

The Manuscripts Stored in Oslo

by Lars Bang Larsen

A message in a bottle, a time capsule, a sci-fi leap across time; and at the other end, a window onto the past, an archaeological event, an historical enigma. From the slightly-more-than-human timespan that straddles its alpha and omega, Katie Paterson's *Future Library* is all that and, in so many ways, a *memento mori*.

In 2017 the human race tends to think of death as a tasteless insult. Trans-humanists lament our being stuck on the pathway of normal evolution and speculate about how to extend the life span of our species. When will it be possible to pry data loose from slime-based bodies and upload a human being to a digital platform with no caducity, in order to change the material matrix of life? However, before we literally put human life on the Internet – already a significant part of our lifeworld – it would serve us well to consider the contemporary culture that surrounds death and time, and the stories that we tell each other about them. *Future Library* is one of these stories.

In his novel *The Western Lands*, published in 1987, William Burroughs gives our death and its culture a deliberately anachronistic run for its money and ponders mortality through ancient Egyptian mythology. What kind of embalming treatment should the gentleman or woman with mummy aspirations get? The fancy one or the cut-price option? As always, eternity is profaned by cultural habits: 'Cut-rate embalmers offer pay-as-you-go plans, so much a month for mummy insurance. If you live fifty years or die tomorrow, your future in the Western Lands is assured. (An old couple with their arms around each other's shoulders stand in front of their modest little villa).ⁱ The risk appears to be that the competitively priced embalmers might do a sloppy job, and then you will end up not as a fragrant mummy majestically ruling over time itself, but as a sorry carcass. Definitely not the occasion to be miserly... but still, it *is* awfully expensive. As Burroughs's mummification ad suggests, for that kind of money you could get a bigger place to live. Just imagine what real estate prices will be in Oslo in 2114 when they open *Future Library*: at the time of my writing it is an impressive 72,175.08 NOK per square metre to buy a flat in the city centre. In fact, a good mummification might be cheaper.ⁱⁱ

Under the conditions of advanced capitalism, according to philosopher Rosi Braidotti, human bodies are "mere carriers of [bio-genetic] information that gets invested with value and capitalized... The contemporary political economy dictates that all that lives gets

commodified.”ⁱⁱⁱ This certainly applies to people who are at the bottom of capital’s infernal cycles of exploitation, where there is a thin layer of cash between them and their destiny – if they are not too poor for debt. There is talk of authoritarianism and tyranny again. On each continent there is a new pharaoh in power. The future seems to be running away from us – politically, ecologically, socially. Gilles Deleuze wrote that ‘Man is no longer man enclosed, but man in debt’.^{iv} This statement can today be taken in its widest sense, as a widespread borrowing against the future. Contemporaneity seems to have just grown in significance to the point when we can hardly look over its edge. We are caught up in our own time, whether this is because we are so many men and women in debt, or because historical time is overshadowed by I-culture; the idea of individual existence of human subjects of whom it is demanded that they, to a significant degree, live for and by themselves.

It is a sign of what we think of our present that we are beginning to prepare vessels for the future, like sarcophagi to sail from the shores of our time. We are preparing for a migration through time by storing our seeds – both organic and artistic – such as the sealed literary contents of *Future Library*. Compiling stuff from the present is certainly a way of taking the future into account, but it is entirely different from how we in the more or less recent past imagined the future in terms of progress, or utopia, or endless growth. Do we think that we are giving the future something to remember us by, something that won’t be available in the future, or something with which we believe our descendants can understand themselves better?[?] All of the above, no doubt. At the same time, *Future Library* – a growing compilation of many future presents – is that strangest thing: an archive that recovers an event that hasn’t yet happened. In Paterson’s project the archive is a receptacle as well as a seed, and its time or rhythm is seed time, one of suspended becoming.

The German-British artist Gustav Metzger, who died in March 2017, theorized how something could be taken out of the present to augment future possibilities through his notion of ‘auto-destructive art’. He wrote in 1961, ‘Auto-destructive art is art which contains within itself an agent which automatically leads to its destruction within a period of time not to exceed twenty years.’^v An art work with built-in obsolescence uncouples the art concept from eternity and makes space for future events with a potentially bigger relevance for the society to come. For good reasons there is little left of Metzger’s auto-destructive works, and it is equally obvious that Paterson’s *Future Library* is not an art project that opens with a bang. Instead it will, as in a fairy tale of sleeping beauties, frustrate our expectations for a hundred years. Even though Paterson’s artistic method is contrastingly delicate, there is enough in *Future Library* to merit comparison

with Metzger's idea of an auto-destructive art: she is, after all, growing a forest with a view to chopping it down for the purpose of printing the future *Future Library* anthology. Apart from this long ecological feedback loop, you can also consider *Future Library's* chronopolitics of delay as related to Metzger's idea of auto-destructive art; its frustration of experience as a gap rather than a fullness, and in general the bestowing of a gift on the future as a kind of potlatch – a gift that cannot be equalled or reciprocated. Not because they won't have great literature in the future, hopefully, but simply because they would have to turn back time to give Paterson something in return. She will become a kind of artist-ghost, returning through *Future Library* to haunt the future and collect the symbolic debt that her work will have produced by then. If all art is 'a bid for immortality', as Burroughs puts it, then Paterson's work is more like a bid for meaningful mortality.^{vi}

What if Paterson is not sending *Future Library* linearly *into* the future, as the preposition and the count from 0 to 100 suggests, but sideways to the future, or spiralling down to the future? Meaning, the *longue durée* of her work is not a pipeline to the future but a rhizome that can go any which way. So much can happen between now and then, and all the literary seeds it will contain will sprout at varying rates and in numerous directions. *Future Library* raises the question of history's readability through the narrative device of the story-within-a-story, common in Romanticist literature. Here a found manuscript (deemed authentic, or not) was typically bookended by the finder's introduction and conclusion, enunciated from other levels of fiction. The particular *mise-en-abîme* of Paterson's work – an art work that is a forest that becomes a book that is written over one hundred years by one hundred and one authors, to include herself – echoes in the delightful novel *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa* written by eccentric Polish nobleman, polymath and officer Jan Potocki, and most likely published around 1813.

The story goes that the young army officer Alphonse van Worden kept a diary of his experiences in Spain's Sierra Morena in 1739, recording events that he witnessed and the stories he was told by the company – of travellers, gypsies, adventurers and the occasional ghost – in which he found himself. The resulting collection of tall tales that combine the gothic and erotic with adventure, picaresque and pastoral styles was, around 1769, sealed by him in a casket, to be discovered some forty years later by a French soldier while out looting in the city of Saragossa. In fact we can surmise that *Future Library* will end up as a comparable compendium of the most diverse but highly readable stories: in their episodic approaches to building a grand narrative, both Potocki and Paterson have something of Scheherazade in them. On the 37th day of

storytelling, Velázquez the geometer talks of science and religion, and delivers the following timeless wisdom:

The ignorant man thinks he understands something provided that he sees it every day. The natural philosopher walks amid enigmas, always striving to understand and always half-understanding.^{vii}

Future Library provides the same kind of transport and estrangement that Potocki sees as necessary for our 'striving to understand' in our meeting with the world. It is a work that we can only ever half understand because at any time, the viewer will always be out of sync with its folded and layered temporalities.

So, time will tell if any of the commissioned authors slacked it for their *Future Library* contribution. Hopefully they won't be like those shifty embalmers in Burroughs's story who shortchange the client: who is going to know anyway, when we will all be dead and gone, right? How mean of you to suspect that, you might say, but it is not just a question of cheating the commissioning party out of a few euros or dollars. It has been done before, as a tactic for passing the buck of mortality. By infamously signing and selling blank print paper in his late years, Salvador Dalí managed to stay prolific in the grave. Obviously the main purpose of this unconscionable ploy was to keep his muse Gala and himself in the life to which they were accustomed. This came at the cost of the total loss of artistic control, given that his signature on a blank piece of print paper was a *carte blanche* for whoever got their hands on it and whatever they would add to it, in Dalí's name. Cheers and *carpe diem*. You would have to be overly generous to read this disreputable scheme in terms of some kind of happening or meta-art work. If the Surrealist master shyster deserves respect anyway, it is because he made it clear that death is a low blow and he preferred to fight dirty. At the probable cost of the future inflation of his oeuvre in general, he placed a time bomb in the pantheon of art history and debunked romanticist views of the transparent relation between creativity and eternity. There is probably a morality tale about the art market in there, too.

I like to think that Sjón would laugh at this story about the crook Dalí and his shameless attempt at turning time inside-out. In Sjón's novel *The Whispering Muse* (2005), Kronos Shipping Line's ship MS Elizabeth Jung-Olsen sails to Fedafjord in South-Western Norway where she is to load a cargo of paper pulp. The recent closure to the Second World War has not lead the protagonist Valdimar Haraldsson's to reconstruct his ideas about the causal relationship

between fish consumption and the superiority of the Nordic races. He watches the production of the pulp from the ship:

Two steel cables ran from the mill and warehouse up to the summit of the mountain that towered a thousand feet above the seedy little settlement. I was informed that from there the cables ran overhead straight to the doors of a timber-working factory located ten miles away up the long tapering valley. I watched the workmen dragging the tree trunks up the beach, loading them on sleds and sliding them into the mill. There the monster logs were chopped into chips and the chips were put into wagons, which then rolled along the cable that carried them up the valley to the factory. After the wood chips had been shredded, pulped, blended with this and that chemical and pressed into sheets, they returned as iron-bound blocks of raw paper, running back down the cable that ended up in the warehouse by the wharf. There the raw paper was stacked and finally loaded on board the ships that came from every direction to transport it around the globe.^{viii}

It is as if Sjón writes about the Norwegian home of *Future Library*, and its equation between wood and paper as the medium or ground for the word and the time it takes to live and die. He spins his yarns across the centuries to find the stories that like crystals shape time by splitting it in two directions, a historical one that falls into the past, the other launched outside of time: MS Elizabeth Jung-Olsen, it turns out, is not only a Danish merchant ship in a Norwegian fjord but also a mythical vessel that gets wound up like a giant clock for its cosmic voyages by second mate Caenaesus, a veteran from the Argonauts' quest to retrieve the golden fleece.

Kronos Lines should have a good long run ahead of them. Over to Sjón now, in ninety-seven years.

ⁱ William Burroughs: *The Western Lands*. London: Penguin Books, 1988 (1987), p.160.

ⁱⁱ As checked on <https://www.numbeo.com/property-investment/in/Oslo>, April 4 2017.

ⁱⁱⁱ Rosi Braidotti: *The Posthuman*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013, p.112.

^{iv} Gilles Deleuze: "Postscript on the Societies of Control." October, Vol. 59. (Winter, 1992), pp.3-7.

^v Gustav Metzger: "Manifesto Auto-Destructive Art" (1959) in *Damaged Nature, Auto Destructive Art*. Nottingham: Coracle, 1996, pp.59-60.

^{vi} Burroughs, op.cit., p.165.

^{vii} Jan Potocki: *The Manuscript Found in Saragossa*. London: Penguin Books, 1996 (original year of publication unknown), p.408.

^{viii} Sjón: *The Whispering Muse*. London: Telegram, 2012 (2005), pp.25-26.