The waiting game

Do you ever get impatient when something seems to take forever? These four women are working on projects that could take ten years, maybe a lifetime or more…

portraits *liz seabrook*
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Lucy Tammam, couture designer and creator of the One Dress project, London

I started making this dress in 2016, and I'm not sure exactly when it will be finished. It's a total labour of love. It will travel all over the world – UK, India, Australia, Kenya – to be embroidered by women with words that define feminism and women's empowerment. This is a positive representation of women, I want it to tell women's stories.

I thought the dress would be embroidered with 500, maybe 800, words in total, then I started doing it, and I realised that it will more than likely be 2,500. As we're only 500 words in, we have quite a way to go. Each word is sponsored, so we can pay everyone involved in the embroidery a fair salary. You can pick from a choice of words online [tammam.co.uk/onedress]: equality, sisterhood, respect, love, emancipation, solidarity. Or you can choose your own, but I don't want it to be negative. We've got different languages, too – Hindi, Telugu, Assamese, Arabic.

The shape is inspired by the dress that suffragette Dame Christabel Pankhurst wears in the 1909 Ethel Wright portrait that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery. But it's a modernised version with an open back and sheer panels. It's made using all vintage and reclaimed threads. The threads are all shades of violet. I'm going to put a green lining in, to get the extra Suffragette colour in there, too. The majority of my work has a vintage influence. Certainly in the way that it's made. That kind of proper couture stitching, everything considered. Provenance has become so important in fashion, people want to know where their clothes came from, that people haven't been exploited and that it is going to last.

Throwaway fashion, stuff that was only worn once or twice, used to be so big, but I'm glad there is starting to be a shift. One Dress is a statement against that, it's the antithesis of fast fashion. It's taking so long to create and it's also about the stories of the women who are creating it. If you look closely, you can see each word is slightly different, the signature of each embroiderer. I love that you can see it's handmade. We are recording each and every embroiderer who works on it. It's an art piece, you know, it's meant to make a statement.

When it is finished, I want it to be worn by a range of inspirational women – to see it on the red carpet would be a dream come true. It will be toured and exhibited in various places, then I hope it will end up in a museum. It's a piece of history I think. →

"It really throws me that a great deal of the people who will be involved in this project aren't born yet"

Katie Paterson, artist and founder of Future Library, Fife, Scotland

Future Library is going both back and forward in time. Every year, for 100 years, a contemporary author will submit a manuscript to the project. So far, it has manuscripts from David Mitchell, Margaret Atwood, and Sjon. This year, Elif Shafak submitted her manuscript. We've planted a forest in Norway and, in 2020, we'll open a library that will hold all the manuscripts. The forest will provide paper to print the 100 books, after it ends in 2114.

So by then, the project will be thinking about 100 years ago, but now it's thinking forward 100 years and imagining what these authors are going to write, and also what the book itself will be like in 100 years. I wonder if it'll still be a material printed book, or if it'll be totally different. Maybe we're making a 'future antique', which is a weird thing.

I think it's probably the concept of time itself that draws me into the kind of projects I work on. I don't know exactly what it is, I'm just really fascinated by long expanses of time, and the idea of cosmic archaeology, of going back in time. It's so vast in your imagination. It's fascinating to think beyond human lifespan, about the world and the universe before we were here.

I can root Future Library back to one very simple idea – I was sitting on a train, daydreaming and sketching tree rings, and visualising the connection between tree rings and chapters in a book. I imagined a forest that would grow and would eventually contain all of an author's words over time. That was years ago, and I put the idea to one side, because I have a lot of ideas and I thought that this one probably wasn't going to go very far.

It feels strange to work on a project that I won't see the end of. It's amazing and liberating that I'll have this project that will last my whole life – you're usually working to exhibition schedules and timescales – but there's also the feeling of it being a little bit disconcerting. The realisation that I'm obviously going to be dead by the time the project comes to fruition is quite strange. I had conceived it knowing that, and I like knowing that, but it is very odd.

Before my son Emory was born, it was very much about what the Future Library meant for me and the people I know, but now it's becoming more concrete that this is something that's being made for future generations. He's ten months old now, and he came to the forest for the first time when we did the manuscript handover in June with Elif, so he might be there at the final handover ceremony, and that's a brightening thought. Watching him growing up and knowing that maybe he'll be involved in the project when I'm gone, that's really special.

It really throws me, that a great deal of the people who will be involved in this project aren't born yet. We're making it for them, and with them, but they don't exist. That's a weird thought; most of the authors, none of the audience, none of the readers are born yet. We have to trust that they are going to be there, and I like that we're creating something that isn't just for us now, it's building something for the future. →

Dr Priyanka Joshi, Biochemist, Downing College Cambridge

Even for scientists who have won the Nobel Prize, it's not until years down the line that someone else picks up their research and uses it for something that has an impact today. In that way, it's common to not ever really see the full scope of your research. Mostly, people just want to make a little dent in knowledge that can help someone else move it on.

A lot of people working on PhDs in the sciences might leave their field of research altogether once they've worked on something for a period of time. It doesn't mean that what they've worked on will go to waste, it means that someone else might come in and pick it up and take it forward. I think everyone gets into this for the thrill of gaining knowledge, of making something new, but knows that it might take a very long time. It's not a field to go into if you want instant gratification.

I have always been fascinated by the brain, because it gives you so much power. We know a lot about it, but there's still a lot that we don't know in terms of development. I'm curious about how memories are formed, how children learn, how things fall apart in old age. I don't have a background in neuroscience, but I wanted to learn something new. That's often the case with science, you come up with something based on what you already know, then you find something that pushes that, to make it more of a challenge.

I work on Alzheimer's disease, and I'm trying to look at the faulty proteins that cause it. What happens with Alzheimer's is that you have faulty proteins in the brain which are very sticky, and they clump together and destroy neurons. Neurons are fundamental cells of the brain and nervous system. They receive, process, and transmit information throughout the body. When I first started my PhD research, I was looking for a drug that would stop the proteins from clumping together. Once I had a set of drugs that would do that, I started to think about why the clumps were forming in the first place. I've been working on that question for the last two years now, and it's going to take me a long time to answer it – in fact, I don't even know how long it will take.

It's been 100 years since Alzheimer's was first diagnosed and we still don't have a cure for it. I'm trying to understand better the fundamental cause of Alzheimer's – why it starts in one particular section of the brain and then moves, and why some people have it and others don't. It takes such a long time because you can't work directly on patients – you can't take a living brain and work on it, so we have to use tiny worms as model organisms. It takes a long time to design a drug or a medicine, but if we don't understand what's really happening inside the brain, then we won't be able to come up with a cure. Before we can even start working on a cure, we need to understand the brain and the disease.

What keeps me going is knowing that so many people are affected by Alzheimer's. Everywhere I go, whoever I speak to, everyone knows someone who suffers from the disease. You can't give up easily, you have to be strong and resilient enough to keep moving on if one of your experiments doesn't work. Society so desperately needs a cure, and for what I'm working towards, you have to fail sometimes in order to succeed. →

"We've already been working on the tapestry for ten years and we're hoping it will be finished by 2022"

Emma Henni, tapestry conservation supervisor, Historic Royal Palaces, London

This tapestry was woven in the mid seventeenth century and is one of the finest ever made. It's a rare and valuable survivor from the court of Charles I and hasn't been on display since 1850. Textiles inevitably deteriorate over time and we've always known that this tapestry was in very poor condition. It has been cared for in storage by my predecessors through regular checks.

Following a detailed planning process, conservation began in 2008. First, we had to document its state and prepare it. Then we had to wet clean it, to remove the dirt and chemically stabilise it. Now we're still doing the main bulk of work – the conservation stitching. So, we've already been working on it for ten years. We're hoping it will be finished by 2022.

We break it down into 15cm sections. We start on one side edge, work to the middle, then work from the other side end. We're almost halfway. We treat each section as a 'turn' – there will be 41 turns of this tapestry in total, and we're on turn 17. These bobbins that we were are using for the threads actually date back to the early 20th century, so it's like working with little historic artefacts, too. But, I can't lie, occasionally you get impatient and wish that certain areas were finished. Starting the next part is very exciting. I am three-quarters of the way through the current turn and I'm starting to get itchy feet. In a day, I can cover around 7.5cm. To put that into perspective, the entire tapestry is seven metres wide and five metres high.

As a conservation supervisor, I'm in charge of looking after all the tapestries in Historic Royal Palaces, the independent charity that looks after the unoccupied royal palaces at the Tower of London, Kensington Palace, the Banqueting House at Whitehall, Kew Palace and Hillsborough Castle as well as Hampton Court Palace. The tapestry conservation studio at Hampton Court Palace opened in 1912. I started working here over 20 years ago as a trainee, and I have never worked anywhere else, so I know the collection inside out. To be able to sew is, of course, fundamental to the job, but there's also a lot of ethics involved and a hell of a lot of science. Everything we conserve, we like to say will last for 50 years. But, of course, that amount of time hasn't passed yet, so we don't actually know. Having said that, a couple of tapestries that were conserved in the late 1980s, over 30 years ago, were checked recently and the conservation is holding up brilliantly. The beauty of what we do is that it always can be added to.

There is a difference between restoring and conserving something. We are conserving this tapestry. Restoration removes the deteriorated areas and then reworks it, a practice that fell out of use in the 1970s. Conservation doesn't remove this original material – we preserve and strengthen instead of recreating. A key difference is that conservation can be undone, whereas restoration cannot be reversed. This tapestry actually sits somewhere in the middle. As it's so damaged, a lot of the image has been lost and we've had to recreate some of the parts using photographic references – we use natural fibres mixed in with polyester to give it more strength. We're not trying to dupe people into thinking it's the original. Obviously, you don't want something to get in really bad condition, but as a conservator it is really exciting to work on. And I know there will be such a great sense of pride when this incredible piece is finally finished. ♦