An Interview with Kim White
author of *The Minotaur Project*

Sarah Townsend: *I distinctly recall the first moment I experienced your piece The Minotaur Project—after years of writing poetry and making personal narrative web sites, I found myself one day doing Google searches on the web in an attempt to canvas this hybrid thing, new to me, called "electronic literature" or "new media poetry." That's what led me to the Electronic Literature Organization's 2001 prize page where, going first to the Poetry short list, I encountered your piece.*

And it surprised me—half of the six works listed there turned out not to be web-enabled. The Minotaur Project, however, was—and its ready availability, along with its deceptive clarity, was one of the things that enabled it to grab me at first.

After that I would have to describe the main force of my attraction to it as textural—that is, on one level the operation of a seeming tactile quality on my senses, even within a "disembodied" medium; it is a sensual piece. But also it is a smart piece—one that immediately struck me with its leveraging at once of classical mythology and contemporary scientific logic and discourse.

This, too, is what I mean by its "texture"—that it acts upon me as a reader/viewer with an ambidextrous touch, at once thinky and feely. And this is what I continue to love about it—that upon repeated visits I continue to be drawn into new levels and ways of receiving it: as a visual art piece, as a sound collage, as a poem collection, as a critical proposition, and as something beyond and comprised by the conjunction of all these things.

Kim White: I love your reading.

ST: *Well, admittedly, I'm partial. :-) So I wonder—beyond wholesale endorsement by those of us fortunate enough to experience love at first sight—what might you hope for from your hypermedia readers? How do you imagine, for instance, a novice to hypermedia works mght approach The Minotaur Project—what steps in reading, receiving and responding? In part I'm interested here as a teacher of literature and writing, two disciplines that are too often pedagogically split, in my opinion.*

KW: When approaching a hypermedia work, I look to see if it can give me something that traditional media can't. For example, if I see a poem or story that has been put into digital format, but has kept all the conventions of the page, then I'm not very interested. I would rather read it on paper. I'm excited by work that understands the relationship between form and content. That examines new media critically, and uses it to do what literature has always done—express our humanity in the context of our struggle.

The first Canto is intended as a meditation. I was experimenting with ways of drawing the reader into a work that is somewhat devoid of narrative and lyrical armatures. Canto One uses an interactive chant to evoke an interior mood. I was interested in how this very old form of introspection would work grafted into a new medium? I was also thinking about Hopi sand paintings when I created the image, which reveals and disappears as the curser moves across the screen. The ephemeral nature of the sand paintings and the chant

form seemed like a good metaphor for the fragility of the electronic medium.

To parse this work I would examine it in layers: the poem which dissolves on the surface of the blank ground, the animated grid, the soundscape/chant, the interactive aspect, and the underlying image. I imagine these "layers" could be considered in the same way you would a line or a stanza extracted from a poem—looking simultaneously at its particular qualities and how it informs the work as a whole.

ST: *Before you came to digital composition, you were a writer and an artist in more traditional materials. Would you talk a bit about how composing for hypermedia is different?*

KW: The digital medium, which deals with image, text, movement, performance, interactivity and sound, has a sort of ensemble composition process, which might be akin to film-making. But it's different from film-making because, at least for me, it's not a collaborative process. As an author and an artist, I work alone at my desk creating these objects.

How the electronic poem comes together in the composition process is, like the page poem, a bit mysterious. It's hard for me to say how they are different because they are so completely mingled in my head and in my process. I still write poetry and prose that I don't put into this medium and make visual art that does not have to co-exist with words.

When I decide to make an electronic piece I deal with these issues:

* a different kind of pacing in an animated poem
* navigation-- pages are not turned; the site map is a kind of composition in its own right
* the performance aspect of electronic poetry
* the computer as a character or agent of performance
* how to marry visual art composition with syntactical composition
* how to incorporate the interactive aspect in the electronic medium.

I usually write first. Before the writing is finished, I begin to incoporate visual art and animation. When the text and images comingle, the writing begins to evolve. My goal is to find ways to make image and text utterly dependent on each other. Image should not be mere illustration for text, it should play a role that the text absolutely cannot. The idea is to make sure the visual art, the sound, the movement, and the interactive elements are saying things that the fixed poem cannot say. So I try to grow them up together as much as possible.

And I've done that with varing degrees of success. In this project, the most successful canto is the first. In "The Cartesian Chant of Making" my goal was to use the interactive element to make the reading of the work into a chant or meditation on duality and creation. In order to unveil the image and activate the chanted dualities, the reader must move the curser, a minute finger action akin to counting prayer beads. The underlying image reveales a combination of flesh and machine. The system of temporary unveiling (and chanting) is organized into a grid. The grid itself has a whole system of symbolic meaning which adds silently to the content of the piece.

ST: *You have commented elsewhere that, in this piece at least, digital composition isn't primarily collaborative for you— and indeed one of the things I love about your work here is how it seems to express a singular, individual vision (I have to admit I tend to be pretty Modernist in my aesthetic). But*

you also credit your husband Mike on The Minotaur Project. How did your respective roles there play out?

KW: The technical assistance I received was minimal. When I got stuck Mike helped me figure the problem out. But I did everything else, top to bottom, took the photos, recorded the voice, wrote the text, did the Photoshop and Flash work, etc. I share your attraction to the singular vision. Ready-mades and art that exists as an illustration of theory is not as compelling to me as the hand-made, personal object.

I started working with Mike on the project before I actually started writing it. I had some drafts, but I wasn't sure how the Minotaur and Kore were going to interact. Mike is a brilliant artist and his first instinct was to make an image, to draw the character. He depicted Minotaur as a kind of sad angel, misunderstood and lonely. He made a Quicktime movie which was really beautiful, but I could see right away that it wasn't going to work. The character he made was endearing and heartbreaking, and would need a story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. That was different from what I wanted to do.

I wanted to write something fragmentary, and I wanted my Minotaur to be invisible. So we put aside the Quicktime sketch and Mike started drafting things in Flash. I had an idea for a kind of yin-yang animation. The red and white shapes, the pink line and the gray shim, these all had meanings but they were too meaningy. Too intellectual with nothing to hook you, no human entry-point.

Finally, I pushed Mike out of the chair and began to do it myself. It just didn't work to dictate to someone else and have him try to interpret it.

Late one night I took a picture of my ear with the digital camera and married it with an image of a circuit board and everything fell into place. That idea never would have happened if I hadn't been struggling with the software myself.

ST: *I'd like to hear a little bit more about your own initial process of conceiving the piece—where did The Minotaur Project begin?*

KW: When I started writing this I had just finished reading Pound's Cantos and was inspired by the audacity of his project—to write a mythology of all people, in a world that was shrinking even then. But I was also struck by how he used images in his Cantos. They never look like illustrations. They function as characters or hieroglyphs, he successfully made images part of the text itself.

Pound was working with many different languages in his Cantos and that instinct seems appropriate in new media work where there is lots of talk about "image as text." Although this concept shouldn't be taken to the extreme, I do think it is appropriate to think about. Certainly there is a language of icons and logos in our late-capitalist culture that even the non-literate can "read." I am interested in how this image literacy will manifest in stories and poems. I tried to work with image the same way a poet working in traditional forms innovates to conform to the sonnet structure. I wanted to make the writing work within a visual, aural and interactive context.

ST: *You know, I think it's interesting how we both self-identify as Modernists aesthetically— and you even note Pound's inspiration. But Eliot and Pound were part of a fairly male New Critical world. So I'd like to ask about The Minotaur Project as the work of an artist who is a woman. Especially considering that this piece centers on Kore or Persephone, who is such an iconic figure for the metaphoric feminine fertility. In the mythology she swallows the pomegranate seeds with the resultant season of barrenness, her body's tie*

the land. And it strikes me that even her name invokes, or anticipates, that term from feminist art history, the "central core imagery" graphically exploited by Judy Chicago and often attributed to Georgia O'Keefe's work. It may not be too much of a stretch to see your ear or mouth depicted as a variation on this theme, the cybernetic orifice.

KW: I mention Pound as an influence, but only in relation to something he was trying to do formally. Pound is not someone I go to on a regular basis. His work does not have the qualities that really excite me.

It's strange to me how sensuality is traditionally seen as feminine and intellect as masculine, since, in fact, both men and women manifest these traits in equal amounts. I don't think of the senses as subordinate to the intellect. They can be trained and developed just as the mind can be. Reading poetry, for example, this is done with the senses as well as with the mind. So that is all to say that I don't privilege thought over sensation.

To identify what one brings to a work because of, or in spite of, his/her gender is an interesting thought experiment. I like your reading of my work in relation to the "central core" idea. Rather than referring to the womb (or the entrance to/exit from the womb) I'm referring to the mouth/tongue or the "voice" and therefore the individual identity of the woman as a trope on "the core." The choice of Persephone/Kore foregrounds the generative powers of women and how they are subverted or "put underground" by men and the cultural barrenness that results. It is interesting to think about how the digital age might perpetuate that. For starters, someone should look at how the structure of computer code corresponds to male thought patterns. Everything is literal cause/effect.

ST: *One of the reasons I inquire about you as a woman artist, of course, is because you had a baby not long ago (here at first I typed "given your son's birth," "due to your pregnancy"— language being so insistently generative).*

The Minotaur Project deals so eloquently with the body and its points of ingress and egress, beginning with that gauzed-over navel on the title page. It seems your experience of conceiving and carrying and giving birth to another human being in the interim since you created the piece must provide some points of reflection—whether toward clarification or obfuscation or greater complexity or simply different emphasis, I wonder.

KW: I wonder if women always have an awareness of creating in a physical sense? I was drawn to Persephone because I wanted to examine how women and their generative powers are diminished. Young women are never thought of as the source. They are habitually depicted as powerless or as powerful only in the sense that they are sexually interesting. Now that I've experienced first-hand the enormous physical effort involved in making a human being, I realize how taken-for-granted that contribution is.

Having a teenage girl as my central character was a decision to forefront a woman just coming into her childbearing phase. Essentially, this is what the myth is about, the incredible power a young woman has. Without her the entire planet goes barren. Without her there is nothing.

Interestingly, in classical myth, Persephone never gives birth to her own child. Though she seems to pine for one. Her efforts are entirely taken up with making the crops grow and, on the flipside (or underside), governing the dead. In a way she's a tragic character who didn't choose this life but is now stuck on a kind of treadmill.

ST: *One thing that's been on my mind lately is… how to put this most accurately… the range, and limits, of the creative potentialities inherent to a woman of a certain age. There are, of course, a lot of things that come into this: motherhood (the biological), scholarly and professional work (the intellectual/critical), as well as other more personally inflected creative endeavors like poetry and collage (the artistic).*

As I write this, I realize how I've intuitively (and some might say mistakenly— for instance, splitting "intellect" from "art"...) portioned these energies out into three distinct realms. Be that as it may, one of the reasons I love your work so much is that it brings this split together—in it I see themes of all three sorts emerging and being interwoven in the most wonderful and fertile and troubling ways.

KW: True, at a certain age there is enormous "output". It is unique to women, the experience of making a new person alongside her other creative and professional projects. Hard to say exactly how that influences…

My work has always made references to the body and its systems. Since becoming a mother, I have been thinking a lot about war and birth. Again, my obsession with dichotomies—the woman gestates and gives birth and the men (though not exclusively) go to war and destroy all that work.

I also wonder at the similarities. The pain for instance—pregnancy, labor and delivery, the sleep deprivation of post-partum has to be equal to what gets experienced on the battlefield in terms of physical pain and exhaustion. I'm interested in where two extremes collide and collude, the visual metaphor of the yin/yang, which shows opposites pressing against one another. In the center of each is a speck of its opposite. The idea is that as soon as it gets completely dark, the light starts and vice-versa. The farther you get into one extreme the sooner the inevitable return. Birth/death, male/female, intellect/intuition, etc..

The first Canto addresses this love of duality in our culture. I titled it in reference to Cartesian coordinates. I wanted to foreground the grid, which is used both in visual art and in science to describe space. I imagine that our cultural preoccupation with dualities is embodied in this linear conception of the architecture of our world. I am somewhat obsessed with the grid, which I disbelieve and believe at the same time. At one point, I had all the other Kore poems arranged in a grid pattern with four, four-line stanzas, eight syllables each, with a rhyme scheme at the corner points connecting them.

ST: *It seems clear that part of your project in this work is the complication of habitual divisions. "The Cartesian Chant of Making" says in effect, "There are these conflicting and colliding pressures in our lives" and then goes on to cast them in an indivisible and constantly-shifting mosaic, illegible except in motion and taken as a whole.*

KW: Yes, I'm interested in how we harbor dichotomies. It's an internal conflict that is below the surface for everyone. The resonance of opposites creates a kind of flux. I'm looking at ways in which the balance or imbalance of that tension becomes productive.

ST: *To what extent do you think this blending is in fact the potential of the medium revealing itself? Multimedia seems the most inherently apt vehicle for addressing collisions and conflicts and eerie emerging hybridities. And it has struck me in my own creative work that production tends to be some alchemy of intention and found brilliance borrowed from available media.*

KW: I guess the medium has a life of its own in a sense. I was a sculptor years ago and when I worked in stone, I had very specific notions about what that stone "wanted to be". It's not unusual for a stone sculptor to feel that he is somehow co-creating with the stone. In multimedia, you have this thing that seems alive, flickering electric like a body or a brain. The character traits of the material are unavoidably incorporated and that is as it should be. I think that is part of knowing your craft. I like this idea of the medium as an "apt vehicle for addressing those eerie emerging hybridities." I love that you say eerie because that's a feeling I often go after in my work. There is something quite eerie about the way technology can creep into the most private corners of our lives.

When I was pregnant, I had a sonogram picture of my son's face sitting next to my keyboard. I used to look at it all the time and think about how I'm not supposed to see this yet. He seemed to have a stunned expression, like I'd disturbed him in this very private moment—floating in the womb. The picture is entirely black with a glowing, skeletal face in the center, an alien in the oblivion before birth. Think of that, technology lets us look into the oblivion and how can we resist?

I've been working on a piece that uses CAT scanned images of my brain, mainly because I am so amazed by them. But also because it seems like such an omniscient view—into one's own brain. The problem for me is—how do I make something more compelling than a picture of my unborn child or of my brain? It's very interesting really, because none of the other artforms have this central problem.

We (multimedia artists) have this beast we are trying to ride which exists as both scientific brilliance and as a giant clump of information and quotidian communication (the internet, television, email). Additionally, it has no artistic tradition and is constantly morphing into something else. I think hybrid artists are drawn to this because it poses so many interesting challenges and offers opportunities for self-definition that are lacking in some of the more established artistic traditions. And there are all these tools that are more or less un-tried by artists. It's kind of a wild west.

ST: *You mentioned that you're still adding to the project, and the "About" page indicates a larger work—would you describe what that is?*

KW: I am imagining Kore's Dantesque journey through the underworld but instead of Virgil, she has an electronic manifestation of the Minotaur as her guide. I am imagining an extended narrative for Kore and most, if not all, of it will appear in an electronic format.

At one stage of its development the trilogy began with a novel section with a circular rather than a linear narrative. The setting was Circleville, Ohio, and the reader entered the work through an introduction called "Home Burial." As you read, the table of contents would build in the background— a mandala that contained all the sections of the body of the novel. You could read them in any order or skip over them entirely and go to the exit (so read as either novel or short story).

Once you finished the final text, the mandala then collapsed and reformed into a wireframe globe or cage structure, trapping the reader inside. This was the framework for the second part of the trilogy, called "The Hellcycle". This section was written entirely in verse, and it's the landscape that the Minotaur occupies.

I then planned a third movement called "The Return." For that I wanted the sense of lucid, above-ground, prosiness to contrast with the denser, more intuitive language of poetry for the below-ground story.

I am a huge fan of Dante and was thinking about his trilogy when I decided on this structure. Unfortunately, I'm finding it much more difficult to bring prose into this medium. Partly because there is so much more text and Flash isn't good with text. Partly, too, because I find it's harder to integrate this volume of text and image without frustrating its legibility. It's more difficult to abandon the convention of the page.

In any case, I'm now rethinking how to adapt my ideas to the available technology. This project has been very slow to evolve. I was hoping to create and release a few sections at a time, but it's not working out that way. Each subsequent section seems to need the next section to feel complete. So it looks like I will have to make a very large piece that will include the Minotaur Project as perhaps the only stand-alone element.

ST: *Apart from this series, what other hypermedia works do you have in the cooker?*

KW: My newest piece is an online journal called The New Disease (http://www.columbia.edu/~kw96/), a collection of fictional nonfiction—stories about diseases like Geusis Nervosa, a taste delay syndrome which afflicts anorexics and bulimics; an STD that's communicated through the ear from phone sex; and a new club drug called 'thrax, made from a non-lethal strain of anthrax.

We are interested in how the reader can affect the narrative and, conversely, how the narrative affects, or infects, the reader, and we wanted to address narrative in the web environment, where the story can be added to, montaged.

The New Disease is essentially collaborative, much more so than anything else I've done. Working with design and visual elements is usually an integral part of my process, but with The New Disease, I made a conscious decision to turn over the site design entirely to Mike. Devin and I did the writing and purposely did not include author taglines on the pieces we wrote. In a very real way, we are also collaborating with the readers (via the "talk back" sections). The intent here is to produce a work that does not privilege authorship.

I am also interested in how self-definition evolves in terms of a medical condition, and vice-versa. But this is a theme that runs through all of my work. I have a collection of prose poems that imagines the body transforming and mutating to manifest something that is happening below the surface. I have this very romantic notion of the body as expressive object. The prose poems explore a kind of magical realism of the body. I think this shows up in The Minotaur Project as well. The senses serve as interface between inner and outer. Those liminal zones, where a transaction between a self and a world takes place, are particularly interesting to me because their significance is largely overlooked, yet our humanity hangs on them.

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The Minotaur Project imagines an insensate consciousness. Minotaur is an intelligent machine, a kind of Pinnoccio character, who wants to be human but lacks the necessary flesh and blood.

My Minotaur has been housed in the ethernet for four years. Spinning its numbers without pause. I don't imagine that he can consume anyone, but he does mesmerize the female character in the poems. He is obsessed with her as well. They are mutually obsessed.

This metaphor of the half-human monster trapped in a maze of technology and trying to find his humanity is also a reference to modern urban life. New Yorkers, for example, who live inside machines—subways, buses, cars, those big buildings with windows you can't open...

Even our communication is through machines. Email is the most extreme example, none of the senses connect with the other person, at least on the phone you hear a voice, you can detect mood, personality. You can make a connection because of that. Imagine all the human information you lose in email. The Minotaur Project is about that loss.

ST: *And now—is it superstition?—for some reason I begin to fear I've committed some trespass behind the creative curtain. Not that I actually have any suspicion that a mechanistic breakdown threatens to denude such mysterious and multilayered work—but I suppose I'm indoctrinated in the etiquette of sparing the made work the disrespect of too close an examination. I hope, both because I know you and because I know you're interested like me in the teaching of hypermedia works, that you'll appreciate my intentions.*

It seems to me that before the "avant-garde" can truly communicate with a broader audience (and surely the classroom is part of this) we need to develop explicit, detailed, and not too high-flown ways of talking about it. Then, too, from my experience in the Iowa Writers' Workshop I know the damage that too precious a mystique of "the Writer" can beget. So please bear with me if I've risked treading slipshod on any artistic holies.

KW: Actually, I think your reading enhances the work. You know how a sculpture gets shiny where people touch it? That's the mystery spot, that's the connection. Without it we've failed in a sense.