

POSTHUMAN ELECTRONIC LITERATURE

Posthuman is both an exhibition and a state of being, a condition that 23 years ago, when N. Katherine Hayles wrote *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* may have seemed somewhat alien to humanists, a strange form of assemblage between humans and machines, a sort of willing melding of body and consciousness with systems beyond our direct control. *Posthuman* features digital art and electronic literature that engages with the posthuman condition: enactments of complex human-technical assemblages in which cognition and decision-making powers are distributed in both aesthetic and literary systems – what Hayles describes as “cognitive assemblages” and what Laura Shackelford and Louise Economides call “surreal entanglements.”

In the years intervening between the publication of Hayles’s landmark study and the pandemic present, posthumanism has been interpreted in many different ways by various thinkers. One of the many things that posthumanism has in common with electronic literature is that the precise meaning of the term is actively and continuously contested. Some, like Cary Wolfe, yoke the posthuman to a shift away from anthropocentrism as the environmental crises force a raising awareness of the costs that the human animal’s obsession with its own selfish interests have had on the planet and not incidentally its own odds for long-term survival. Others imagine and celebrate various flavors of transhumanism: imagining a future in which the factors that limit humanity, such as ageing and mortality, are transcended through technology. Rosi Braidotti extrapolates from the posthuman a form of neo-humanism that emerges from post-colonial and race studies, as well as gender studies and environmentalism. For others such as Eugene Thacker and Phil Torres, the concept of posthumanism lends itself to consideration of a foreseeable future without humans, perhaps even a time when the species has gone voluntarily extinct.

During the 2020-2021 pandemic, several of these conceptions of the posthuman have felt particularly material: the co-evolved relationship of humans and technology has perhaps never been so apparent as during long stretches of lockdown time, for many of us technologically mediated human relationships became the only kind we had. As our new University of Bergen Digital Culture colleague Astrid Ensslin notes in her SLSAeu 2021 keynote paper coauthored with Christine Wilks, “Posthuman Healing and Critical Digital Fiction Co-Design,” our “being-in-code” inevitably has ramifications for our “being-in-flesh.” The fact that we humans exist within a vast cognitive assemblage becomes even more apparent as our lives became subject to rules and bodily restrictions beyond our individual control, which have seemed to

change on a weekly basis according to sometimes arbitrary factors, not the least of which is the non-human actor of the mutating virus itself. And the haunting spectre of a future without humans has, of course, been a chilling threat echoed in the wailing of sirens in cities around the world as we continue to tally the dead.

My colleague at the University of Bergen, Professor of English Joseph Tabbi, had been planning the 2021 Society for Science, Literature and the Arts Europe (SLSAeu) conference “Literary and Aesthetic Posthumanism” since well before the pandemic began, but, like many events in our lives, plans for that event had to change radically as it became apparent over time that an in-person conference that entailed international travel would be virtually impossible. Joe and I had already discussed organizing a small art exhibition along with the conference, and our collaborator and colleague in the Department of Fine Arts, Eamon O’Kane, volunteered to help us organize the show, even amidst the uncertainty of the pandemic.

After the 2020 Electronic Literature Organization Conference, I volunteered to co-organize the 2021 ELO Conference and Festival at the University of Bergen along with Søren Pold at Aarhus University: a conference and festival that will also have manifestations in India (organized by draft) and at Washington State University Vancouver organized by Dene Grigar and her team at the Electronic Literature Lab. Part of the reason that I volunteered to chair the arts program for ELO 2021 was that during the ELO 2020 Town Hall session, it was announced that the ELO would be planning for an all-virtual event after the success of the ELO 2020 (un)continuity conference. While I’m all for the open inclusivity and community spirit of virtual ELO events, I hoped that we could organize an arts program that would have both online and physical manifestations and that would unfold over a longer period of time than a normal ELO conference. When we hosted the ELO 2015: End(s) of Electronic Literature festival, professionally produced art exhibitions were an important part of the program, and one that I feel is important to the authors and artists who show their work, as well as the new audiences who are introduced to e-lit through such events. I think we have all missed these opportunities to share cultural experiences in embodied environments during this brutal past year.

As the plan solidified, I proposed to Joe that we could combine the SLSAeu exhibition with one of the shows of the ELO 2021 Platform (Post?) Pandemic Festival. Associate Professor of Electronic Literature and digital poet extraordinaire Jason Nelson joined our Digital Culture faculty this year (though he is still living in Australia due to pandemic travel restrictions). Jason has put together a number of innovative online exhibitions of electronic literature and volunteered to coordinate all of the ELO 2021 online exhibitions.

Like many things in the pandemic, our curatorial team for this exhibition is a kind of ad hoc patchwork assemblage of local talent, built up on an affiliation we call the Digital Narrative Network: Joe has organized the SLSAeu conference and established the conceptual frame for the call for works, Eamon brings the expertise of a professional arts exhibition curator, Jason the experience of producing innovative online exhibitions, and I have been coordinating with the artists and staff and gluing the various pieces together. We have had to do all of this on an accelerated schedule, putting together an exhibition that is taking place both online and physically on the University of Bergen campus. Our top priority was to move quickly with a cross-faculty group of University of Bergen faculty with specific skills and roles that would enable us to produce this show efficiently, fairly, and well, under unprecedented circumstances. The adherence to the *Posthuman* theme, quality and professionalism of the submission, and logistical viability of showing each given work were our primary considerations as curators. Diversity was also a key factor in our consideration of the submissions. I'm proud of the fact that the show features voices new to the ELO community, such as Kat Mustatea and Santiago Canek Zapata Paniagua, and compelling work by younger innovators such as Winnie Soon, alongside the work of well-established artists and authors. The logistics of producing this show are complex — even as I write we are still working out the specific conditions of showing the work in the physical exhibition under Coronavirus restrictions (Is that 2 or 4 people allowed in the gallery at a time? Where should we put the hand sanitizer?), but I am very proud that this will be perhaps the most significant exhibition to open on the University of Bergen campus, simultaneously at the Humanities Library and the Art Academy, since the pandemic began.

We have been supported in this work by a seemingly tireless production team of women and men including graduate researchers, artists, and librarians who I would like to acknowledge and thank here for their dedicated work on this show:

Posthuman Production Team

Carlota Salvador Megias – Logistics and editorial work

Irene Fabbri – Web development

Samuel Brezki – Art school exhibition installation and documentation

Anthony Morton – Art school exhibition docent

Cecilie Thale Klingenberg – ELMCIP database documentation

Aud Gjersdal – Library exhibition coordinator

Olaf Knarvik – Library exhibition installation

Ronny Nordvik – Library exhibition installation

Lucila Mayol – ELO 2021 logo and identity

Thanks also to Kat Mustatea. Images from her work *Voidopolis* are used in posters for *Posthuman*.

We would also like to thank the SPIRE fund, the University of Bergen Library, the Art Academy, English, and Digital Culture programs for their support of this exhibition.

The works in *Posthuman* showcase a variety of different media formats and types of artistic interventions interpreting the posthuman condition:

Winnie Soon's **Unerasable Characters II** is a conceptual and software work that mediates algorithmic censorship. The application pulls in erased text from microbloggers in China on a daily basis whose writings are frequently censored and displays the characters of the messages in a way that is visible but unreadable, demonstrating the effects of mediated and automated authoritarianism in silencing voices online.

Simon Biggs's **Autography** is an interactive artwork that automatically generates evolving 3D graphic characters resembling human handwriting: algorithmically generating near-letterforms that manipulate, adjust, and reshape themselves on the fly. This has the seeming effect of watching something like near-language produced by an alien life form we cannot quite understand; or watching a machine in the paradoxical process of unconsciously trying to produce something resembling an expression of human thought.

Karen Ann Donnachie & Andy Simionato's **A.I. seems to be a verb** is a coded interactive human-machine collaborative system which explores the uncanny affect of combining the embodiment of written language (the word as thing) with the intrinsic entropy of speech (the word as process). The work identifies and maps spoken word, not only for linguistic function but also across a spectrum of sentiment, in order to generate a complex array of paratextual supports (page-design, rules, and symbolic elements) used in the display. As the process happens in real-time, it creates a 'mise-en-abyme', incorporating on-the-fly semantic 'slippages' of auto-correct grammar and ill-recognised speech and suggesting rhyming prompts for the user. At times the system generates minimal snippets of words mixed with graphic symbols and animations, only to suddenly transform into highly complex assemblages of text and image, before returning to a staccato rhythm of the speaker(s),

Will Luers's **Distant Affinities** is a work of recombinant cinema about machine intelligence attempting to process, narrate, and mimic sentient being. Through subtitles, the omniscient AI narrator cycles through media that has been captured from the network and attempts to narratively

interpret the patterns of human behavior. Gaps between the text and video fragments suggest what remains outside the domains of surveillance and narrative.

Roderick Coover's **Meet Me at the Station** represents mediated consciousness through a surreal, lyrical VR experience about a scientist trapped in the future due to a time-traveling accident. His only hope is to travel through dreams, but dreams can also turn into nightmares.

Mark Marino and John Murray's **The Hollow Reach** is a choice-based, interactive VR puzzle game built on becoming a posthuman cyborg to overcome the trauma of emotional and physical loss. In this painful but healing journey, the player character must learn to navigate new physical and emotional realities and find novel ways of relating to the world and to others.

Johannah Rodgers's **Not a Book: Locating Material Traces of Collaborative Print and Digital Technologies in the Archive** is a project concerned with the histories, presents, and futures of books and the technologies of reproduction and replication used to make them. It is created from digital images of the traces left from the original copper engraved botanical prints on the interleaved blank pages of a digitized edition of one printed copy of an 1844 issue of "Flora Batava" magazine.

Eamon O'Kane's **Low Prophet** is a short video filmed in New York in 2000 wherein a plastic owl reads Bill Joy's text, "Why the Future Doesn't Need Us," published in *Wired* magazine. The text outlines a dystopian future where humans are rendered obsolete and replaced by the sentient beings they have created. In the video, the pigeons that the plastic owl is meant to scare away simply continue going about their business.

Kyle Booten's **To Pray Without Ceasing** is a web app that autonomously prays for people by searching Twitter for expressions of need. Visitors to the site may mindfully light a virtual candle and, in so doing, delegate the work of praying to the machine while still feeling vaguely responsible for whatever good it does.

René Bauer and Beat Suter's **Turing's Assembly Line** is a cross between an art game and an e-learning project that reverses the role between human and machine. As a player, you become Alan Turing's universal machine yourself. You will receive task after task. Will you be fast enough? How long can you keep up the assembly line?

Santiago Canek Zapata Paniagua's **Li Po :: 8888** is an unreadable text generator paired with a surreal film. "8888" is a part of "Li Po :: Rice for the People 米為人民." On an Earth without humans, an old Chinese poet still fights against the alien occupation and extraction of the planet. An ambassador from the year 8888 time-travels to 4444 to hear the poems of Li Po. Then, the

antidote to capitalism within Li Po's poems is sent back to our time to be sold as rice to prevent the alien occupation.

Brad Gallagher's **Gnarly Posthuman Conversations: John Ashbery, W. H. Auden, Wallace Stevens, and GPT-2** is a cutting-edge machine learning-based poetry generator. The project uses OpenAI's GPT-2 and traditional recurrent neural networks to develop a generative poetry pipeline exploring the interconnections between Auden, Ashbery, and Stevens.

Nick Montfort's **Book Post** is an installation featuring computer generated books by Montfort, Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, Milton Läufer, and Allison Parrish, which are chained to a table, while a slide projector shows images from inside the books on a screen. The functioning "obsolete" slide projector, and the establishment of an "obsolete" chained library within the Humanities Library may suggest that the book is also obsolete — although all of these are perfectly functional technologies.

David Jhave Johnston's **ReRites** is a limited-edition boxset of 12 poetry books written in one year by digital poet David Jhave Johnston with neural net augmentation. The video shown in *Posthuman* showcases the cyborg writing process of a human editing machine generated poetry.

Kat Mustatea's **Voidopolis** is a digital performance about loss and memory currently unfolding over Instagram. It is a loose retelling of *Dante's Inferno*, informed by the grim experience of wandering through NYC during a pandemic. It uses synthetic language, generated in this instance without the letter 'e.' The images are created by "wiping" humans from stock photography. The piece is meant to culminate in loss and will eventually be deleted.

David Thomas Henry Wright's **Most Powerful Words** is a digital literary work comprised of 54 poetry generators. 6 themes each contain 9 poems. Click a theme, then a panel of the theme's carousel to generate a unique, infinite, recombinant poem. This collection presents all language on the same playing field, allowing readers to lightly, quickly, precisely, visibly, and consistently traverse the infinite use and misuse of these charged forms of past and present language.

Together this group of artworks comprise a posthuman portrait – a snapshot of our present moment situated between human subjectivity and whatever comes afterwards. I hope that you will enjoy reading and experiencing these compelling works of electronic literature as much as we have in the process of assembling them for this show. Thanks to everyone who has worked on this first exhibition of the ELO 2021 festival, and thanks to all of the authors and artists for sharing your work.

—Scott Rettberg, ELO 2021 Arts Program Chair, 27.02.2021, Bergen

Posthuman at KMD JOY Forum, Rom 61 and the Humanities Library (HF), University of Bergen.

Opening hours: KMD, Møllendalsveien 61, 4-6 march - 12.00-16.00

HF Library, Haakon Sheteligs plass 7, UiB, M-F, 4-31 march 10.00-14.00. The library exhibition is only accessible to UiB students and staff due to COVID-19 restrictions.

Online exhibition: <http://eliterature.org/elo2021/posthuman>