



Visiting artist Jen Bervin weaves interdisciplinary stories across Northwestern

The Block Museum and Kaplan Institute host artist-in-residence throughout winter quarter

EVANSTON - When artist Jen Bervin first visited Northwestern University's Block Museum of Art in spring 2017, she launched into a two-day whirlwind tour, taking part in more than 20 conversations with faculty and students that spanned the fields of engineering, nanotechnology, computer science, poetry and art. As an artist and poet whose research-driven works weave together various disciplines, including text and textiles, poetry and art, science and life, Bervin found Northwestern's focus on cross-departmental collaboration to be the ideal setting to continue thinking about her current projects.

These productive discussions led to the first joint residency effort between the Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities' Artist-in-Residence program and the Block Museum. Additional support for Bervin's Winter 2018 visit is provided by the Department of Art Theory and Practice, the Center for the Writing Arts and Northwestern University Libraries.

"I was floored by the Block's agility and openness," Bervin said. "The museum and Northwestern approach collaboration with a remarkable seriousness and generosity. I am excited to spend this winter actively thinking with Northwestern's 'brain trust' and am hopeful about the potential of what may emerge."

Her works are closely attentive to material and language; they range in scale from a nanoimprinted poem in the form of a liquefied silk biosensor to a 230-foot hand-sewn model of the Mississippi River.

"I want to make works that create space, rather than take one away. A space where disparate fields can cohere and can find meaning in touching, fusing and thinking together," Bervin said.

Bervin's been the subject of solo exhibitions at the Des Moines Art Center and Granoff Center for the Arts at Brown University and has been featured in group exhibitions at the MASS MoCA, MCA Denver, the Power Plant Contemporary Art Gallery in Toronto and the Walker Art Center. Bervin has published 10 books, including "Silk Poems," a long-form poem presented both as a book (Nightboat Books, 2017) and as an implantable biosensor made from liquefied silk developed in collaboration with Tufts University's Silk Lab. She also is a SETI (Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence) Institute artist-in-residence, a program that facilitates a cross-disciplinary exchange of ideas between artists and scientists.

"Bervin's process-based practice is research driven and weaves together a range of disciplines," said Susy Bielak, Susan and Stephen Wilson Associate Director of Engagement/Curator of Public Practice. "Whether using the working methods and materials of medicine and engineering to teach art students about process or leading conversations about the work of a specific poet, she has a rare capacity to draw connections across disciplines and pose fundamental life questions."

Through its Public Practice program, the Block Museum is committed to fostering projects with artists outside of the walls of the building – art that is collaborative, process-based, participatory and that often involves people as the medium or material of the work.

"The Block actively seeks opportunities to connect artists with faculty research, student interests and campus resources. These interactions contribute to the development of artists' work while engaging Northwestern in an artists' creative processes," Bielak said.

Cross campus engagement

In addition to connecting to Northwestern's staff, faculty and students across disciplines, Bervin will conduct research for future art projects in the diverse collections of Northwestern University Libraries – from its John Cage archives in the Music Library to textiles and ancient manuscripts in the Melville J. Herskovits Africana Library.

Bervin's residency will culminate in "Read with the Spine: Experiences & Experiments in Northwestern Libraries Collections," an interdisciplinary writing workshop for faculty and students using the Library's collections. This workshop will use the site of the library to explore fundamental questions about human experiences and the nature of books and libraries themselves, such as: "What does it mean to listen, especially now?" "How is a history made, on the human level?" "What do we keep in our archives and why?" "Why choose a book as the form for ideas?" and "What is the sensory ecosystem of a library?" Working individually and collectively, participants will immerse themselves in looking, listening, reading, writing and responding to sites and materials across the libraries.

“Read with the Spine” is being developed and led by Bervin; the Block Museum’s Susy Bielak; Martin Antonetti, the Library’s Director of Distinctive Collections and curators and conservators from Art Library, Archival Processing, Melville J. Herskovits Library of African Studies, Music Library, Preservation and Conservation, Transportation Library and University Archives. Participants will draw inspiration from library holdings, as well as from the architecture of the historic Deering and Main Libraries themselves. The workshop will be open to anyone on campus seeking new modes of research and inspiration.

“This workshop continues the Block’s long history of collaboration with our friends at the Northwestern Libraries,” said Lisa Corrin, the Block Museum Ellen Philips Katz Director. “Over the past few years we have worked together to create opportunities for artists to be nourished and inspired by the University’s extraordinary collections.

“Northwestern’s libraries hold so much more than books,” Corrin said. “They include archives, photographs, works of art, scrap books and even objects that tell the history of mourning. Jen Bervin is a passionate lover of these collections and the curiosity that drives her desire to discover what is in them is contagious. In sharing this passion with our students, we hope that they will continue to mine Northwestern’s distinctive collections as poets, artists and scholars.”

Bervin’s other campus engagement activities will include an array of programs and learning opportunities, including teaching “Advanced Materials,” a studio course focused on the intersection of art and science through exploration of traditional craft and technological innovation. Offered through the Department of Art Theory and Practice in collaboration with the McCormick School of Engineering, the course is open to undergraduate and graduate students across disciplines.

The Alice Kaplan Institute for the Humanities is committed to disseminating humanities research and providing opportunities for faculty, students, and the broader community to explore issues, examine beliefs, and engage in interdisciplinary dialogue about human thought and culture. As a site for exchange and connection across the humanities, sciences, and social sciences at Northwestern, the Institute is dedicated to fostering critical, creative, and scholarly discussions about what it means to be human, across time and space, through sponsored fellowship competitions, innovative curriculum, a first-year undergraduate honors program, and a range of scholarly and artistic talks, workshops, and performances.

The Block Museum and Kaplan Institute are members of the Northwestern Arts Circle, which brings together film, humanities, literary arts, music, theater, dance and visual arts. Watch the Arts Circle winter preview on the Arts Circle website.