A CORONA OF SONNETS

FASTIDIOUS INQUIRY, WEIRD COMPLIANCE

BY ANONYMOUS

FOREWORD

Fastidious Inquiry, Weird Compliance is a corona of sonnets, written by *Anonymous*. These sonnets express a fictional subject's experience of, and involvement with, state powers of online surveillance during the novel coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic in 2020.

The '*I*' of the sonnets is a tentative, flickering composite. They articulate their position in fragments, and so we are compelled to read imaginatively, to try on their world through their words[2]. The '*I*' of these sonnets is themself trying to navigate the implicated worlds of state surveillance and covid-19. Through the sonnets, they shift sideways from their workaday point-of-view to momentarily inhabit positions that are different from their own: Sometimes you hear the voice of a citizen questioning the idea of themself as a surveilled 'data body' and their responsibilities as such; sometimes you hear the voice of a government administrator chairing a public health meeting on Covid-19 test-and-trace protocols; sometimes you hear the voice of a police officer on the frontline of an anti-facemask protest; and sometimes you hear the voice of a protester in active dissent of state sanctioned Covid-19 restrictions. Whatever their position, the voices that emerge in these poems ask you to think with them about the ways we live with, under, or by state powers of online surveillance; they ask you to consider with them whether you experience online surveillance passively or actively, whether as citizen, professional, public servant or 'radical' nobody.

These sonnets were written over the course of two *Engineering Fictions* writing workshops[3], by representatives from policing, government, health, academia and civil liberties groups in the U.K. The *Engineering Fictions* workshops were hosted in the spirit of the Chatham House Rule, which states "when a meeting, or part thereof, is held under Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed"[4]. Hence, the decision to combine the participants voices under the ancient pen-name, *Anonymous*.

The first aim of these workshops was *to open up a constructive, honest and creative conversation* amongst stakeholders of state powers of online surveillance. The conversations were carefully prepared through the *Engineering Fictions* process [5], to help participants consider what and how we think and feel we're doing when we participate in or enact online surveillance and policing.

The seed topic of each workshop reflected these considerations in the context of the Covid-19 public health emergency. While *Fastidious Inquiry* (30th September 2020) spoke to the necessity of holding those in power to account through a commitment to individual inquiry for the collective good, *Weird Compliance* (4th November 2020) confronted the identity crisis felt by many on the political left, as they struggle to reconcile, for example, the right to protest with the problem of misinformation.

Through these workshops, a meeting-place was formed where participants could enjoy a certain quality of anonymity, under the cloak of poetic fiction. Indeed, participants of the *Engineering Fictions*

process expressed an appreciation of the time and meeting-place afforded by these workshops to "metabolise the things you are working on"; "to allow emotion to come"; "to process thinking and feeling" and "to consider the contract between the state and the citizen".

This chapbook gathers together the poems, and the ideas that prompted them, produced during the *Engineering Fictions* process, in order to address the second aim of the workshops: *to seed a wider conversation* on state powers of surveillance and policing, by appealing to the public imagination in a time of novel coronavirus. As curator and host of the *Engineering Fictions* sessions, I chose the form of the sonnet to be a catalyst for these anticipated, future conversations.

The sonnet has been practiced for at least 450 years in the English language, and for about 750 years in Italian. Its longevity, suggests Don Patterson, can be put down to the fact that; "Poets write sonnets because it makes poems easier to write. Readers read sonnets because it makes their lives easier to bear"[6]. I became interested in the sonnet form when I employed Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, Sonnet 43, as a seed for an *Engineering Fictions* session during Love Data Week in 2019[7]. This poem, beginning with the line "*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways*", offered a playful yet critical way to collaboratively make sense of what happens when we use the word 'data'. The etymology of the word 'data' suggests that it means *something given*, but in the context of consumer technologies like smart phones, search engines and internet-of-things devices, 'data' are more likely to become *something taken*, often by way of imperceivable algorithms employed by corporations and states. In this context, I began to imagine Browning's sonnet as a model for a *critical data poem*, one that suggested a lineage between accountancy, writing and contemporary 'smart' technologies.

The form of the sonnet - a small, squarish text, typically of fourteen lines length - appealed to me as simple device to host conversations and writing experiments that could generate collective sense-making from within a society besotted by technologies for "transforming all things under the sun into a data format and thus quantifying them"[8]. Described as a "moments monument"[9], the sonnet offers a means to process social conditions whereby it seems that "everyone gets so much information all day long they lose their common sense"[10].

In contemporary manifestations, the sonnet has come to function as a focused yet flexible instrument through which a person may process their own thoughts and feelings in correspondence with their larger reality. For instance, poet Laynie Browne has developed a time-sensitive approach to sonnet writing. "As a parent of two small children," she writes, "I invent time in order to work. Thus the one-minute sonnet. Thus the collaboration with the kids"[11]. Browne's *Daily Sonnets* are "a collaborative experiment in time" that both trouble and celebrate the complex relationship of personal and professional life: she draws language from her daily conversations and interactions with family; over-heard fragments from media, events and lectures; from the everyday chores and errands of her domestic and professional life.

In the context of the *Engineering Fictions* workshops, the sonnet form became a filter for the participants to experience the benefits and challenges of open ended conversation, when paired with the constraints of conceptual writing. In the meeting-place of the workshops, participants were afforded an unusual opportunity to reflect together upon their own assumptions and values, their own complicity and resistance, as individuals working within (or in relation to) the worlds of online state surveillance and policing, and to present their testimonies through the anonymity of poetic fiction. The sonnet, and its collective form, the corona, somehow seemed to be the right compositional strategy (particularly during a coronavirus pandemic) to tackle issues of online state

surveillance and policing, with some of the people most closely involved in these matters. The poems in this chapbook demonstrate the sonnet as a form of critical reflection, one that is "most full of knowledge, [of] relevance to the moment now"[12] and, as our anonymous poet here writes, one that may even be "dangerous to the institution."

Before you continue reading, I'd like to offer *a little orientation* on the performance and publishing of *Engineering Fictions*:

There are three roles which define participation in *Engineering Fictions* sessions. The first is the role that I play, that of the *host*. During the sessions I am facilitator and time-keeper, but, in the preparatory phase of the workshops, I am also midwife to the *seed* topic of the catalyst. In response to the seed, I create a flexible script for each session and devise generative writing constraints that will support exploration, inquiry and reflection. The second is the role of the *catalyst*. The catalyst is a person who has something at stake that they wish to speak about, to ask about, to open up about, with others. This 'something' becomes the seed for the session. The seed often takes the form of a text, written by the catalyst, as a kind of soliloquy script, that begins the session and prompts conversation. The third role is that of *others;* a temporary community of interest who directly or indirectly share a stake in the seed topic of the session and are willing to listen, respond and write honestly together. All of the texts in this chapbook, unless otherwise stated, were written by participants, *host/catalyst/others,* during the E*ngineering Fictions* workshops in September and November 2020, and are published here under the pen name, *Anonymous*.

The first sonnet sequence is prefaced by a script, written by the catalyst of the *Fastidious Inquiry* session, and concluded by a piece of free-writing written by one of the participants during that session. Likewise, the second sonnet sequence is prefaced by a script, written by the catalyst of the *Weird Compliance* session. These scripts were read at the beginning of the workshop to seed the conversation and writing that followed.

The sonnets themselves have not been edited or revised in any way. They were written during the course of the workshops and sent on to me via email by their individual authors. The only intervention I have made has been to retrospectively compose them into their collective form, as they are presented here, as a Corona of Sonnets. This involved taking the last line of each poem as the title for the next. So, for example, I chose the sonnet '*On a Meeting to Discuss Communication Strategy for Covid*' as the first poem in the sequence. The final line of this poem becomes the title for the next: '*Not at all old chap, we know its all about wealth*', and so on. I did not labour this process, it was done quite swiftly and intuitively.

The sonnets are followed by *Curator's Notes*. These include excerpts from my research diary where I am reflecting immediately on my experience of the first *Engineering Fictions* session. I include this text to demonstrate the way analysis is integrated iteratively into the process of devising and performing an *Engineering Fictions* session, and the way insight and further inquiry can be generated as a result. I offer a provisional, reflexive analysis of these research diary excerpts in response to two questions: *What has been learned? What has been achieved?*

Concluding the chapbook is an *Afterword* by Megan O'Neill and Amy Humphrey, who invited me to facilitate these *Engineering Fictions* sessions as part of their dissemination project through the Scottish Universities Insight Institute.

Jessica Foley | Curator and host of Engineering Fictions
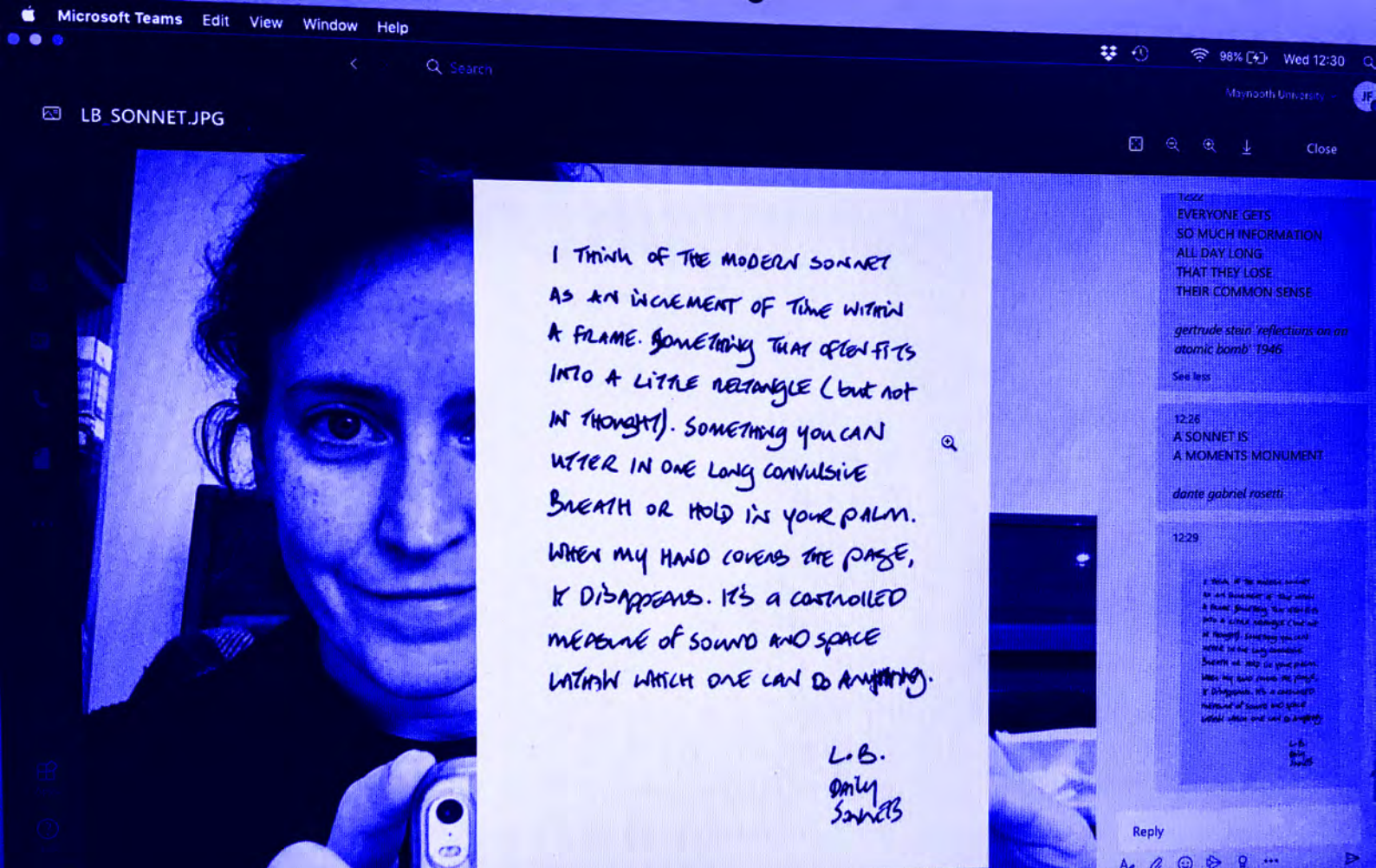
REFERENCES

1. Rita Ann Higgins, *Pathogens Love A Patsy: Pandemic & Other Poems*, Salmon Poetry, County Clare, 2020, p.14.

2. Anonymous, the author of this Chapbook, goes by the pronoun 'they': https://www.mypronouns.org/they-them

3. *Engineering Fictions* is a collaborative and improvisational writing workshop for interdisciplinary thought experiment, created and curated by Jessica Foley. Its bespoke design affords people a time and meeting-place to creatively explore and respond to ideas, questions and doubts relating in some way to technology and communication, through fiction. See www.engineeringfictions.org for more information.

4. www.chathamhouse.org

5. For an introduction to the Engineering Fictions process please visit https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IjE8XYDis8k&t=9s&ab_channel=JessicaFoley .

6. Don Patterson, *101 Sonnets: from Shakespeare to Heaney*, Faber and Faber, London, 2012, p.xxvii.

7. For more information visit https://engineeringfictions.org/2019/03/02/ef1-19-how-do-i-love-thee-let-me-count-map-the-ways/

8. Mirko Tobias Schafer & Karin van Es, *The Datafied Society: Studying Culture through Data*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2017, p. 11.

9. Dante Gabriel Rossetti, http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s258.rap.html

10. Gertrude Stein, *Reflection on the Atomic Bomb*, Yale Poetry Review, December 1947.

11. Laynie Browne, *Daily Sonnets*, Counterpath Press, Denver, Colorado, 2007, p. 157.

12. Bernadette Mayer, *Sonnets*, Tender Buttons Press, 1989, 2014, p. xvii.

FASTIDIOUS INQUIRY

My aim with my inquiry is the respect, protection and fulfillment of rights. I must ask those questions to understand that what I cherish is protected. My inquiry is not to undermine, but to strengthen, not to always stop the measure but to always preserve and improve our rights. In an age of technology adoption, it is only through inquiry that we get to a place of clarity. Courts care about this, journalists care about this (sometimes in entirely the wrong direction – and I care about that when it hurts conversation), people care about it when they can too.

Compatibility with the rule of law requires the rules and measures taken to be reasonably foreseeable. For secret surveillance, the tests of foreseeability has consistently been qualified that is not necessary for the individual to be able to understand all aspects of the surveillance that could occur against them. It is for the State to provide clear rules for when rights can be infringed, to protect against arbitrary interference.

"Where a power vested in the executive is exercised in secret, the risks of arbitrariness are evident. It is therefore essential to have clear, detailed rules on interception of telephone conversations, especially [emphasis added] as the technology available for use is increasingly become more sophisticated"

This [quote] is from the European Court of Human Rights in the case of Weber and Saravia v. Germany. Technology and sophistication is not an excuse for lack of clarity, it's a responsibility for greater transparency from the rule makers.

With coronavirus, this isn't about crime fighting but something much more structural. We are all at risk of unwitting spreaders of a virus that can take our loved ones, or break our health systems. But we aren't suspects, and we can't be treated as such either, and for the most part the measures taken reflect that. These measures for safety, and for tracking this virus, only work with public trust and the consent of the public. And policing powers operate under the aim of "policing by consent". These both require a mutual respect for information sharing, and that has to start with the rule makers and those who enforce the rules. After coronavirus, measures we thought could never be considered became our daily lives. These decisions that we have taken will shape the world for years to come. Temporary measures become permanent effects, even when lifted.

What world will we inhabit when this storm passes? How different will it be? Can one of the outcomes be a more open conversation on our rights and technology? Maybe its caution, maybe its conservatism, maybe its concern for giving too much away to those who shouldn't get away with their criminal actions. Maybe its embarrassment – nobody wants to see their homework available for everyone to see – but when it comes to online measures we rely much more on each other, and the rules we make as a society. We can't see the technology, we often can't see the effect either but it is there.

That means I have to ask the questions:

WHAT MEASURE IS BEING TAKEN? WHAT'S THE TECHNOLOGY? WHO UNDERSTANDS THE TECH? DO YOU UNDERSTAND THE TECH? DO I UNDERSTAND THE TECH? DOES ANYONE? I HOPE SOMEONE DOES. WHAT ARE THE RULES? DO THE RULES REFLECT THE TECH? DOES THE TECH RESPECT THE RULES? WHERE ARE THE RULES? WHAT EFFECT ON OUR RIGHTS? WHAT EFFECT ON OUR SOCIETY? WHAT EFFECT ON THOSE MARGINALIZED? WHERE IS THE CONVERSATION ON THIS? WHO IS INVITED? AM I INVITED? HAVE YOU THOUGHT ABOUT THIS? DO YOU GET WHERE I'M COMING FROM?

Don't tell me you've thought about this. *Show me.* Show me the assessments, these policies, these activities. Show me you're working, show me you *are* working. I want to improve and preserve. If you don't or can't I struggle, it will be a struggle.

Trust isn't a word, or a nod, or a wink, or a bullish speech in Parliament. It is a cabinet overflowing with assessments, with notes of conversations and challenges, open to the public to see.

WITHOUT IT WHERE IS OUR TRUST TO BE PLACED? WHAT DO YOU CHERISH? WHAT IS YOUR PRIORITY? HOW DO OUR PRIORITIES CLASH? HOW DO THEY COMPLEMENT?WHAT IS YOUR INQUIRY? CAN I BELIEVE YOU. CAN YOU BELIEVE ME.

We need to trust each other.

ON A MEETING TO DISCUSS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY FOR COVID

David, John, Richard, How are you?
What are we here for again, what to do?
A Covid Comms strategy, to keep a lid on it?
Perfect, the right people are here, that should do the trick.

But of course we know what the public need,
they should listen to us and take heed!
Engage them in narrative, are you taking the mick?
We just tell them to obey, that should do the trick.

How to present it? What's best?
Line up droves of politicians, then give them a test?
I know: "Let's use the bake off advert!"
Perfect, the right moment, that should do the trick.

Isn't this all a bit presumptuous, it's their data and their health?
Not at all, old chap; we know it's all about wealth.

NOT AT ALL OLD CHAP, WE KNOW IT'S ALL ABOUT WEALTH

We've turned into
a parent society: go to your
room naughty step.

No one is free
of the inquiry. It pulls inside
you like a turning thing.

Our world is compliance,
and I must comply: fulfill, accede,
yield. My duty to you is an act

of courtesy. You do not
consent. Some people you cannot
reach and encouraging police

officers to be reflective
is dangerous to the Institution.

TO BE REFLECTIVE IS DANGEROUS TO THE INSTITUTION

For my children and for my children's children
Tomorrow I will march for freedom
For the choice to disagree
For the victims of a rotten society
That wants to enslave us and control us
That wants to manipulate and destroy us
Tomorrow I will march for justice
For the unsung heroes that rose against Bill Gates and the 5G towers
Against the government's lies and cover-ups
To denounce the atrocities that have made us all lab rats
Meat to be cut up and injected with poison and tracking devices
Corpses to be experimented on and declared sick
That's why tomorrow I will march for us
Because We Do Not Consent

BECAUSE WE DO NOT CONSENT

What do you mean I should trust you?
Tell me your story, that is our story –
I can't see myself in it.
Yet you tell me your story uses my information,
did you ask me?
What do you mean I should trust you because you will protect me?
How do I know you care about me and mine?
How can I change your mind?
When your 'bottom up' is my 'top down'
and we don't meet in the middle?
What do you mean I should trust you, how do I know you are not a bot?
Who are you to describe me as 'hard to reach'?
How hard did you try?
You know where I live, where I go and what I eat, so how hard can it be?

HOW HARD CAN IT BE?
JOURNEY OF SELF-DISCOVERY, GDPR ENABLED, (VERSION 12, ANNOTATED)

To the Data Protection Officer,(Art 37 GDPR)
of the of Public Authority X(art 37 (b) and recital 31))
In one month or less(art 14 3(a)
Tell me who I am(recital 64)
Have I been good? Am I good? (Art 20 with recital 71)
Am I sick? Will I be well? What should I do?(recital 35)
Will everything be all right with me?(recital 75)
How Scottish have I become?
                    (be honest now...)(S2 Part 1 para 4 of the Data Protection Act 2018)
Am I the villain or the hero of my piece?(recital 97)
(I settle for sidekick, btw, if he has good lines)
Weave me a picture from your data fragments(recital 30; art 4 (4) and art 16 GDPR)
(machine-readable and interoperable)(art 12 (7) and recital 68)
Show me how you see me, so that I can see myself
                    (in accordance with Article 15, Recitals 63 & 64 GDPR)

SHOW ME HOW YOU SEE ME, SO THAT I CAN SEE MYSELF

My likes, my hates, my clothes, my friends, where I shop,
what I read. All these are me, become me, my data body.
My physical body cannot travel the world in a pandemic,
but my data body can. My data body can catch a virus, but
it does not get locked down. Its reach extends beyond
my physical body. Perhaps it is a superhero, but does it use
its powers for good, or for evil? Who owns my data body?
Who can I trust with it? Will they cherish it? Value it?
Share emotion with it, for it, because of it, through it?
Is my data body a threat to anyone? Does it tell lies?
Will my physical body become a suspect and pay a fine
because of my data body? And...where am I? Do I live
in my physical body, my data body, both? If someone
watches my data body, do they see me? And can I?

AND CAN I?

Are they...

Secretive or communicative
Lawfully audacious or Highly intrusive
Keeping people safe or being obstructive

Am I...

Inclusive or exclusive
Active or passive
Positive or Negative

Are we ...

Sensitive or insensitive
Reclusive or talkative
Conclusive or inconclusive
Resistive or submissive
Dismissive or acceptive

COVID is so divisive

COVID IS SO DIVISIVE

Let me explain

      I know what you know

I know what you're thinking

         There's a reason for this, a very good one

But let me explain

          What you need to understand is

I didn't mean for that

       Let me explain

It is important for you to know

              I know how it looks but

But let me explain

       Who will you tell?

       How many will know?

Let me explain

THE GOVERNMENT SHOULD ENSURE CLARITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY OVER ITS DECISIONS, ESPECIALLY WHEN TECHNOLOGY IS INVOLVED. INSTITUTIONS SHOULD BE ENCOURAGING AND EMPOWERING THE PUBLIC TO ACTIVELY LISTEN AND UNDERSTAND WHY DECISIONS ARE MADE. PEOPLE OFTEN GET STUCK IN TRYING TO DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN TRUTH AND LIES, AND END UP FAILING TO TRUST INSTITUTIONS, ESPECIALLY WHEN LACKING TECHNICAL KNOWLEDGE OF HOW TECHNOLOGY OPERATES. OFTEN, INSTITUTIONS FAIL TO REACH SPECIFIC SEGMENTS OF THE POPULATION – PEOPLE WHO JUST DON'T HAVE THE TIME TO "DEEP DIVE" INTO SPECIFIC TECHNICAL ISSUES (MOST PEOPLE). IT IS IMPORTANT TO GET OUT OF GEEKY NICHE DISCOURSES AND INCORPORATE COMPLEX ISSUES INTO MORE WIDELY AVAILABLE AND ACCESSIBLE NARRATIVES. ONLY IN THIS WAY CAN THE PUBLIC MAKE INFORMED DECISIONS. BUT HOW? LACK OF TECHNICAL/LEGAL KNOWLEDGE IS THE NORM. YOU CANNOT EXPECT EVERYONE TO BE EXPERTS IN THESE HIGHLY COMPLEX FIELDS. BUT AS THESE ISSUE BECOME MORE AND MORE COMPLICATED, HOW CAN YOU ENSURE PEOPLE UNDERSTAND? HOW CAN YOU ENSURE PEOPLE ARE NOT INSTEAD MANIPULATED BY IDEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL AGENDAS?
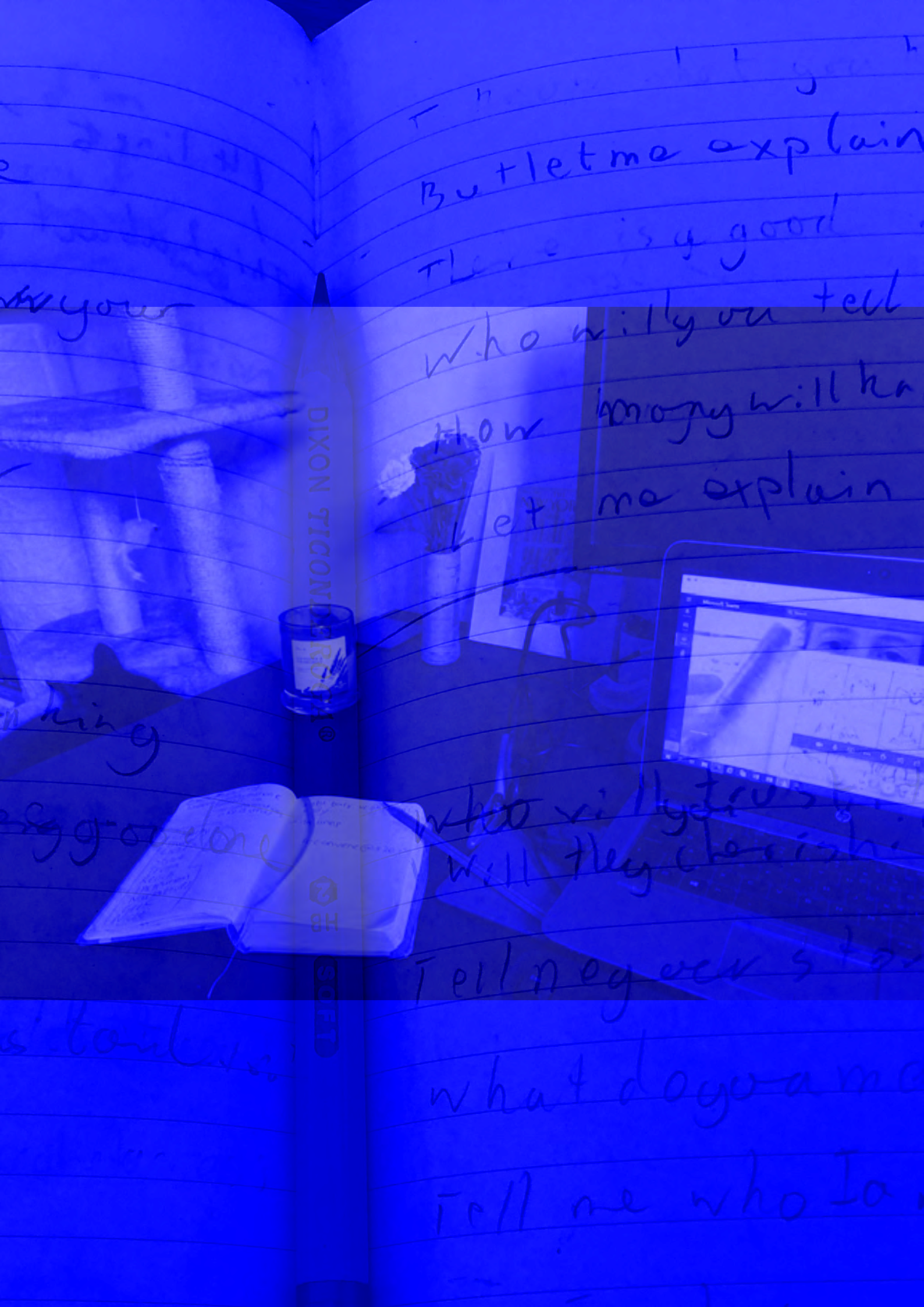
But let me explain

There is a good

who will you tell

How many will ha

Let me explain

who will tr... explain

Well they decision

Tell me your sta

what do you m

Tell me who I am

WEIRD COMPLIANCE

Am I a slave and do I love my own servitude? I have framed my identity in terms of revolution and resistance. The books I have read and the subjects I have studied taught me to rebel and question the chains I have found myself trapped in since birth. The chains of gender-norms, the chains of tradition and religion, the chains of dogma and neoliberalism.

But what if the act of breaking these chains calls for the creation of new ones? Choosing to cover my face with a mask and saying no to travel, to friends, to family, to everything I have always held so dear? Quarantine, isolation, circuit-breaker, contract tracing, lockdown, pandemic. Where do my individual servitude and my individual freedom collide? Is following the rules an act of submission? Or can it be a revolutionary act? Can compliance be loud and beautiful, an act of generosity? Or does it have to be meek and silent and lonely?

I know I have my answer. I see my freedom as a collective action. I am free to do what I want, but others should be protected from me if my act of freedom overrides theirs – positive and negative freedom. Sometimes it feels easy to me. I love my freedom but I believe in others' more. And if by being free I hurt others, then I am not exercising freedom but a degeneration of it, selfishness. It sounds easy.

But where does this stop? I feel safe following the government rules, because I know I can trust them. I feel certain that the information I am given is objective and I feel I have the means to objectively assess whether governmental directives are proportionate or not. But can I? Did our grandparents feel the same when they bowed and honoured the Duce every morning before school? And how are you supposed to know? Can you know?

It's clear to me a lot of people cannot tell the difference between fascism and slavery and compliance in the name of freedom. The latter does sound like an oxymoron. How can you comply in the name of freedom? How can I convince people this is right, this feels right? I already know that our statistics and academic papers don't work. People are scared, confused, lonely. Are they the enemy?

Should I fight them and call them idiots, ignorant, wrong? How is that going to convince them I am not part of the The Plan? How is that going to help them feel the difference between freedom and selfishness? Sometimes I get angry.I am sad. How can I tell people these new chains will make them free? How can I explain this weird compliance can be a revolution? And do I know?

"A REALLY EFFICIENT TOTALITARIAN STATE WOULD BE ONE IN WHICH THE ALL-POWERFUL EXECUTIVE OF POLITICAL BOSSES AND THEIR ARMY OF MANAGERS CONTROL A POPULATION OF SLAVES WHO DO NOT HAVE TO BE COERCED, BECAUSE THEY LOVE THEIR SERVITUDE."

Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World*

LET ME EXPLAIN

I don't want to see it,
But I can't look away.
The unnecessity of bare faces
Coming out to play.

I don't want to hear it,
Those thoughts in my head:
The uncourteous non-compliant,
Raising up the dead.

I don't want to speak it,
My virtue signal is clear.
Not because I'm a hero,
But to remember those held dear.

But enough from this middle-class hack...
Don't forget the anti-bac!

DON'T FORGET THE ANTI-BAC!

In Morrison's I see you in aisle 3. I think.
You see me too. You think.
We haven't seen each other for a long time. We are old friends.
We hold a gaze and collectively agree it's us and say 'hello'.
Socially distanced, we chat. We do not hug. We do not kiss.

In Morrison's I see you in aisle 7 I'm sure.
You see me too, you're sure.
We briefly catch eyes and move on.
We're acquainted but not friends.
No need to linger and admit we saw one another.

NO NEED TO LINGER AND ADMIT WE SAW ONE ANOTHER

For the love of God, put that mask over your nose!
Don't you see that you look like an idiot? You are not
Protecting me. You are a threat to me.
"I" have on my mask. "I" know how to do it properly.
I am smug. I am fashionable - See how well
It is sculpted to my face? How it matches
My clothes, my bag, my hair, my privilege? I am
Keeping you safe. The least you could do is return
The favour and put your goddamn mask over your nose.
Ok, yes, sometimes I forget to wear it. Sometimes I pretend
That we are living like we used to, that my kids are safe,
That my job is safe, that I can control my world.
I can't control my world.
I can't control you.

I CAN'T CONTROL YOU

Playing hide and seek,
being Hyde, and Jekyll.
Switching identity with the masks.
The laughter in the eyes
does not quite reach the mouth.
Under the mask, I'm scowling at you.
Becoming invisible, going into hiding.
Under the mask, I'm laughing at you,
making faces at CCTV.

The 3 layers of linen protect
against the 4 layers in the neural network
of the facial recognition algorithm.
I'm doing my bit for society still.

I'M DOING MY BIT FOR SOCIETY STILL

I'm just a bit of cloth, fabric or material,
I'm not the enemy, I shouldn't be feared,
I will protect you from the real enemy,
the virus you cannot see, so cannot blame.

Some of your actions are irrational, like a child lashing out,
and yet I don't blame you for that.
I will still shield you and look after you,
like a parent or guardian, protecting you unconditionally.

Blame me, resent me, and hate me if you must,
but don't blame those trying to help you.
They will make some mistakes, they're doing their best.
Scared and needing protection like you.

It's easier to blame me and I don't mind.
I'm just a bit of fabric after all.

I'M JUST A BIT OF FABRIC AFTER ALL

1. I get overheated very easy
2. I can feel it in my chest that I might explode
3. There's a supernova in my lungs
4. And a fire pit burning in my stomach
5. When I think of all the bodies
6. I can feel it in my limbs
7. Fireworks are starting to pop
8. My insides trembling with an earthquake
9. As the flames of my anxieties my tears cannot stop
10. I get overheated very easy
11. When I see that you don't care
12. An inferno inside my head
13. Lava bubbling to the surface
14. And I spit it out and coals is all we've got.

AND I SPIT IT OUT AND COALS IS ALL WE'VE GOT

When does it end and do I
want it to end? Hold the gaze,
the buzz of it, the plastic hum of it,
the densely packed meat of it,
the heave and hot air of it,
those bodies who disclose
me suddenly, my forbidden face
contorted between contempt and care,
breaking against mesh, and despair.

What of it? What of it? We were
friends. Vulnerability is a collective
action. This is what you come up
against. I used to get a gag
reflex. Now, I love it.

NOW I LOVE IT

Ridiculous,
but quite secure.

Feels like it might
budge.

It was made by granny though,
so I feel

ethical. I feel
nonplussed.

I don't really have any thoughts.
The enormity of the situation

it represents.
Strange wearing it in the house.

Sometimes I don't believe
all the bare faces.

ALL THE BARE FACES

Scared people
are not the enemy.

We all want to breathe.
Rebels, rabble, the voiceless

masses shouting at the walls
of empty institutions.

What if they were heard?
Who should listen

to their fears, their doubts,
their accusations?

Why should they trust
those too chaotic

for
conspiracy?

Meeting chat ✕

be trustworthy

24/09 11:19

Every Engineering Fictions session is a collaborative experiment. However, the sessions we are about to

See more

📅 Workshop One - F...
Wednesday, 30 Septe...   •••

12:22

EVERYONE GETS
SO MUCH INFORMATION
ALL DAY LONG
THAT THEY LOSE
THEIR COMMON SENSE

gertrude stein 'reflections on an atomic bomb' 1946

See less

12:26

A SONNET IS
A MOMENTS MONUMENT

dante gabriel rosetti

CURATOR'S NOTES

We began with the most excessive TECHNICAL TROUBLE and yet the group remained patient and non-flustered. I wonder why that was? They were each already committed to the process. Each knew that there was a journey together ahead and that in order to get on with that journey we would need our tools to work adequately.

We can commit to the process.

The trouble was with Teams. We had doppelgänger activity. We had voices seeming to come from behind-the-scenes of the internet, from the wells and recesses of it's cerebral worlds. At one point, one of our number disappeared from view and seemed to speak from behind the veil of the world wide web. She seemed lost and it put me in mind of Dante's inferno, not least because of her accent. Everyone one bore these disappearances and echos and reappearances and exits, from one stage to another, from one institutional platform to another, with great forbearance and good humour. Thankfully. It was a beautiful mess. And in fact it may have all played in our favour, as one of us remarked. The technical breakdown at the beginning, and me as an unwitting guide through it all, if anything brought the group together in a way that might not have happened otherwise. Or at least, not so immediately.

Breakdown can help to bring us together.

It was very funny really. As if we were all trying to get onto a moving vehicle and kept slipping off or crossing into the wrong carriages or even onto the wrong trains. It was bizarre. I've never experienced anything like it, but it was really fun too. We were all laughing and jolly, because no one had seen Teams act up in such a way, it must have been refreshing.

Breakdown can make the familiar strange to us, again.

I was so new to the whole video-conferencing experience that I had no leg to stand on and really just had to keep watch for the right moment to start our tour! And off we went then, and it was great fun. I followed the script more or less, and rambled a bit about how we struck upon the seed of *Fastidious Inquiry* through our conversations, Anonymous and I.

We can prepare for the conversation.

And how I was intrigued by this term 'fastidious' and took the etymology dictionary to it. And discovered that it broke down into the words 'excessive care' - which I found very compelling -; so I looked at the word 'care' more closely and discovered that it was actually linked to quite stressful emotional states, like worry and concern and anxiety. And I wondered about this, in relation to carers... those who are burdened with the job of worrying while the rest of us without that title can frolic about the place. I didn't say all this, now, I'm just elaborating here. But I got the gist of the etymological inquiry across. And it was new to most people. And I raised the question of using the language of love over care. So I put that out there. And during the conversation someone said that in one of the governments frameworks for children there is a sentence that states that each child should

feel loved. So that's something.

I felt I was getting into a bit of a ramble-mess and we were already about 20 mins behind schedule, so I welcomed Anonymous to read their piece. And it was really beautiful - I think they read it so well and clearly and slowly and with emphasis and with commitment and it meant something to them and so it meant something to us all too.

We can invite each other to speak in a way that demonstrates we are listening.

And when they finished their speech we all let it settle and then conversation began - people were struck by the emotional aspect of it -how it activated emotion. One person said they liked how 'EMOTION WAS WOVEN THROUGH' the piece and that we are always moving away from this.

We are always moving away from emotion.

And this was perceived as important and yet uncommonly acknowledged. We spoke about how transactional politics has become, and how emotions are unheard of. Everything has become a transaction, tit for tat. And there is so much left out. Let alone left unsaid. The whole question of body language, of soul speak, of dance and emotion is ignored in politics... largely speaking. The primary emotions in political life seem to be combative, defensive, reactionary, laced with fear and anger and confusion. Though we do see beacons coming from some places...

There was conversation around TRUST, what this is, what it looks like and feels like. That there is a transactional trust, but there is also something more intangible, something ineffable about trust, something to do with love. Technology tends to lend itself to transactional forms of trust. Blockchain trust. Digital ledgers. Tracing and tracking of transactions. And I'm reminded of Zadie Smith (again) and how she asserts the importance of rules and institutions to set standards for human conduct. The question is who writes those rules? Who upholds them? I read about two justice systems in America, one for White people and one for Black people, people of colour. What kind of rules are those? And the same questions apply to those transactional forms of trust... they are only as good as the love put into them. I don't know how else to write about this. Love keeps coming up.

Often, we do not acknowledge the values within our rules, or their ramifications.

I digress. What else happened yesterday? Anonymous read their script, really beautifully. People listened, took notes, responded. At each change in pace or activity, I asked people to listen actively, to make notes of words or phrases being said that meant something to them in some way, that interested them, or that they could relate to, or not. Whatever stirred some emotion and intellectual curiosity. Write it down. This is CRITICAL UNCREATIVE WRITING. Listen and take notes. Be taking notes. Always be taking notes. But then, read those notes, speak those notes. Throw them out there. Become the most critical echo you can be, or the most loving echo you can be. The one who listens and repeats so that we hear ourselves anew. Echo returns. Thankfully. I hear you. I hear me. At last.

We can learn to listen.

But this IMPERATIVE TO LISTEN that I insist upon is what helps to make things work. Also, the preparations. I do believe that the relationships we build with people have effects that we cannot trace, that we cannot see. Effects that radiate, psychically perhaps. The group knew that myself and Anonymous were preparing something. The group new there was a meeting coming, a different kind

of meeting. And there is a slow expectation there, what will it be like?

Preparation is an action that illuminates and gathers people and ideas together in place.

At the end of the session, someone admitted that they had been very skeptical about the whole thing, and they found themself surprised and engaged; they really enjoyed the process and the liberation of creative action together.

Many of us are skeptical, we suffer from doubters-rot.

Everyone agreed that there had been a 'stepping away' from the pressing work of their own worlds into something that allowed rest and reflection. That is a joyous thing. Something to be celebrated and cherished and nurtured indeed.

We can acknowledge and come to terms with our need to step away.

I like this metaphor of 'stepping away'. As if from one stream into another. Or from one world into a parallel world. It echos, as well, the hilarity of one of us getting lost in the slip-stream of the internet as we tried to set up the Teams platform. The appearance of two Anonymous' at one point, the doppelgänger effect. But maybe that's just what this workshop affords too… our bodies and voices can slip sideways into another time/space, one that allows us to breathe and listen and think as social beings. My point here, is that our relationships matter, the way we make them and sustain them. They do not last forever in an intensity, but they can have lasting effects. They can move us into new courses and currents.

That is the purpose of *engineering fictions*. That while you have stepped away into a parallel world, when you step back into the home-world perhaps your course has changed. Perhaps your agenda will have shifted, perhaps your priorities will have shifted in subtle ways? The conversations were very rich, and I did not record the session, deliberately. My intention was that the writing we make would be the record, and that in order to get back towards the conversations we had we would have to read the texts again, to find our ways back to the thoughts and feelings that mattered to us, that opened up questions about professional criticality - whether the institutions we uphold can actually accommodate dissenters… can our institutions accommodate critical thinkers?

We don't trust that our institutions can accommodate critical thinkers.

This is a really important question… and it feels as though the answer is 'not at the moment'. What happens currently is that we create new groups, we silo critical thinking, we delegate. We establish ethics boards. We create ethical clearance bureaucracies. And I think back to Charles Eames' adage that "You can't delegate understanding". We don't have time to waste. Greenland's ice-mass is melting faster than at anytime in the past 12,000 years, meaning we will see our oceans rise by 10cm by the end of the century. How many feet will be covered? How many worlds submerged? Not before they dry out. Because we can't handle change? Because we can't bear to let the institutions we have painstakingly built and instituted change course? I think of the traditions and cultures of drawing and telling stories in the sand (*Milpatjunanyi*). Perhaps we need these traditions now?

We don't know how many worlds will be submerged.

I would like to know if there were any questions or insights left with people after the session. I know that for one of our number, hearing another speak about her impressions of the Covid-19 app as a 'tracker' app was valuable.

There are too few conversations happening where people can honestly learn from each other.

This person realised that the message was not getting out there that the government's app was a *health app* and not a *tracker app*. It's really important that we pay attention to the narratives around technology and the ways they are being used. I think we take narrative more for granted than anything. We cannot see our own narrative habits and how they make puppets of us all. Narratives and stories are hugely powerful technologies, and yet we do not see them as such.

We are not literate enough in the technology of fiction.

Right now, the presidential elections in the United States are underway with the first debate taking place on Tuesday night. It was a "shit show" said CNN. Trump was in attack mode. And his approach dominated. His narrative style is to shout, to dominate, to win. That's it. He is the hero of his own paltry journey up the ladder of the so-called American Dream. The tradition of the Hero's Journey has been warped into a win/lose dominator culture that enables holocaust. These narratives are obsessed with endings, obsessed with a destination where peace and rest and safety are falsely promised. This is a fiercely fear-based narrative politics, a kind of psycho-politics.

The narratives of Western traditions can be reclaimed and recast in a global light.

And then there's Audrey Tang who is adopting a different narrative, as Taiwans Digital Minister. In a TED talk from a few years ago, she quotes the president of Taiwan, Tsai Ing-Wen, saying: "Before, democracy is seen as a clash between two opposing values, but from now on, democracy must become a conversation between many diverse values." Someone mentioned Audrey Tang in our conversation, in response to the fear-mongering narratives that are on the increase in relation to Covid-19 measures and their impact on public and private life. In Taiwan, the government are combatting disinformation with humour - "humour against rumour". There are comedians working with government to counter disinformation narratives quickly through social media. And it seems to be having a strongly positive effect. The problem of psycho-politics and narrative-politics is that it paralyses thought and endorses fight or flight responses. It keeps us captive. The philosophy and narrative sophistication of actors like Audrey Tang and Tsai Ing-Wen are so important today. And we can draw on the story telling acumen of people like Ursula K. Le Guin, of traditions like Ki-Sho-Ten-Ketsu in Japanese culture, of Sand-drawing from Oceanic cultures, and so much more besides. These are narrative styles that foster a sense of beginning, of vitality, of co-living. These are narratives that appreciate the significance of endings. And that is the kind of democracy we require on a dying planet, a planet abused by its most prolific and devastating species.

There are other ways of living together on a dying planet, we can explore what these might be.

I shifted around the writing exercises a little, because we were behind time. One of our number could not access the chat box, so I screen grabbed the words we had pooled together and sent them on via email. Everyone spent 90 seconds dropping words into the chat box in an associative way, reading and responding. Then we each chose about 10 words (too many, to be honest) and began to do some free-writing for ten minutes. I invited everyone to then read what they had written (or talk about it) if they were comfortable to, and I asked that we all listen actively and make note of any words or phrases we might use from each other. This was an effort to bring the CENTO exercise into play, but it really wasn't necessary to do that. I could just as easily have let this exercise breathe and be what

it was. A warmup.

Next we moved on to the SONNET. I gave a short introduction to where I was coming from with the Sonnet, why I like this form and what I thought it could do for us. I read, from Laynie Browne's book *Daily Sonnets,* a quote about her understanding of the Sonnet form, which is really the philosophy I'm adopting: *"I think of the modern sonnet as an increment of time within a frame. Something that often fits into a little rectangle (but not in thought). Something you can utter in one long convulsive breath or hold in the palm of your hand. When my hand covers the page, it disappears. It's a controlled measure of sound and space within which one can do anything."* And I read from the script a little bit. And I was open to peoples questions, or expressions of fear! One said they felt inadequate to the task. And some others declared, for the record, *we are not poets!* And so on.

Listening, actively and with empathy, allows us to acknowledge fear without becoming defensive.

I say things like "well, I go back to the etymology dictionary and look up the word poet and see that all it really means is to make things, to bring things together, and isn't that what we do everyday in our own way?'".

Embracing etymology is a way to loosen our definitions, and appreciate the long life of words.

I think to be a poet is really just becoming more aware of that process of bringing things together, and not taking this daily art so much for granted. Which is why Laynie Browne's approach is so brilliant and liberating. I think everyone really did take on board where I was coming from with the Sonnet. Though its associations with elitism, and no doubt some class connotations, were hard to shuffle off. One said the last time they remember dealing with a sonnet was when they were embroidering one as part of their education. It sounded the very essence of boredom and oppression for them. So I hope we have rekindled the sonnet form some how for them, I wonder what sonnet it was? I may ask them. I wonder do they still have that little sampler? I wonder could we embroider our sonnets in some way? Perhaps onto the attire of Police uniforms?

Art helps us to become more aware, more conscientious, about the way we bring things together.

I think from here the writings people produced will have to speak for themselves. I don't remember so much of the conversations. But I was really surprised and delighted by how warmly everyone spoke about the session, I think everyone was surprised that it was so effective. And so engaging. And allowed them to step away from their burdens for a while and to think anew about their work in a creative way. To begin again.

Art, a process that generates creative inquiry and discovery through form, can surprise us.

One person joined us a little late, but they said that entering into the session was like joining a party as the sober person. So the fact that it felt like a party is really great! There was a sense of co-presence and energy that held the group in conversation. That's special. And that's when another pointed out that I should be very clear about the level of facilitation that goes into these sessions, that it is a very skillful thing to facilitate a session like that. And that I should give an account of the effort and skill that goes into this process, and not take that for granted. I told them this was the very thing I struggled to do, but that I was determined to do it this year. And I will do it. I hope I get to speak with these people again, they really are marvelous. And so warm and engaged with their work, despite all

its contradictions and frustrations. I'm reminded again of Audrey Tang and how she describes her role with the Taiwanese government: *"My existence is not to become a minister for a certain group, nor to broadcast government propaganda. Instead, it is to become a "channel" to allow greater combinations of intelligence and strength to come together."* I like this idea of becoming a channel to allow for greater combinations of intelligence and love to come together. I really do think we need to talk about love.

And so, What have we learned?

Engineering Fictions is a process that serves to open up inquiry, raise questions and discover problems, more so than solve them. I believe that this process of *preparation* is often overlooked and/or undervalued in professional practice. There can be a tendency to rush towards solutions to straw-man problems, without due consideration of what other, more nuanced issues might be at stake, hidden-in-plain-sight.

Engineering Fictions is, therefore, a process that seeks to prepare ourselves for manifold conversation, listening, vulnerability, generosity, openness and change. This process invites us to pause and "step-away" from our current path, to reconsider and apperceive our existing conditions and predicaments, whatever they may be.

As curator and host of *Fastidious Inquiry* and *Weird Compliance,* I caught glimpses of the conditions and predicaments, professional and personal, of individuals working in relation to online state surveillance and policing. While I cannot (and do not) speak for the other participants, I can (and am privileged to) speak to my own learning and sense of what has been achieved by these *Engineering Fictions* sessions.

I learned that:

> i. there is an implicit *skepticism towards creative inquiry and thoughtful action* amongst individuals employed by state bodies;

> ii. there is *a crisis of integrity within state institutions* - they are unsure whether or when to accommodate, or even foster, collective critical reflection and thought within themselves;

> iii. there is *a desire to engage with protocols for 'stepping away from within,'* amongst individuals employed by state bodies.

In other words, I learned that while stakeholders of online state surveillance and policing can be skeptical of creative inquiry, (e.g. *Engineering Fictions*), they also express a desire for protocols that can support both creative inquiry and critical reflection, (e.g.: *Engineering Fictions*). I learned that this contradiction is anecdotally reflective of the ways that state institutions, such as policing, can be structurally inhospitable to critical thinking at the level of the individual, because of their hierarchical, command-and-control procedures and bureaucracies. In short, I learned that

stakeholders of online state surveillance and policing are, anecdotally at least, conflicted by a contradiction of integrity across their institutions. Of course, these are not findings per se. But, they are insights that may become questions, propositions and openings for further inquiry.

Happily, I also learned that the process and protocols of *Engineering Fictions* was valued by the participants in the sessions. Though, as I've said, I cannot speak to what each of these participants might have learned individually, I can paraphrase what I think we might have been reminded of together:

i.   I believe we were reminded of a general need for artistic inquiry in social and political life. Art can help us to become more aware, more conscious and conscientious, about *the way we bring things together*; they way we make the human world and impact our more-than-human environment.

ii.   I believe we were reminded of the power of art, as a process that generates creative inquiry and discovery through form, to *surprise* us. This surprise often occurs when we temporarily render what is familiar to us a little bit strange. This process in turn can remind us of our own abilities and responsibilities in making and remaking social and political life together, for good or ill.

iii. I believe we were reminded of the democratic and ecological necessity of preparing conversations that can serve as *manifold meeting-places* for listening, truth-telling, creativity and imagination.

iv.   I believe we were reminded of the need of *a more radical literacy* around the power and politics of words and narratives, a literacy that can help us to perceive what words and narratives actually *do* in/with/to human and more-than-human lives.

And so, What have we achieved?

A mutual, non-hierarchical, thoughtful, and creative conversation has been hosted between stakeholders of online state surveillance and policing: government employees, health professionals, police, academics, civil liberties advocates. Each stakeholder listened to each other, and importantly, each stakeholder listened to themselves.

That is, in no small way, an achievement.
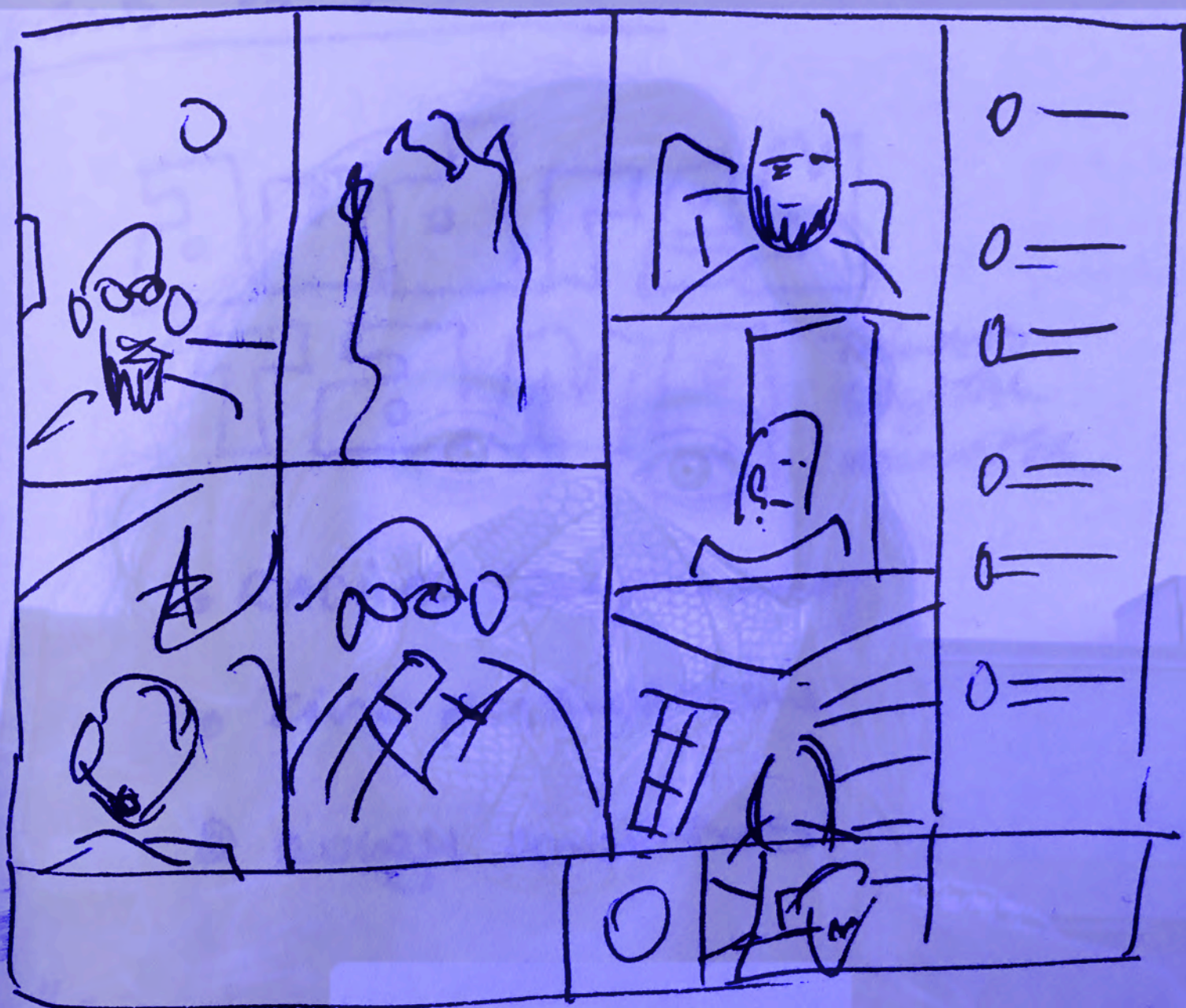
AFTERWORD

Megan O'Neill and Amy Humphrey

Digitally enacted policing, such as online surveillance, predictive algorithms, or biometric recognition, poses a particular challenge in terms of communicating core considerations to non-experts. This contentious topic area also generates significant disagreement among the various specialist groups who use or monitor the use of such technologies. Often, such disagreements are represented in public as taking simplified, polar-opposite positions. These groups range from, for example, the police, government agencies, intelligence agencies, civil society groups, journalists and academic researchers.

This chapbook is part of a dissemination project, funded by the Scottish Universities Insight Institute (SUII)[1], which has been inspired by findings from a larger academic project called *Taking Surveillance Apart: Accountability and Legitimacy of Internet Surveillance and Expanded Investigatory Powers*[2], in turn funded by Nordforsk[3]. A series of events was planned to provide spaces for the various interest groups to inform, collaborate and plan, with each event linked to and inspired by those preceding it. Central to this endeavour was to build on the project results of *Taking Surveillance Apart*, which suggested that while the various parties can hold disparate opinions and views, there were a few areas of convergence which might be utilised to start constructive dialogue.

A policy and practitioner knowledge exchange event on the topic of accountable and ethical deployment of new digital policing technologies came first, followed by a public event aimed to draw new public audiences to existing information. The Engineering Fictions workshops, *Fastidious Inquiry, Weird Compliance,* then grew from a desire to offer a sideways step away from standard interactions among stakeholders and to create a new way of communicating this topic area to the public, through creative writing. The final event will be a return to engaging with the public, to develop an informed debate which will contribute to the ongoing work of the interest groups in this topic area.

The *Corona of Sonnets* represents a distinct departure from the 'normal' engagement practices of the groups and agencies concerned, but each participant brought with them an enthusiasm to try something new and a curiosity to see what might emerge. The creative writing captured here is a composite expression of individual authors and does not represent the view of their agency or employer. The goal was to find a way to explore the issues and challenges which are faced daily, but in a new way and with an awareness of the emotion inherent in them that is often pushed to the side. The process of the workshops themselves was where the convergence happened, where the learning took place and where points of view were appreciated. The sonnets are the product of that journey.

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[1] https://www.scottishinsight.ac.uk/   [2] https://sites.dundee.ac.uk/eyes-online-project/   [3] https://www.nordforsk.org/

WITHOUT
THE FACE
NO ETHICS

Imagine you are going to an
anti-covid protest.
Your aim is to prompt
reflection and peaceful dissent
with your neighbours.
Compose your slogan like a
Haiku.
Draw a diagram on make
a model of it.

COLOPHON