Inspired by sketching tree rings and how they represent the passage of time, Scottish artist Katie Paterson started a project called Future Library that would outlive her by decades.

“The idea arose for me initially through making a connection with tree rings — to chapters, the material nature of paper, pulp, words, books — and imagining the writer’s thoughts infusing themselves, becoming the trees,” Paterson says.

The work began in 2014 when 1,000 Norwegian Spruce trees were planted just outside Oslo. In 2114, the forest will be turned into paper for an anthology of books more than a lifetime in the making.

In ensuing years, one writer per year will contribute a text. The writings will be held in a trust and remain unread and unpublished until 2114. A copy of each manuscript — kept hidden except for the title and author — will be on display in a specially designed room in Oslo’s new Deichman Library, set to open in 2019.

A Call For Works
Several years ago, development company Bjørvika Utvikling commissioned Situations, a visual arts organization, to develop a vision for public art in Oslo’s harbor. They called it Slow Space. Project Manager Anne Beate Hovind searched for artists who would challenge conventional forms of public art.

“In Norway, the easiest way would be to buy sculptures of moose in bronze or something like that,” Hovind says. “We didn’t want sculptures, we didn’t want this traditional way of working. We wanted something that was extraordinary.”

Hovind and the board recognized that extraordinary quality in Paterson, whose work often reflects themes of space and time. In August 2011, they asked her to submit a proposal for Slow Space.

“A week [later] she called and asked if I had access to a forest where she can stay in a cabin,” Hovind says, who offered up her family’s barebones saeter. “She stayed in that cabin a week. Coming out of there she proposed Future Library. I think she felt like Norway would be the best place to propose this idea.”

While bronze moose may be a stereotypical representation of the country, Future Library — with its commitment to the written word and its forest home — seems to have captured something that is even more fundamentally Norwegian.

“We have this very strong understanding of the commons,” Hovind says. “The way we hike, the way we understand the forest, it’s...
Visit Future Library

Future Library Forest is situated just outside of Oslo, about a 30-minute walk from Frognerstasjon station. Visitors are welcome any time, but you might be able to take part in the annual ceremony where authors hand over their manuscripts. Subscribe to the mailing list at futurelibrary.no for information on author updates.

OWN A PIECE OF FUTURE LIBRARY

Purchase a limited edition print of Paterson’s tree ring design along with a certificate that entitles you (or your descendants) to one full manuscript upon its release in 2114. Visit jonescohan.com/artists/kate-paterson for details.

Meet the Future Library Authors

David Mitchell

British novelist David Mitchell is selected to contribute a text to the secret anthology.

Sjón

Icelandic novelist Sjón is the third author to contribute a text.

Deichman Library

Open in Oslo, housing the growing collection of unread manuscripts.

The writing will be released from the Future Library Trust

2014

1,000 Norwegian spruce trees are planted in Nordmarka forest just outside of Oslo. It will supply paper for an anthology of books to be printed in 100 years.

2015

Canadian author Margaret Atwood is the first author chosen to contribute a text.

2016

British novelist David Mitchell is selected to contribute a text.

2019

Icelandic novelist Sjón is the third author to contribute a text.

2021

The writings will be released from the Future Library Trust

IN THE FUTURE WE TRUST

Since its launch in 2014, the world has taken notice of Future Library. Publications like The Huffington Post, The Atlantic and The Guardian have extolled its contribution to the art movement and highlighted its inherently hopeful premise. The project has also resonated with the public.

“In this world we’re in, with everything going on, this project represents something hopeful, that we’ll still be around [in 100 years],” Hovind says.

Hovind and Paterson plan to archive the personal responses they have received from the public who have connected with Future Library.

Those of us reading about Future Library, and dreaming about what the world may look like in 2114 will never know for sure what our ancestors will find in the secret anthology that is yet to be completed. Will the printed word finally have given way to a digital medium? Will the languages represented in it be words (not illustration) and it must be kept a secret from everyone but the author until the anthology is printed in 2114.

Paterson will be directly involved in selecting authors for years to come, but there will be a time when she’ll hand over that responsibility to the next generation. Her dream for the list, she says, is to include authors who give voice to the globe.

“I hope the writings in the Future Library Anthology will contain contributions from all over the world, and contain crystallized moments from this era to the next. And that each piece of writing will hold within it something of its own time, own moment, projected into an unknown future,” she says.

The writings will be released from the Future Library Trust

Check out a video of Margaret Atwood and learn more about Future library at futurelibrary.no

MEET THE FUTURE LIBRARY AUTHORS

Margaret Atwood

Canadian Margaret Atwood was the first author to contribute an original work to Future Library. She’s a natural fit because she is known for imagining the future and her writing. Atwood is also a committed environmentalist. Her manuscript for this project is titled “Earth Alcohol.”

David Mitchell

English novelist David Mitchell is best known for novels like “Cloud Atlas” and “NumberDream.” When asked to contribute a text to Future Library, he made a list of reasons to say “yes.” Mitchell’s Future Library manuscript is titled “From Me Flows What You Call Time.”

Sjón

Icelandic author Sjón has written novels “The Blue Fox,” “The Whispering Muse,” “From the Mouth of the Whale” and “Moomintroll: The Boy Who Never Was.” His works have been translated into 35 languages. He has won several awards, including the Nordic Council’s Literature Prize.