E-Literature as Public Art: ELO 2015's Five Gallery Shows

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Citation Details
Berens, K. (2016). "E-Literature as Public Art: ELO 2015's Five Gallery Shows" Hyperrhiz: Journal of New Media Vol. 14.
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Citation: Berens, Kathi Inman. "E-Literature as Public Art: ELO 2015’s Five Gallery Shows." Hyperrhiz: New Media Cultures no. 14, 2016. doi:10.20415/hyp/014.c01

Abstract: Electronic literature as public art finds broad audiences in five theme-specific media arts shows hosted in Bergen, Norway.

Residents of Bergen — Norway’s second city and the nation’s artistic hub — enjoy unusual access to public art. Living ten months in Bergen as a visiting Fulbright Scholar, my ordinary walks through the cobbled city were often punctuated by pop-up installations. One Saturday afternoon, for example, a twenty-minute walk wended by three art installations, all of them funded by the Bergen Kommune, the city government. If you’ve ever wondered what it would be like if artists earned middle-class incomes, visit Bergen and see the results.

As an American, I’m accustomed to digital artists having to find sponsorship from corporations or university labs, to self-fund, or to make art on a shoestring. Art funded by the Kommune — I myself received a small stipend for “RestOration: Kalfarlien 18” — answers a broad mandate to "strengthen the City of Bergen as a national cultural centre of gravity for international contact and exchange, traversing borders of nationality and genre," the first goal listed in the City’s 2003-2013 Strategic Action Plan for Art and Cultural Policy.

The five Media Arts exhibits organized by Scott Rettberg and Roderick Coover make a powerful claim for electronic literature as public art. There was an unusual degree of planning and coordination between local host Rettberg and the various Norwegian galleries, libraries, organizations, and funders that hosted and/or co-sponsored the media arts shows. The result? Every aspect of these five shows was aesthetically suited to the e-literature they presented. The Electronic Literature Organization’s first-ever kids e-lit show was housed at the Bergen Public Library. Lydgalleriet, Bergen’s sound gallery located right next to the large and active Literary House, hosted the Synesthesia and Hybridity show. "De-Centering: Global Electronic Literature" fulfilled the mission of Galleri 3,14 (that is, Gallery π) to display art that would otherwise not be seen in Norway. Several organizations — Arts Council Norway, the Nordic Culture Fund, Hordaland county, the Polish Ministry of Culture, the French-Nordic Center for the Humanities, the Research Council of Norway and the University in Bergen — contributed space or funding toward world-class shows that displayed e-literature in gorgeous settings within easy walking distance of each other, making e-lit freely accessible to communities across this city.

DE-CENTERING: GLOBAL ELECTRONIC LITERATURE
For me, the most striking exhibit was "De-Centering: Global Electronic Literature," which featured work from nations that have traditionally been underrepresented in ELO shows and collections. Even the title "De-Centering" invoked this exhibit’s comparison to the de facto "center" of e-literature in western European and North American traditions. The exhibit's historic reach back to Peruvian, Polish and Russian computational artists in the 1970s and 80s actively ‘decentered’ the axis on which much of the e-literature canon spins. Polish Demo scene videos (circa 1980s) compiled by Piotr Marecki, and especially "P2P: A Comparative Exhibit of Experimental Polish and Portuguese Literature in Print and the Digital Era" curated by Marecki, Álvaro Seiça, and Rui Torres, drew together an impressive body of text-based generative poetry in both traditions that suggests parallel experimental developments during a time when the Iron Curtain frustrated cultural transmission.

A collection of contemporary Russian Electronic Literature curated by Natalia Federova featured a number of present-day kinetic and video works. Subtitled "This is Not a Utopia," the Russian works displayed a wide range of techniques, including the lettrism for which Fedorova is known. "Polarities" by Elena Demidova and Maxim Kalmykov (viewable here) is a beautiful pinwheel of Russian letters whirling from animated hubs of red and blue colors on a white background. The fast-moving formations never resolve into a static image one could run through Google translate. Focus (2014), a poem in English by Irina Ivannikova and Maxim Kalmykov, explores the physicality of reading. (See my playthrough of it here.)
From Perú, José Aburto’s four "Small Poetic Interfaces" brilliantly invite navigation without use of screen or keyboard. 3D-printed, colorful plastic boxes housed the interfaces, which you can glimpse in the image. My favorite was "Scream," which would produce a poem only if the reader could shout into the orange box with sufficient volume and breath. These poems shattered the quiet of Galleri 3,14’s elegant wood-floor gallery. In my several trips to this exhibit, nobody beat little Benji Rettberg, then age five, in coaxing a poem from the box. Most visitors were too shy or reserved to shout the program into printing a poem. A fascinating poetic frustration.

Approximately 33,000 asylum seekers entered Norway in 2015. When I lived there, Bergen’s population reflected such internationalism. My children were in school with kids from Africa, the middle east, central Europe and western Europe, all learning Norwegian language immersion and culture, which involved cross country skiing field trips and a wetsuited dive into freezing fjord water. Bergensers are well-situated to find immigration stories relevant. "High Muck a Muck: Playing Chinese" depicts Chinese immigration and assimilation in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. Authored by ten artists (Nicola Harwood, Fred Wah, Jin Zhang, Bessie Wapp, Simon Lysander Overstall, Tomoyo Ihaya, Phillip Djwa, Thomas Loh, Hiromoto Ida and Patrice Leung), this interactive poem with hand-drawn graphics overlaid on a map speaks to a city as a space of mixed race co-habitation. Winner of the 2015 New Media Writing Prize, "High Muck a Muck" addresses questions of assimilation and nation in ways that might particularly interest Norwegians, whose census collects no information about race. This surprised me until it was explained that Norway, like several other European nations, doesn’t collect racial information having seen the uses to which such information was put by the Third Reich. Interactive poetry about racial assimilation makes a case for qualitative, not quantitative, perspectives on race.

HYBRIDITY AND SYNESTHESIA

Lydgalleriet, Bergen’s sound gallery, hosted the movement-intensive "Hybridity and Synesthesia" exhibit featuring works that appeal to our senses of touch, sound and sight. Many of the works allowed for multisensory exploration and physical play. Joellyn Rock and Allison Aune’s "Fish Net Stockings" allowed visitors to dance with silhouettes of mermaids against a backdrop of vivid jewel-toned colors and fleeting text streamed via a Twitter hashtag. Children passing the gallery’s picture window on this busy street in the arts district stopped in to dance with the mermaids. The multidimensional poetry made by these human/nonhuman dancers, punctuated by the text projected atop them, made for a more embodied kind of "generated" poetry where the live text juxtaposed against movement and color made for serendipitous accidents of meaning.

Anastasia Salter and John Murray’s "From Beyond" ushered guests into a curtained and dimly-lit nook, where they encountered a wooden planchette as the interface for this Twine-based hypertext story about the supernatural. Readers — as if communicating with the dead via the Ouija board — can move the planchette on the carved wooden box to indicate "YES" or "NO" answers to the prompts on the screen. These choices accumulate into a story experience that lets readers ruminate on the "ghost in the machine," a ghost that readers themselves embodied through their own physical interaction with the work.
Movement was required to experience Caitlin Fisher and Tony Viere’s augmented reality work “Mother/Home/Heaven,” which uses iPad cameras as magic mirrors to view ordinary objects supplied by Fisher that then pop visually and aurally rich augmented reality vignettes. Culled from nineteenth-century Canadian pioneer diaries, the AR was triggered by interaction with familiar objects one would find in a general store. Traveling from York, Canada, Fisher and Viere brought photographs of the nineteenth-century objects rather than lug those objects to Bergen. The images were hung on the walls and on the gallery’s picture window. It is always a kind of pleasant dance to figure out exactly how to align the camera with the AR tags on the object so that it can be read; in this sense, the “work” of reading is to collaborate with the machine, angling the tablet so that it will yield story. This stands in stark relief against the human network conjured by the general store, and the actual people gathered around them inside the gallery.

Mez Breeze and Andy Campbell’s #CARNIVAST, and Julie Vulcan and Ashley Scott’s RIMA explore opposite ends of how words spatially shape human experience. In #CARNIVAST, Breeze and Campbell’s codepoetry app creates word-structures as inhabitable one can touch, meld, and explore. #CARNIVAST was exhibited on a laptop set on pedestal near the doorway, a textual portal literalized in its placement near the door. RIMA depicted a livestream of woman in solitary confinement, her experience textually represented through environmental data (hot, cold, light, dark) and a Twitterfeed narrating her thoughts. Strategies for survival
are overt in RIMA, but in #CARNIVAST, with its blooming walls made of quickly shifting words, the confinement of "meatspace" (carne) juxtaposed against the "vast"ness of our information-saturated virtual spaces also suggested the difficulty of extracting oneself from the worlds we make of virtual words.

Characteristic of Phillipe Bootz's mischievous sense of humor, "Play Music for My Poem" asks readers to divide their attention between playing a game that triggers music, and watching a second computer that "hears" the music triggered by the game one is playing. In response, the second computer composes a poem. Bootz's trick is that the quatrain printed by the music-listening computer is algorithmically generated, not responsive to the player's ability or inability to execute the game well enough to trigger a song. The dramatic scene exploits liveness and co-presence, things that reading alone wouldn't yield. As ever, Bootz is deft at writing "simple" poems that evoke strong emotions (in this case, anxiety, thrill, and pride), experiences heightened by the gallery spectacle of the human/machine performance.

THE ENDS OF ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

The beautiful University of Bergen Humanities [UiB] Library hosted "The Ends of Electronic Literature," an exhibit theme that also doubled as the main conference theme. Works encircled the upper deck of this two-story, glass-metal-and-wood space. One long wall also featured poster art from previous Electronic Literature Organization shows and readings.

Artists in this exhibit imagined the "ends" of electronic literature as various terminal points. UiB then-undergraduate Anders Gonzo Gaard's panoptic Taroko Gorge adaption "Take Gonzo" requires readers to accept a Terms of Service agreement before the machine will load the poem. Gaard installed his generative poem inside an emptied-out old school television screen equipped with prison bars and webcam, so readers would see themselves projected in prison as the redacted and censored lines of Gaard's Taroko scroll endlessly.

Stuart Moulthrop's "End of the White Subway" is, like the Hotel California, a ride you can never really leave. All riders "must leave the train" of this text combiner/generator, but you ride it "as far into the future as you can stand." Your only out is to close the browser.

The terminal point of erotica is obvious, but Megan Heyward and Michael Finucan's "The Secret Language of Desire" isn't. This soft, text-rich novella written as an interactive mobile app features the wail of a saxophone and jangling keys that respond to the reader's touch.

Pry, by Samantha Gorman and Danny Cannizzaro — winner of the 2015 ELO Robert Coover Prize for Creative Work — features groundbreaking haptic interactivity. Exploiting the unique haptic capacities of the iPad, Pry follows the fragmented story of a depressive Iraq War veteran suffering from PTSD whose attempts to integrate back into employment Stateside are frustrated by his insomnia and waking nightmares. Crushed by war and by betrayal in a love triangle with the female GI he's obsessed with and his brother (who turns out also to be his impatient boss Stateside), our protagonist floats in and out of lucidity. The title refers to how the reader uses her fingertips to pry open the eyelid and the consciousness of our protagonist. The reader's two fingers pinches-open to see from James's point-of-view, and pinch-close to see what he thinks or dreams. There is also a section written in "braille" (images of braille text) that are read aloud by the device when the reader's finger glides over the braille.

Hamburg, Germany's large port is called the "Gateway to the World," which struck Maria Mencia as an apt metaphor for the "immensity of the Internet." Her work "Gateway to the World," co-authored with programmer Pascal Auberson, use open data from the maritime databases to visualize the routes of the
vessels arriving to and from the Port of Hamburg. As the vessels move they act as writing tools to reveal a string of text creating calligramatic forms of information, which are then fed into Wikipedia, where the vessels' names generate a remix of text blending factual information about the vessels with characters in literary works, plays and mythological stories. One traces these elegant stories with a finger on a tablet, "traveling" virtually with these cargo ships as they move through real water and imagined depths available via Wikipedia.

Figure 3: University in Bergen’s Humanities Library Director (in red) announces the library’s commitment to preserving and exhibiting e-literature and ELO artifacts. The upper-right part of this image shows some of the archival posters from previous ELO conferences.

My own collaborative feminist ecopoem “RestOration: Kalfarlien 18,” co-authored with Kerstin Juhlin, Alicia Cohen, and Eva Pfitzemaier, featured a large, functional e-waste sculpture and a hypertext poem, a sound installation and a tablet game all centered on the gentle decay of an historic Bergen house located at Kalfarlien 18. This home is juxtaposed against a backdrop of global warming’s effects on Bergen’s sea levels, rapid cycles of tech obsolescence, and e-waste dumps. De-commissioned UiB computer screens, keyboards and wires made an e-waste reflecting pool, where guests’ faces, captured by an iPad camera, were mirrored onto the functional e-waste screens. Pfitzemaier’s haunting, movement-triggered sound installation, hidden in the bookshelves, evoked an eerie sense of an old house and its media archeology, such as the
scratchy 33PM album that played stormy noises, and the sound of a plastic pen trailing across piano keys. Juhlin’s tablet game, physically set in a nineteenth-century wooden frame, featured the esteemed architect’s house plans as a navigable space, and included playable decorative arts from the home.

Stephanie Strickland and Ian Hatcher’s generative poem “House of Trust” honors free libraries and worries about them as a potentially compromised resource in an age in which “data floats free and loses its roots.” This published version of the poem invites clicks to advance the stanzas, which randomly combine variables such as printed signs one sees at a library and free, open access archives such as Arxiv. The poem, projected to fill a large white wall, conjured its source texts, Alison Knowles and James Tenney’s “House of Dust” (1967) and the Epic of Gilgamesh: Tablet VII where “Enkidu raised his eyes,...and spoke to the door as if it were human.” Knowles and Tenney's early work of generative poetry, refashioned by Strickland and Hatcher, transports readers into a rumination on the human/nonhuman collaboration that forges knowledge in open, free libraries: a “House of Trust.”

Abraham Avnisan’s “Collocations,” a beta version of which débuted at ELO 2014, is a palimpsest experienced on a tablet. Using essays by Einstein and Niels Bohr as source texts, the poem reads how the reader manipulates the tablet’s position in space, bolding some words in the source texts and fading others to make a dynamically-generated visual poem.

Chessbard, by Aaron Tucker and Jody Miller, takes the input of the algebraic notation for a chess game in .PGN format (digital file format for archived chess games) and outputs a poem. Tucker wrote twelve source poems, six for black piece and six for white. The reader’s experience of playing chess against the machine triggers a word from Tucker’s source poems, which then get compiled into a poem made by the chess player’s moves.

Encyclopedia used a card catalog as an interface for gathering information about species extinction. This ecological work by Johannes Heldén and Håkon Jonson generates unique entries about fictive animals and was given away as one-off printed index cards to visitors of the exhibition.

**KIDS’ E-LITERATURE**

The Bergen Public Library hosted the Kid E-Lit show, which brimmed with little ones as they darted between the exhibit’s two levels when I visited on opening night. The highlight of this show was the Typomatic, a photobooth where guests sit in a curtained chamber, enter in any word of their choice using a tablet screen, and watch as the Typomatic cuts it in two, making clever “mi-mots,” half words blended to make new word associations from those same letters. It then prints out a scrap of paper with the mi-mot that readers can “play” and share. This video demonstrates the Typomatic in action. Building on their Kinect-powered, physically interactive “mi-mot” exhibit at the ELO 2014 media arts show I curated, Typomatic creators Pierre Fourny, Guillaume Jacquemin, Serge Bouchardon, Luc Dall Armellina and Hélène Caubel added, in this new iteration, a layer of identity play by framing *mi-mots* as snapshots. Fourny’s program cuts words horizontally, peels them, reverses them — shows words emerging from other words. The printed output evokes people. I observed many people sharing their folded bits of mi-mots, moving the paper to show the “animation” between first word and new word. Fourny’s background in theater is evident in this canny human/computer interface.

Children authored two featured works. Ten-year-old Aleatory Funkhouser exhibited “My Own Alphabet,” a motion poem about disorder. "The poetry may look jumbled," she notes, "but [it] does not to the author." The 10- and 12-year-old Marino children joined their dad Mark C. Marino to co-author their ongoing middle-
grade-reader hypertext series "Mrs. Wobbles and the Tangerine House," illustrated by Brian Gallagher.

A collection of Nordic-languages e-literature for kids — two from each country — demonstrated the strong work in Nordic countries in thinking about how to feed kids' appetites for interactive storytelling. "Simogo," the Swedish game developer duo Simon Flesser and Magnus Gardebäck, won awards and international renown for the stylish and challenging iPad puzzler Device 6. Their new children's story, The Sailor's Dream, lacks the puzzle-solving drive of Device 6 but is nevertheless a beautiful and rewarding reading experience, with playable elements such as a singing message-in-a-bottle and an explorable island castle. Touchbooks, a Danish company making interactive e-books and apps, makes WuWu & Co.

The Tower of Jezik, "a wonderful and very scary hypertext story" was made in Europe by students during the 2014 Erasmus Intensive Digital Literatures Program. Coming from different countries and backgrounds, Ana Abril Hernández, Mario Aznar, émilie Barbier, Leja Hočevar and Luis Javier Pisonero worked together in producing a story dealing with the inefficiency of language and the aesthetics of frustration both through the content and the form.

INTERVENTIONS: ENGAGING THE BODY POLITIC

The final exhibit to open, "Interventions: Engaging the Body Politic," was in the crown jewel of settings. Nestled on the banks of Puddefjord, west of the Nordnes peninsula, USF is Bergen's premier arts and cultural complex. More than 100,000 people visited USF in 2015, and in 2016 USF announced a major, anonymous donation that permits it to rent exhibition space to artists free of charge for the next three years. This level of prominence for an e-literature show revisits and fortifies the claim for e-literature as public art.

Shy Nag, the code opera authored by Chris Funkhouser, Sonny Rae Tempest, and director Louis Wells, made its international début in USF's theater space. Funkhouser and Tempest applied "a series of intensive digital processes to a piece of hexadecimal code derived from a .jpg image." Fundamentally an act of human/software translation and iteration, the authors ran the many lines of one .jpg's code through Google Translate, Microsoft Word, and other programs to derive a theater script that is a mix of fabrication and algorithmic processing. Wells coaxed human conflict and resolution from the absurdist lines. The actors (I among them) rehearsed a couple times, learned basic blocking, and read from scripts. An appreciative audience seemed to enjoy the Dadaist humor.
Talan Memmott’s The Exquisite Corpus, a one-hour video essay featuring seventeen e-literature luminaries, also played at USF. Memmott shot and edited this beautiful black-and-white montage about the future and purpose of electronic literature. Thinking about the diverse actions of interactive readers, for example, J.R. Carpenter and Mark Amerika independently wonder about what it means to read. “I don't even know if it needs to be literature anymore,” observes Amerika. “I think it’s more about performance” (8:30-45). Nick Montfort talks about e-lit as an alternative to “military, scientific, industrial computing.”

While Memmott’s essay deftly conveys the fascinations of our field, the composition also harks back to a time just a few years ago when the faces of e-literature were primarily white North Americans and western Europeans. Efforts to broaden the field and invite participation from artists working outside North America and western Europe has resulted in a more diverse Electronic Literature Collection Volume Three than the previous two collections. A sneak peek of ELC3 was offered at the UiB Humanities Library for ELO 15, six months before publication in February 2016. The four editors Stephanie Boluk, Leonardo Flores, Jacob Garbe, and Anastasia Salter energetically sought contributions that would recognize e-literature made in non-English speaking countries. Leonardo Flores’ push to feature global e-lit on his scholarly blog I Love E-Poetry manifests itself in a board of translators who volunteer their services to review non-English language works. Further, Flores gives talks about reconsidering how “grassroots” e-literature fits into a field that has its origin in elite technical skills and continues to venerate them. Memmott’s essay remains relevant as a core aesthetic statement of the field, and is expanded by these recent diversification efforts.
Reminiscent of his masterful *88 Constellations for Wittgenstein (Written for the Left Hand)*, David Clark’s *The End: Death in Seven Colours* is a non-linear database film. *The End* examines the deaths of Alan Turing, Sigmund Freud, Princess Diana, Jim Morrison, Judy Garland, Walter Benjamin, and Marcel Duchamp through the prism of popular culture and film in a vast, encyclopedic mash-up. Clark likens this database work to a “chose-your-own-adventure conspiracy theory.”

Faceless Patrons, by Andreas Zingerle and Linda Kronman, is an augmented reality installation that documents stories used by Internet scammers in “check overpayment” scams. Zingerle and Kronman scammed the scammers, impersonating potential victims and drawing the scammers into conversation that became plotted stories designed by Zingerle and Kronman. The well-conceptualized installation uses AR tags pegged to framed, fake bank checks and portrait photographs. When the guest’s viewing device (phone or tablet) hovers over these elements, the virtual layers expose fragments of information about the scammer, who is often either a victim of identity theft, or a composite of several untraceable individuals — hence the “facelessness” predator. The work is rewarding as a sample set or as a continuous, if fragmentary, narrative.

“We are all victims | We are all offenders” is inscribed at the top of Daniels’ project webpage. Sharon Daniels’ *Inside the Distance* documents victim/offender mediation practices in Belgium, where Restorative Justice is institutionalized within the criminal justice system. ”Inside the distance” is a boxing term that refers to the fighter staying in the ring for the duration, 9 or 12 rounds. The project examines how mediation poses a potential cultural alternative to dominant modes and theories of retributive justice and punishment. In mediation, victims meet offenders face-to-face. As is the case with Daniel’s other groundbreaking interactive documentaries, such as the *Vectors* essay *Public Secrets* about women incarcerated in California’s penitentiary system, interactivity *Inside the Distance* intimately disturbs the ”distance” from which we spectators absorb information.

**LIVE PERFORMANCE**

E-literature exhibits have a tradition of excellent live performance. Several stood out in 2015’s talented group. Ottar Ormstad voiced LONG RONG SONG atop music spun live by Taras Mashtalir, and the packed house at Lydgalleriet erupted into dance as Ormstad intoned his stacked, single-word concrete poems over pulsing beats.

Jason E. Lewis performed his poems for ”excitable mobile media” as David Jhave Johnston touched the tablet interface in a kind of poetic dance between voice and screen output.

Mark Sample and Leonardo Flores read a selection from their various bot creations, mining them for comic resonance.

Jhave’s livecoded poetic conversation with his self-built poetic agent generated 100 poems, 4512 lines, 39,704 words in 523.66 seconds. ”How many poems do you want? __” asked the agent. Reading aloud, Jhave lit upon lines like a firefly as they scrolled quickly down the screen, the human/machine poetry symbiosis both moving and virtuosic.

Judd Morrissey’s Kjell Thøry (“Mountain”; in English, ”kjell” sounds like ”shell”) was the last performance of the conference. One in Morrissey’s ATOM-r (“Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality”) series, Kjell Thøry is a mixture of ruminations on Alan Turing’s life and Morrissey’s experiences of Norwegian culture while living in Bergen as the Fulbright Scholar of Digital Culture 2013-14. About a dozen people joined Morrissey for this locative, ambling AR poem which started at the University’s garden. Morrissey read poems that were
floating in the environs and viewable from an iPhone strapped to a ping-pong paddle. A rose tattoo on Morrissey's right bicep was a tagged site when the group arrived at the Festplassen. The piece culminated in Morrissey performing "The Tits of Tireseas" in the courtyard of the Leprosy Museum. Apollinaire's *Les mamelles de Tirésias* (1903) is the source text, clearly in dialog with Turing's forced injections of estrogen as a punishment for homosexuality, which rendered him impotent and caused him to develop breasts. Turing committed suicide less than two years after his chemical castration. Morrissey's brilliant juxtapositions between Leprosy Museum's celebration of a cure, augmented reality, and Turing's castration invited guests to think about how technology is marshalled to "cure" aspects of the human condition.

![Figure 5: Judd Morrissey's *Kjell Theøry* is site-specific augmented reality poetry triggered by signs imbedded in various outdoor Bergen location and on human bodies.](image)

**CONCLUSION**

The five Media Arts exhibits organized and produced by Scott Rettberg and Roderick Coover delivered electronic literature to new audiences in aesthetically gorgeous, evocative settings during the conference and well after it ended. Those exhibits were created for literate and intellectually curious Bergensers who savor internationalism and respect art as a key mechanism to foster global dialogue.

**BIO**
Kathi Inman Berens, Assistant Professor of Digital Humanities and Book Publishing in Portland State University's English department, researches and makes electronic literature. In 2014-15, she was the Fulbright Scholar of Digital Culture at the University in Bergen, Norway. Her scholarship has been published, among other places, in Digital Scholarship in the Humanities (Oxford) and her poem "Tournedo Gorge" is anthologized in the Electronic Literature Collection Volume 3.