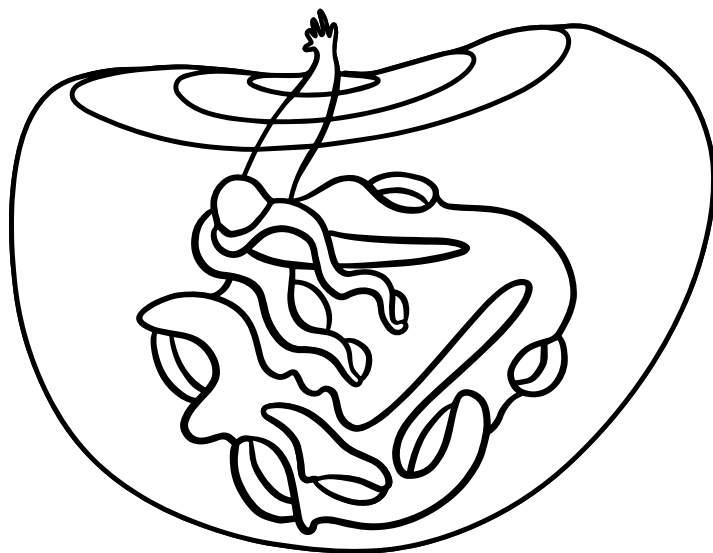


LIVING IN THE TIME OF TECH GIANTS

Marie LeBlanc Flanagan



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CREEK There is a creek next to the house.

We are crouching at the edge of the pussy willow creek. Poking frog eggs, cupping tadpoles, holding friendly frogs. Tiny white flowers became tiny sour wild strawberries.

We wade in rubber boots through the darkness of echoing metal culverts, singing unrepeatable words.

TECH IS A GARDEN

Our tech can be local, relational.

We harvest seeds and share them. We germinate seeds on damp cotton towels. Some of our seeds are duds.

Our tech runs in cycles of nurture, birth, growth, harvest, and decay. We delight in rot and fermentation. We listen to the Elders: the three sisters support each other, each different, each with a role to play.

TECH IS NOT A GARDEN

Big tech is not a garden.

And if it is, we're sharecropping in a tiny sandbox. Pesticides and herbicides blow in on the wind. We're working with patented seeds and prefab soil under artificial lights.

Infrastructure is an ecosystem that cannot sustain itself, that cannot regenerate without our hands.

Big tech is not a garden, it's extractive from the start.

OUR GIANTS

Airbnb, Alibaba, Alphabet, Amazon, Apple, Dropbox, Meta, Google, Microsoft, Netflix, Nintendo, Samsung, Spotify, Tencent, Uber, WeChat, Zoom. Little critters creep onto the stage and are consumed.

GIFTS FROM THE GIANTS

Power, convenience, reliability, predictability, less bugs, affordability, accessibility features, ease of use. And all our friends and family are here.

THESE MONSTERS

Why growing forever and ever? Why sucking up all the information? Why selling our data? Why quantifying everything? Why permanence? Why surveillance? Why secrecy? Why one size fits all? Why presumed ubiquity but actual exclusion? Why pushing and squeezing our behaviour? Why agitating, radicalizing? Why trash-making, why environmental devastation? Why weird bro meritocracy?

FOSSILS We gather tiny fossils on the beach of Lake Huron. Jars and jars of little grey stones. When they are wet you can see the intricate shapes of ancient coral, sea creatures, and plants.

We smell the lake from far away. We have swimsuits wrapped in rolled up towels. There is a fight about the towels, no one wants the raggedy ones. We know it is embarrassing to have a faded and ripped old towel on the beach, but we don't know why.

We go swimming, build sandcastles, then we gather tiny rocks. Grandma says they are beautiful. They are fossils, etched into the stones a million years ago.

TRANSFORMATION

Once a year the caterpillars come. Some years they blanket the trees. We are always in the trees. We pet the hairy ones. We love them, the way they curl up. May you never become a butterfly, you glorious hairy creature. We bring one to Mimi and she howls **GET THAT DISGUSTING THING AWAY FROM ME.**



Floating towards a world where there is **NO UNDO.** Every version of everything we have ever made is on a server somewhere. No deleting or forgetting. Everything is there always, in some form that we can't know or understand but that we are somehow beholden to and responsible for.

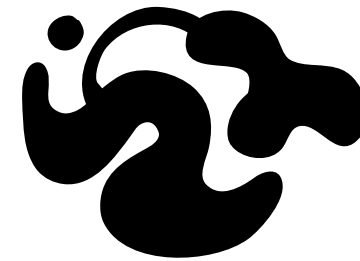
EMBODIMENT Our own bodies are organic containers that process information. Sometimes we are the recording. We shape a body of knowledge and shape ourselves. Manifested histories allow for flexibility, embodied remembering. We build an archive thoughtfully, intentionally, in our hands and bellies and hair:

WHAT IS TECH? We chatter about tech as if it's only our computers and our phones. As if real tech is made by machines, out of metal and mysterious rare earth minerals. As if bread is the same thing as a stalk of wheat. As if books grow in the garden. (Find Ursula K. Le Guin)

PLAY is resistance. Play as a verb, a state, something that pours out of us as a birthright. We tinker, we skip and trip, we make mayhem.

GLITCH is resistance, as possibility space. Failure as resistance. We fail to even start. We fail into a joyful pile. (Find Legacy Russell).

LOVING TRASH is resistance. We will become trash ourselves, compost. Our bodies are transforming into the rot juice that nourishes all things.



WHITE VAN

We make joyful messes with the man who lives in his white van in our driveway. We play with trash. Broken is better; broken is the site of creation. Everything is an art supply. We make adjustable frames and hold them up to the world. Shifting around, we discover how to change things by moving our position in space.

MODELING FUTURES

We need models, we need metaphors. It's hard to build towards something we can't imagine. We follow each other with little steps, little movements, that we share and mimic and adapt and hold.

TURTLES

One spring morning three prehistorically enormous turtles come crawling up from the creek. Each reptilian head held high, clawed feet pressing deep into the earth soft and dragging their ancient bellies through the long grass. Their shells are gnarled geometries.

We never saw any turtles here before and we never see any here again.

WISHES

We read old stories about the dangers of wishing. When people make wishes they come true in the worst ways. Wishing is dangerous. Praying is good. We don't understand.

We learn to wish for the things we have.

A wish is a form of travel. We wish towards a million possible futures. (Find Sophia Al-Maria and Leila Dear)

CHANGE IS COMING

We wonder if the tech executives lie awake at night worrying that they've taken it too far. That one day we'll just snap out of it. We'll look up from these glowing portals and say in a quiet voice 'that was nice but that's enough' and drop our phones into our junk drawers and go sit in a sunbeam with a friend.

ARCHITECTS

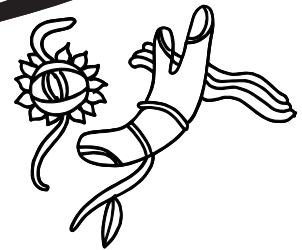
The technofetishist egotism to think that we are ready to architect anything when we can't even steward ourselves as a species.

DIGITAL DOULAS

Digital spaces are threaded with deep pain. Digital doulas emerge, helping people process data trauma through data healing. (Find Neema Githere and Olivia McKayla Ross)

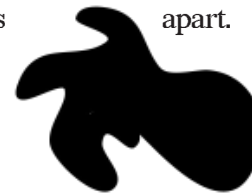
WATCHES

We try so hard, but we can't tell time. Every watch we touch eventually stops working. We open them up, poke around, put them back together and delight as they mysteriously come back to life. Time only works when we are staring at a clock. Look away and long stretches of time scrunch up and hide inside little ticks of time. Look away and little ticks will stretch out unfathomably. It's not real.



CARE

The internet is not designed for care. It's military technology. The infrastructure is designed to cultivate our worst impulses. We find the cracks. We grow care while the system tries to pull us apart.



NOT ENOUGH

We fail each other and ourselves. We fail to heal. We fail to reach out enough, to hold each other in the ways we need for healing. We find patience for ourselves and each other as we care for the wounds the tech giants have given us. (Find Neema Githere and Dorothy R. Santos)

STARS

Our mom wakes us up in the middle of the night and brings us outside. We lie down on a threadbare blanket on the sweet grass and watch the meteor shower.

We can't see anything. We pull at the edges of our eyes to try to see. We have never been able to see, but we don't understand that we are supposed to see. Fake it until you make it.

The night air is warm and smells sweet, like bruised grass. Mom sees a hundred shooting stars, we feel her meteor dust joy shooting from her chest to ours.

SWARM INTELLIGENCE We feel alone. We feel alone even in our collective, swarming movements. We listen, we respond, we become something transformed and new. We are fungal intelligence with more dancing. (Find Patricia Kaishian)

CONNECTION

There is no substitute for connection and community. No replacement for the collaborative binding of strands between us, our cross pollination, the ways the information and bacteria and feelings shift between us.

INTERMEDIARIES

The tech giants position themselves as the arbiters of our health, our fertility, our food, our navigation, our work, our play. They position themselves between us and our livelihoods, our relations, our own histories.

PUBLIC SERVICE

Having access to the tools of the tech giants feels as necessary as plumbing, as roads. They are building a world that is impossible to navigate without them.

WE THE PRODUCT

Our bodies, our minds, our dreams have become the hottest resource for giants to extract value from.

SANDING

We learn how to use tools in the wood shop. We write out the rules, ten times. Safety glasses. Hair tied back. Safety down. We imagine our fingers being eaten by the machines. We stay inside during lunches with the sawdust and vibrating machines. It's safer here. We make a spinning top. We make a chessboard.

We know we are different. We're like that from the start. We ask the wrong questions and too many questions. We perch in the chaos. We try to decipher patterns in strange loops of meaning.

We imagine remaking ourselves into something tidier, with elaborate sliding dovetails and hidden joints. We imagine the wind blowing away our freckles like the sander erases our pencil marks.

PUBLIC SPACES

Is there public space on the internet? What is public space? Is it like free time – stolen, then gifted back to us in tiny portions?

TRANSITIONAL SPACES

Where are the transitional spaces of the internet? What are the landings, bridges, alleys, hallways?

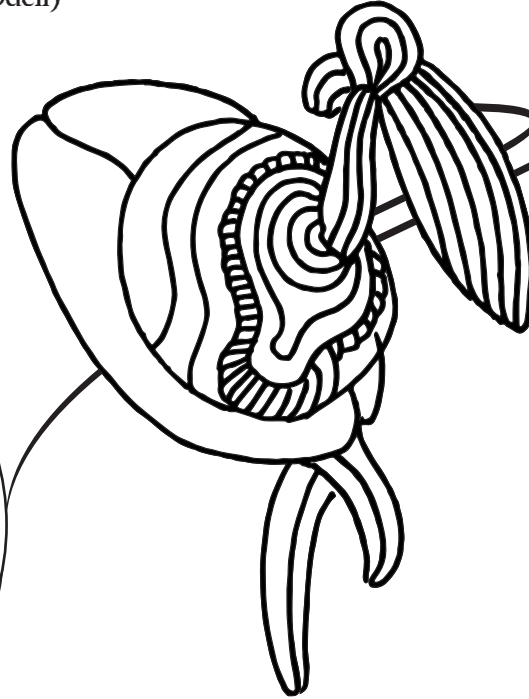
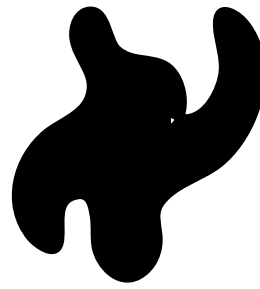
COMPUTER

Our dad finds an almost working, 8-year-old computer at a yard sale and sets it up in the musty concrete basement near the wood stove. There is no manual.

We build fires in the wood stove. We chop logs with the heavy axe, millipedes skittering. We use old newspapers and matches. We learn how to charm the computer to life, first the power button, then a set of pedantic invocations that jumble around into character soup. There is nothing inside.

SPACE FOR NOTHING

We dream of spaces for nothing. We dream of floating in warm empty pools of nothing. We watch people planting flags, building walls, transforming every space into something purposeful, useful, profitable. Where can we do nothing? (Find Jenny Odell)



WE CAN FIX THIS

Tech bros double down on assigning an owner of all things. They are Little Red Hen drunk. They try to sidestep trust by making a ledger of all things, they think that there is an amount of transparency that can fix these sore hearts. The

whole point of trust is that it exists outside what we can see, what we can know.

We see friends trying to split a bill. Rather than wondering what it means to host, to eat food together, or asking why some friends can only afford water and an appetiser, we find a clever solution for breaking down the cost, french fry by french fry.

We look at the problems created by abstracting, isolating, and extracting and decide to solve them by doing more of that.

SCHOOL

The first days come with soft voices, toys, cookies, and naps. School isn't so bad. Just disconnect completely from what you feel and wonder and think.

We try so hard to be good. We pull wet, crumpled papers from the bottom of our bag, our lunch leaked again.

Overpower your own voice by forcefully repeating the instructions until they take root, and keep doing that forever. It's good practice for everything that comes after.

If you make it a habit it's easy.

TRUSTLESS SPACES

We spend our days and lives in platforms that we don't trust, platforms that erode our relations with ourselves and all things, one post at a time.

SELF TRUST

Every day, every hour, in a million tiny ways, we are taught that our perceptions and intuitions are not to be trusted.

WIRES

Someone makes the phones automatic and fires the operator who used to patch us through. Julia dumpster-dives for phone wires. We make bracelets together, winding wire around wire, braiding them into intricate patterns.

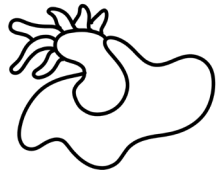
Julia tells us who is good looking, we can't tell. We like everyone. We like no one. Julia's dad has a computer with KidPix. Julia shows us how to draw animals. She tells us that each animal needs a fence. We draw trees that spread like fractals.



SPACES BETWEEN US

We're working towards a future where people are connected in ways that are currently unimaginable. We work in the spaces between people. The spaces between us can seem empty.

Online, we scroll past each other or ritualistically click hearts and like buttons. In public spaces like a busy sidewalk, we swerve around each other like spatial inconveniences.



UNIMAGINABLE CONNECTION

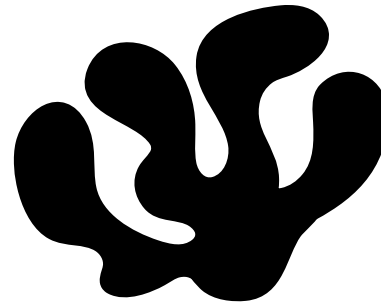
The spaces between us are spaces of incredible possibility. How do these spaces work? How can we activate them?

What happens when a whole network of these spaces are active? What happens when we feel connected with the people around us?



REFUSING TO RECORD

We sometimes choose not to record things. There are many recordings in the world, disembodied moments nested on hard drives, in bookmarks, on to-do lists. The ghosts from the future watch us, out of context. They haunt us and shape the now.



PERMANENCE

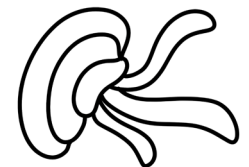
Tech giants capture our photos, our words, our feelings, our histories, our social culture, our lives. They hold them and they lock them up. The machines don't forget. Everything is there. The machines pull and track all the things, everything that can turn a profit. We have a right to be forgotten.

BOOKS

We learn to read, fingers moving slowly under the words. It's clumsy at first, but then it changes.

We are drunk with joy. We stop sleeping, devouring books every night. We are released, shifting into an infinite becoming.

We dream about getting locked in the library overnight, alone in the perfect quiet, surrounded by the infinite possibility of thousands of books.



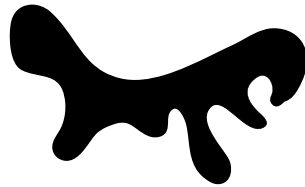
WAITING

The early internet is all about waiting. The newspaper says the internet belongs to all of us, as long as we avoid the weirdos. The radio says we'll be console cowboys surfing the waves of the future.

We wait a lifetime for the internet to reach our small town, and then our school. We gather around the ugly machine and each get a turn awkwardly pecking at the keyboard and waiting for an image to load, line by line.

EXTENSION OF MIND

The internet is a glorious extension of our mind. We can search anything. It's easy to forget that this is not our mind. We have around 300 tabs open right now.



CYBERNETICS

We are animals. We are machines. We are in communication.

PROTEST We explode into prepubescence. Corporate giants are building sweatshops, polluting water, burning a hole in the ozone layer. If people knew, they would care. We try to throw a revolution at our elementary school, starting with boycotts and taking the gymnasium stage. We feel the thick urgency and wild blood in the room as we stare down the principal from the stage. We become a hurricane. Teachers desperately try to hustle the smaller children away from the howling room.

Detention.

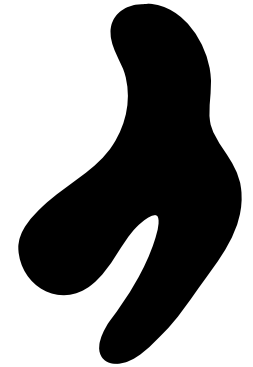
TEMAGAMI

We love trees. We can feel them in our bones. We ride north to Temagami in a van with Megan's parents, where the last old trees are standing off against chainsaws. We dream that we slip off the edge of a dock into the icy water and come up wild and magical, transformed. We do slip off the dock. We come up bleeding. We have no money for pads.

We stand with red and white pines on unceded land. Pine sap for inflammation, to stop bleeding. White pines for peace. (Find the Haudenosaunee Confederacy)

POROUS SPACES

We're opening porous spaces of our lives online, where the membrane is thin. Our website feels like a bench where we sit with a friend and eat some mulberries. Anyone can sit here, anyone can stop by.

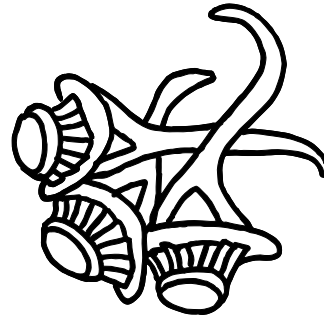


TREES

People laugh at the idea that trees can talk to each other, collaborate, and share resources. We build a fumbling copy of the same thing and call it the internet. (Find Suzanne Simard. Find the many Elders who have said this for a long time)



HOME INTERNET When we get the internet at home, the computer is elevated to the living room with the records and the plants. Connecting to the internet is a noisy, public negotiation for space. Bleep bloop bluuuuurp. Someone is always waiting for a phone call and needs us to get off the internet. Someone is always needing the internet and needing us to get off the phone.



THE STANDARD USER

Giants have a favourite gender; a favourite skin colour; a favourite person. We know that drugs are tested on male rats, because they don't have menstrual cycles. We watch UX designers build personas. At Ableton, one of the personas is someone who pirated the software. Who are these standard users? What are the default settings? Who does this serve?

STRANGER DANGER

Don't share your address, people on the internet are weird. There is something wrong with them. Stranger danger. We shared our address with someone who sends us a cassette of them making music, scratching records.

CHAT ROOM The first time we join a chat room we are delighted. We feel unbound from the bodies that never felt quite right. We are released from the gender markers, class markers, cognitive difference markers, and the entire identity that our culture constructs for us, chopping off the parts that don't fit, stuffing the rest with balled up newspapers.

Our bodies are perched on chairs, and our real selves are transported into the chat room. We are surrounded by hundreds of possible friends with \$trang3 usernames. We can be whatever we want to be.

But they all ask the same inscrutable question: a/s/l? When we finally decode the meaning we are crushed. The portals to the infinite are opening, and this is the question? We have found presence without shared embodiment! We can finally touch minds without our meat sacs and you want to know our age, sex, and location?

ASSUMPTIONS

All tech makes assumptions. Facebook assumes you are an individual, cars assume you have a destination. We share a single Facebook account with our entire community. We put in directions to places we will never go.

LOCKING THE WRONG DOORS

Our train loyalty account wants a unique password made up of 62 characters with capitals and punctuation and numbers. We oblige. We use password managers. It doesn't matter, we are impossibly easy to hack. Anyway, the real robbers are underneath.

WINDOWS

Computers are not windows. Why are they so invisible? Why do they claim to be a window? They are not windows, they are filters, they are someone else's dream. They are systems, with rules, encoded desires, restrictions.

SKIN

Why does our computer feel softer than human skin?

BEAVERS

There are two willow trees in our yard. The willows stand side-by-side, next to the small creek. Men who work for the town come to our yard in khaki uniforms to wage war on the beavers.

The beavers build dams. The workers brandish explosives, trying to drain the swamps for the new developments. We are on the side of the beavers, despite the clouds of hungry mosquitoes and the flooding in the basement.

MACHINES DECIDE

We are letting machines decide, but we can't hold them accountable. Like corporations before them, we shrug and say: 'oh, the algorithm: what can we do?' As if we didn't code the algorithms ourselves.

COURTING THE ALGORITHM

Musicians talk about the algorithm in hushed voices, whispering secrets about its latest whims, how to trick it.

Friends talk about how the Spotify algorithm "gets" them, how it knows what they will like. We want this experience, but refuse to use it. Somehow we just can't do it today. Maybe tomorrow.

EXTRACTION Why do we move as if our primary purpose here is to extract? Separating oil from earth and rare minerals from their common friends? Our purpose here isn't even to weave things together, it's to be part of the weave.

NOT A CLOUD "The cloud" is not a cloud, we know. It's someone else's computer. But clouds are not clouds either. They are temporary masses of water. We need rain.

CLIMATE ANXIETY We are all tied impossibly into the machine. We watch the fires burn and the waters rise. We see homes become uninhabitable. We entangle ourselves with the other-than-human processes in inter-species relationships. (Find Donna Haraway)

WILLOWS

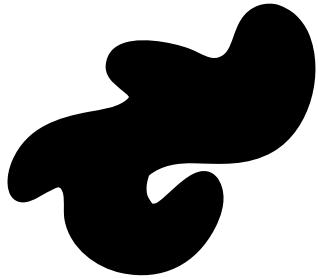
A beaver gnaws down one of the willow trees.

We wake up one morning and all that is left is a stump. A few weeks later, a single twig grows up from the stump. And then another branch, and another. It slowly grows upwards, and within a few years the trees are the same height again, side by side.

One is gnarled, twisting around itself, the other is smooth and straight.

MESSAGES

The first few times tech companies email everyone in our address book, we are outraged. But eventually it becomes normal.



CRM

We use a CRM to manage our relationships with our volunteers. We realize that people put pixels in the emails to tell when and how often we open their email. It's terrifying. It's useful.

We use IFTT to copy every social media post to a spreadsheet, Our own low-res social media for people who don't want to use social media.

EVERYTHING

Everyone wants to sell everything. Everyone wants all our money and time and energy. We don't like reading ingredients on boxes. We like to go to the market and get fruits and vegetables of vibrant colours. We love dark, leafy, greens. We love red beets. We love the variety and diversity and the nutrients buried deep in their beautiful homes.

TERMS OF SERVICE

We get used to scrolling through 40 pages of unknowable hieroglyphics to click the consent button. Apple's privacy policy takes 40 minutes to read.

This is the ritual. If something bad were happening, someone would tell us. It's the same with schools, with doctors, with the law. It's not new.

ROACH MOTELS

Dark patterns for behavioural modification empires. We pull away. Roach motels are easy to get into but hard to get out. We fall back in.

ACCLIMATE

We are frogs in the stew. The system changes in a slow trickle. It never comes on too strong. It's only a little more precarious than yesterday. It's only a little more, we can handle a little more.

ROCKS

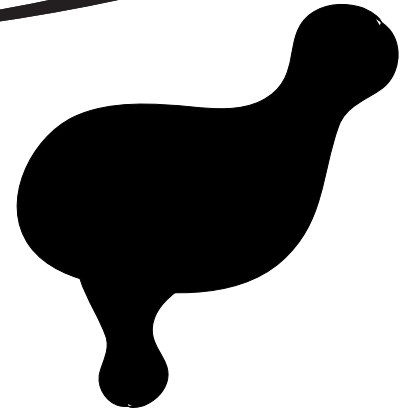
We pick up a hundred rocks that are smooth, or beautiful, or strange. We touch them, love them, then we throw every one of them back into the ocean.

Everything we keep, we have to carry. Why carry things from one place to another? From public space to private? Every time we throw a rock away, we get to keep it somehow, without carrying it in our pockets.

NUMBERS

The giants turn everything into a number. We are triangulated, pinned into place on a matrix. We are wriggling on our strings in exactly the ways they statistically predict.

Maybe we just need some Salted Caramel Cluster ice cream? Maybe we just need a like from that person whose profile we always check but never comment on?



PARASITES

Break to fix. They create a situation that they know will make us beg for their solution. The oldest trick in the book.

SERVICE OUTAGE

An ice storm comes and the world goes silent. There is no power for three weeks. We haul buckets of water up from the basement with the Katimavik student who is trapped in our tiny home with us, in the dark. It feels like the world has ended.

We feel the same strange floating delight when Facebook or Reddit or Twitter goes down. What if it never comes back up? Maybe we can start again?

BURN IT ALL DOWN

We sit at our computer and we fantasize of everything closing down. We dream of implosion. There is no gentle change. There is no middle ground, no responsible transformation.

JOY / GRIEVING

We make space for our feelings. We hold each other in the ways our machines never could.

NOT INFINITE

The internet isn't an infinite library. It contains a lot of the same things, from the same kinds of people. Google isn't trying to help us find the best answer, it's trying to give us whatever keeps us coming back.



WHY DO WE HAVE COMPUTERS

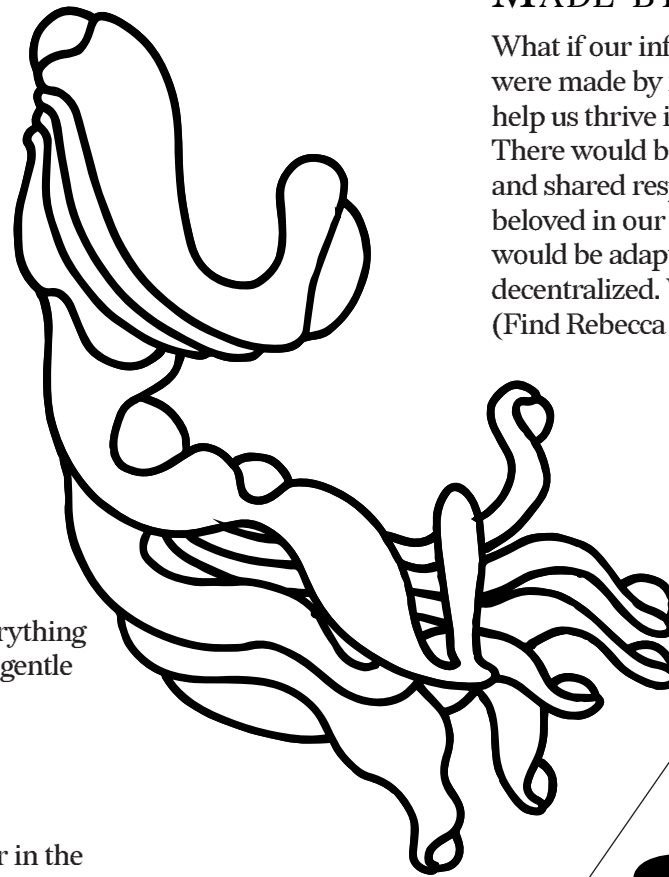
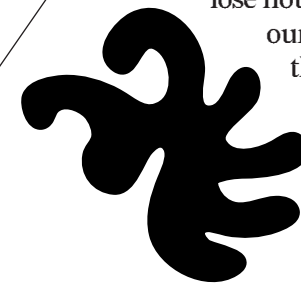
Are they here to make more joy in our lives? To make our work easier? What happens in our minds when we think of something as a tool?

MADE BY FRIENDS?

What if our infrastructure, our tools, our worlds were made by friends? All things would be built to help us thrive in small, cyclical, renewable ways. There would be ongoing consent, stewardship, and shared responsibility. We would be beloved in our diversity, our spaces would be adaptive, modular, repairable, decentralized. We would be roses. (Find Rebecca Solnit)

SAVE

We implode and reform, and implode and reform. We drop out. We collapse into a pit. We crawl out of the gutter and wriggle our way to a university, where everyone says we can build a good life. When we get there, computers are for typing essays. The computers are always crashing. Everyone says: save your work. Every two minutes, save. But we forget. The machine crashes and we lose hours of work. We howl at ourselves. We never blame the machines, not really.



GIANT RELIANCE

Before we used tech giant maps we were always lost. Before we used a tech giant calendar we forgot to show up. We tried so hard. We bought and lost so many paper planners. Everyone was angry with us all the time. Now we check our calendar 200 times a day. We check it before we go to bed, we check it in the morning. We check it in our meetings. We can't imagine life without it.

ACCESS

Our mind breaks again. We can't quite pull it together. This isn't new, but it is different. There is pain. We read words but they won't string together into meaning. Accessibility services can't help. They work with wheelchairs, they don't work with invisible problems.

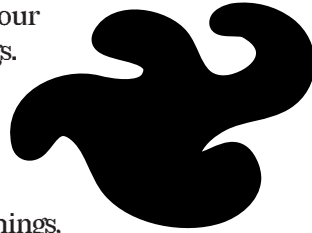
We dream of having an advocate. We dream of smoothness, easing into a beautiful day. Access is always an afterthought.

CAMERAS OFF

We work from bed because of chronic pain. We turn our cameras off in meetings.

We work at the last minute because we need the urgency to pull us through. We all have to hide these things, these are the rules.

It's so easy to become the cursor. To float around the machine. We are entangled in our tender bodies. We are rooted in our twitching eyes, our aching bones, our tingling wrists. We are opening tabs and closing them again. Let the battery on our laptop die, and we'll know.



INVISIBLE THINGS

We notice silence just as much as we notice words. We notice absence just as much as we notice presence. We notice when you deviate around an invisible thing, and we count the times you don't mention it.

SHAME

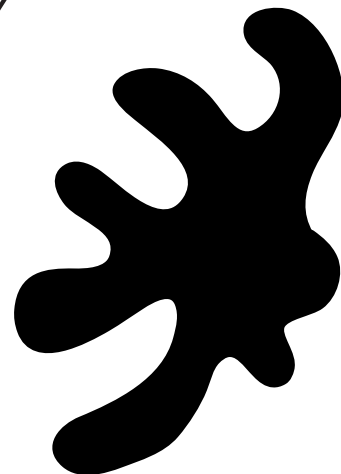
We tap tap tap on our tech giant laptop bought with Tech Giant dollars. We hide the tech giant box. We sit in shame. We tell each other that individual choices don't matter and it is true. We don't want our life to be spent in service of this system. We can't see any way out. Maybe this is a pathological avoidance of labour. We aren't trying hard enough. Our therapist tells us all of reality is in our minds and that we are choosing suffering. We eat our medication, give penance, and try again to open the doors that are locked to us.

AFFORDANCES

We are led by the nose. Buttons instruct us to press. Switches invite us to switch. We delight in the smoothness of our shared language, and hiss when our tired minds hit friction. But affordances aren't just clues to how things work. They pull, they drag, they shove us onward, willing or not.

SKEUOMORPHISM

We design by imitating features from an older version of the thing, even though those features aren't relevant anymore. The tech giants hold our hands, making "documents", making "rooms", making "friends." What is a friend? What does it mean to "connect" on LinkedIn? What does it mean when our most intimate words, like "connect" and "friend" are sucked hollow?



SOCIAL MEDIA

Ellen sends us an invitation to Facebook. It's new and exclusive. It feels institutional, like a yearbook.

It feels personal, like PostSecret or a bathroom wall.

We make friends and scribble things on our own wall. HI!!!! We shout and it is recorded forever.

3 million hearts and 3 million fire emojis please.



TRANSPARENT

Social media invites us to be absolutely transparent, vulnerable. It promises that we will finally find our people and be seen. We dream of relationships that feel fluid, spontaneous, embodied, intuitive, and healing. Our guts call us forward. Our guts have been misled.

SERIOUS

Our careers and ability to care for ourselves are bound to platforms that we can't control. Our social media profile is an advertisement for us and all the things we do. We become many selves, all of them restless and exhausted and hungry.

SHADOW BAN

We are banned to the shadows. We are silenced, but we think we are heard. We are the 52-hertz whale, singing to no one.

SAME OLD

The giants restrain, retrain, and isolate us in the same way as earlier systems. The way Facebook defines personhood, the way TikTok defines platform and audience, these are a natural extension of societal systems.

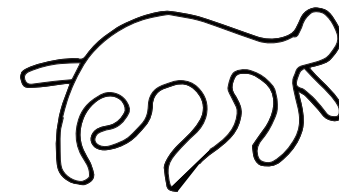


THE USUAL

We find out that Messenger is secretly spying on us, listening to us through our microphones. There is outrage, then we move on. Like always. This is capitalism and these are free tools. Sometimes the tools aren't even free. (Find Shoshana Zubov and Jaron Iainnya)

GHOST PROFILES

The giants follow us around with their friends like a ravenous pack of dogs. Giants create ghost profiles of people who don't use their services, based on information from people who do. All things are interconnected, they don't even need to know us to know us.



WATCHED BUT NOT SEEN

The giants track the flushing of our toilets, our GPS, our IPs, the angle of our phones, cursor movements, the direction of our compasses. Key logging, screenshots, IM Monitoring. We oscillate between the desire for anonymity and a desperate desire to be found, to be truly seen. We slowly creep towards Neuralink.

USER NAMES

The giants are shifting what they call us. We don't know why. They call us guests, they call us consumers, they call us users.

What do we call ourselves? On the internet we choose our own names, as long as someone else hasn't chosen it first.

Or unless the site forces us to upload passports, singing out dead names, locking us down.

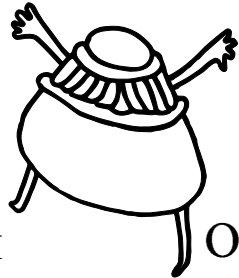
WEIRD CANADA

We gather 600+ volunteers in an online community dedicated to encouraging, documenting, and connecting creative expression. We make the “best music website in Canada”, ad-free. We host country-wide events. We share knowledge, build community, and shove back against old guard slimeballs. We have a \$0 operational budget, and day jobs.

We are intentionally unprofitable, so explosive growth just means more work. We get hundreds of emails every day. All our energy goes to administration.

We become internet scavengers, using tech tools and digital duct tape to batch tasks. These tools reduce a 300 hour work-week into 30 hours.

Sometimes things glitch. A mail merge service emails people 30 times in one day. People beg us to make it stop. We feel like that apprentice in the castle with the mops that won't stop.



GROWTH

Things grow and grow and get too big. We have this knowledge encoded in our bodies now, how draining it is. We come from a culture where it's all about growth, growth, growth at all costs. Growth is how we measure success. It's insidious, it's hiding inside our minds.

ON FIRE

The current infrastructures are failing. Overproduction. Overconsumption. Climate catastrophe.

PRODUCTIVITY

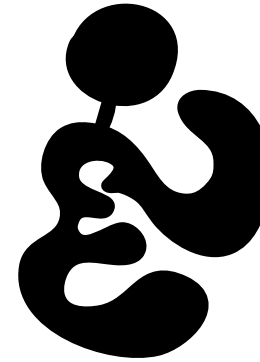
13 tips for coaxing more productivity out of your weeping body.

LEARN TO CODE

We learn to code. We break our brains to make the code fit in. Variables feel like violence. We hate hierarchies. We abstract the living complex relations of all things into a set of rigid representations.

We feel small. We learn the staccato chant of the machine in the same way we learned to become a real human.

It's relieving, once it sticks. Everything has an answer and the machine will tell us.



METAPHORS

Metaphors are for dreaming, they are not tools for bludgeoning. We remember to reshape them into nothing when we are done with them.

ELEGANCE

Engineers are obsessed with elegance. Elegance, meaning less redundancy. Saying something in a concise, one-size-fits-all way. Elegance is beautiful. Elegance doesn't handle edge cases well. It flattens, pushing for a world where we all come in the same shape or not at all.

EVIDENCE

Engineers will never believe you if you tell them something happened, They need to see it with their own eyes.

WEBSITES We learn how to make websites. We somehow sift through all the fancy tools and find out about simple HTML/CSS and static sites. We can make a website in an hour. Our websites can be anything. They can be ice cream shops. They can be poems. They can be wispy dandelion dreams blowing on the wind. (Find Laurel Schwulst)

OUR WEB

Anyone with access can be a collaborator, and can make part of the Web. Yes, access isn't equal, yes, it's hard to learn, yes, the barriers are real. But if you are plugged in you are here.

UI

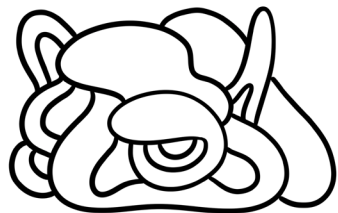
Buttons, menus, links, rounded corners, search boxes, navs, tooltips, dropdowns, badges, animations, error messages, notifications, colour, fonts, windows.

REAL / IMAGINARY

The internet is both a real space on real machines. The internet also is co-existence in an imaginary space that we can co-create with our minds and machines.

UX

Desire, problems, needs, convenience, goals, connection, productivity, behaviour, manipulation, efficiency, delight, decisions, joy.



PROPERTY

Tech giants invite us to dream of a post-ownership world, of perpetual remixing and collage. Come, they say, let go of these old ideas of owning.

But who owns the internet? Who owns the platforms and servers that shape our lives?

They are silent as they quietly colonize the community, the context, and the container.

FREE INFO

Free information is at the core of the Internet's democratizing potential. It calls for information flowing in every direction, a dialogue.

Not all information can be extracted from context. Not all things can be flattened into the same little chunks and inserted, contextless, into a spreadsheet. Some information needs stewardship, needs care.

TEACHING WEBSITES We teach other people how to make websites. We hear that we can make a grassroots network, mesh network, or ad-hoc network. We don't know how.

We write a zine about DNS with Julia. DNS is distributed and it's not. Who stewards these spaces? We don't own anything. We live in this company town, we are buying flour on credit at the company store.

We hear promises of decentralized worlds. We dream of webs. We dream of things that can be in many places at once, of things that can be many things at once.

MAKING ACCOUNTS

We make our first multi-player game. People need accounts. Accounts need passwords. The quickest thing to do is generate and email temporary passwords to people in plain text. When we are troubleshooting, it makes sense to bcc ourselves in the confirmation email with the password. Just for now.

The developer chooses all of this, there are no laws about it. People reuse passwords. Zuckerberg looked at people's passwords when he first started Facebook, to hack into their other accounts.

SILICON VALLEY LIES

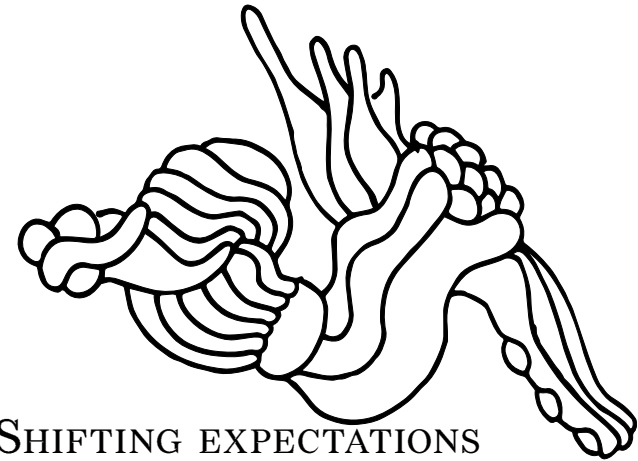
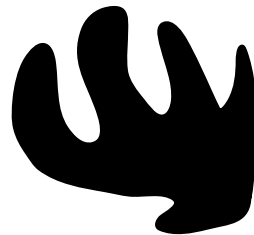
Just like the CEO who starts in the stockroom of Grandpa's corporation, tech giant tech is built on publicly funded tech, subsidized academic research, and public information.

POWER POOLS

Power pools, power gathers, power persists. Tech giants with power tend to get more.

WRONG

We need space to be wrong. It needs to be ok to be wrong sometimes, to change, or shrink, or grow.



SHIFTING EXPECTATIONS

The open-source tool we are using is glitchy and broken. The makers are burnt out. The makers are offered day jobs at the same companies that profit from their work, the same companies that burnt them out with unending demands.

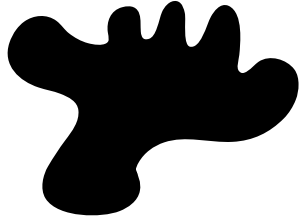
TETHER

We are tethered to our tech. Stuck. They make it wireless, but the tether is never the cable, it is not about being physically stuck.

SOUNDCLOUD

We get a gig working at SoundCloud. The sound, the cloud. We drink fresh-squeezed orange juice. We drink fizzy water out of a tap. We see behind the curtain. These are programs, made by people, on computers. People are thoughtful, kind, curious. Everyone loves music.

We can't talk or write about the music that is on SoundCloud. It's a safe harbour dance. Companies have limited liability for what people do on a tech platform, as long they don't know what people are doing. So don't look.



PREDICTIVE TEXT

The delight we feel when Gmail starts writing our emails for us. Sure! Take this absolutely exhausting work out of our hands. Other people hate it. We love it.

PEOPLE OF TECH GIANTS

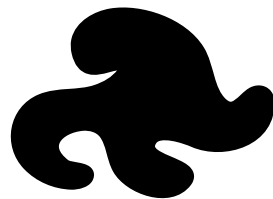
Someone we know is starting a new job at Facebook. We've never known anyone who works at Facebook. We don't know if we like him.

Facebook becomes flesh. It is close enough to touch us. We don't want to be touched. Can he see our activity? Our private messages?

HOW TO TALK

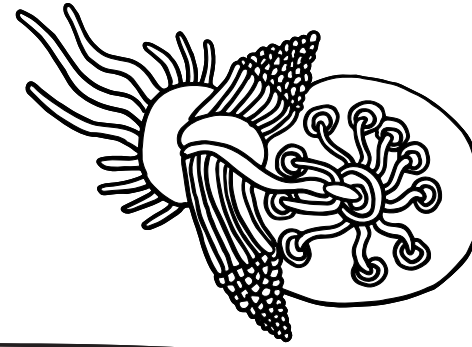
We find a startup that tells us how to talk to people. It crawls online profiles and posts and instructs us how to talk to each person to win their heart.

It tells us we should ask many questions to win one person over, and to be curt to win over another person. It's more horrifying and incredible than any experimental art game we can imagine.



AUTOCORRECT

Autocorrect and text prediction funnel us into talking more like other people, more like our past selves. The future becomes an optimization of the past rather than what we might become.



ASKING

The cognitive drain of resistance. The giants ask over and over and over for our attention, it wears us down in our deep underbelly. They know it wears us down.

OUR PHONE IS ALWAYS THERE

5 hours of screen time a day. Our phone is always here.

It's always here. When we are sad and broken in bed. When we are sick. When we are lonely. When we are craving something.

It's always here.

NOTIFICATION OVERWHELM

We mute all our discord servers. Our servers are full of the people we love doing wonderful things. But we are drowning. We miss everything that matters. We are perpetually left behind. How do people do it?

We try harder. We write lists of things to check and set alarms to remind us to check them.

BELLS

At first, only churches got bells. Come to church, they sang. Ice cream trucks picked up the idea, dinging and calling us to the street. Now every giant and wannabe giant wants to ping, ding, and ring. We keep all our notifications off. We are told over and over that this is unspeakably inconsiderate. People stop inviting us to things, we don't write back fast enough.

HEADHUNTED

We are headhunted by a FAANG company. They won't tell us how they found us. Everyone is charming, human, sincere. Everything is a secret. It is powerful women all the way up. They are all ungoogleable. When we ask what skill we need most for the role, they say "the ability to handle ambiguity."

It's a question that causes all other questions to eat their own tails. We eat our own tail and unbecome.

Can't hire an unbeing.

STORAGE

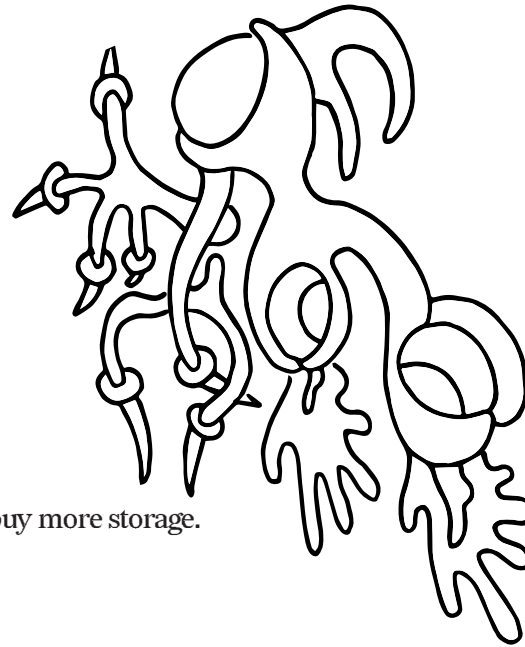
When we run out of storage, we just buy more storage.

LINKBAIT

People are growing tired and irritable with clickbait titles and sensationalized content. We grow numb.

NOTHING WITHOUT US

The giants and the social web only continue to exist as long as we — the nodes that hold it together and feed it — continue to show up. Tomorrow might be the day where we all decide to let this all go.



AUTOMATION OF INEQUITY

Our systems of data extraction worsen the trauma of the most vulnerable among us. When our tools are not made to dismantle structural inequities, their inherent speed and scale magnify them. (Find Virginia Eubanks)

Our tech is urgent, perfectionist, paternalist, extractive, and individualistic. Our tech is inextricable from white supremacy culture.

INCOMPREHENSIBLE

The tools we use are getting more and more complex and the jargon is inscrutable. They render us incapable of understanding the technologies and methods used for our control.

They are very good at making things legible when they want, they share the glamour and sparkle dust.

ALGORITHMIC BIAS

When we start making games with cameras, we notice these computer vision libraries are very bad at detecting black bodies. This bias carries to policing apps, health apps, anywhere there is a machine learning algorithm, the bias is baked in. The machine reinforces what it has been fed. A feedback loop of injustice. (Find Safiya Umoja Noble)

ILLUSION OF EASY

The giants delight in making it seem like it's easy, like it's faster, like it's better. It is easy, faster, better. They are experts at shuffling the hard parts around until it seems like the hard parts are your fault. All of this would work great if you just had faster internet, or a newer machine.

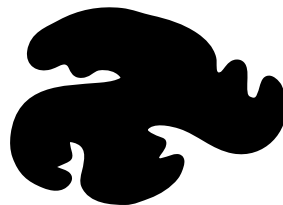
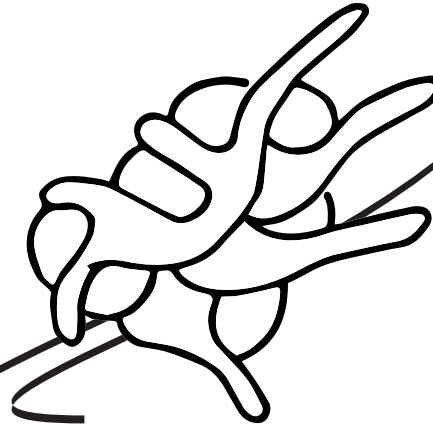
NO DRIVER

Does this thing even have a driver? These giants are so massive. Who is in control? Someone's job is to make and maintain the percentage bar that shows how full your Google Drive is.

NY

We are in New York. We go to meetups at startups and repeat techno-utopian metaphors to see how they feel in our mouth. We eat a lot of free candy. We visit the huge library at Kickstarter. We are scanned by the machines. There are keycards and warnings of people trailing their way in.

We visit a new friend at her work. We drink free tech giant coffee and she shows us how to clone keycards. She has all the gear. We have a secret plan. But the security on the cards is too modern, we can't get a good read.



SF

We are in San Francisco. The sidewalks are sparkling. Our neighbourhood is in a valley and down every street we see steep hills and houses climbing to a blue sky that looks like a computer monitor, like something is shining behind it. We see people sleeping on the streets, howling outside tech hubs bustling with young professionals drinking coconut water.

We hang out in hackerspaces, one where someone burrowed into the walls, another for feminists. We join the tech workers coalition.

Thousands of scooters are littering the streets.

IMPERMANENCE At any moment the internet might disappear. Maybe just parts, maybe all of it. We go to the Internet Archive. It feels like a church. It feels so fragile. We step inside the Wayback machine with Danielle. It's a telephone booth to the past.

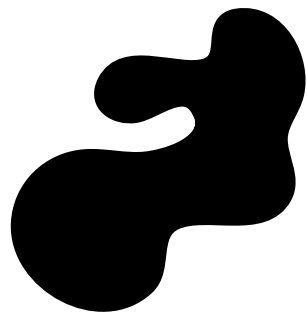
FOOD We go for free lunches at Etsy and Kickstarter and Google. We go to events at Unity, KickStarter, Etsy, Mozilla. The disembodied becomes bodied. We eat free lunch at Google and see the arcade. We hoard free snacks from Unity. We eat free breakfast at Stripe. A friendly guy in the elevator asks us what we are doing here. We say we are just here for the free food. He says 'me too'. He's the CEO.

WHALES

We talk to people who work at freemium video game companies. They are hiring.

They tell us that game loops are amazing, you can trap people in an infinite loop of desire. Like drinking salty water. They tell us about whales, the people who spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on microtransactions and keep the companies afloat.

Everything is for the whales.



BEING GROWN

What kinds of people do phones grow? What kinds of messages does Gmail grow? What kinds of relationships does TikTok grow? What kinds of bodies? What kinds of minds? What kinds of connections? What kinds of thoughts? What kinds of moments? Of interests? Of lives?

BEING SHAPED

Giants are sculpting us like novelty moulds make square watermelons. Giants are rewriting our brains to be good for the machine. Giants are remapping our personalities and communication styles to be more clickable, more emotion-inducing. Quietly.

BREAK TO FIX

We are harmed physically by our ubiquitous tech objects, our eyes are strained, our backs, our necks, the wiring of our brains. We pose for the webcam, holding our bodies still. We contort and erode our bodies to do our work.



FREEDOM TO SPEAK

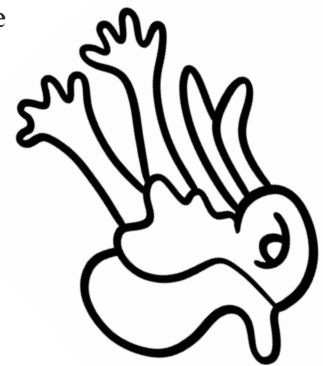
We want freedom to speak. We skim over our dwindling freedom to think, to be, to be still in our own minds like a leaf floating on a lake, to know our minds like a child knows the scratches in the kitchen table.

SEX WORK

Mastercard changes their terms and conditions so sex workers can't accept payments.

GATHER

We stamp on the lies of warrior-kings with spears. The hunters were never in charge. We remember our aunt leading us to the places the berries grow, our hands gathering soft herbs and berries together. Some of us daydreaming, others cartwheeling, others listening to the wind.



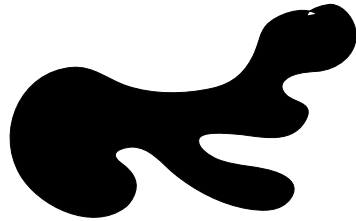
ANGRY TRUCKS

Truckers are churning in the streets, spitting slurs with foaming mouths, blasting truck horns, whistling to dogs, waving flags, clawing back their voices and whiteness and rage. They are angry. They want the lives they saw in their minds, the life that someone promised them.

KITCHENER / WATERLOO

We feel it coming before it comes. The entire city is under construction. The glass Google building towering over a growing tent city. The tents are going to be evicted. We drink our tea at a nearby cafe. Two men are scheming about a supply chain startup. Two women are discussing incarceration and safe injection sites.

Across town, we bring hay to a community garden with Fanny and we meet the aunties who are trying to stretch their arms around the children. We talk about the invisible threads that hold people together. An elder offers us a gift.



BAD WEB

The internet is built on machines that themselves are built with exploitative labour; running software that is built on military technology, using wealth accumulated through slavery and colonialism. It's a space where communities like gamergate and 4chan systematically harass people and send SWAT teams to people's homes. It's a nest for white supremacy groups, human trafficking, and revenge porn.

Instead of an infinite library where anyone could build anything, we find ourselves cycling through fiefdoms run by voracious tech oligarchs (Meta, Twitter, TikTok, Google), with privately-owned infrastructure controlling what we see and explore (Google, AWS, Azure). We're digital sharecroppers in a surveillance state, paying rent with our brain-space and building our entire lives in spaces where at any moment, for any (or no) reason, we may be permanently ejected, losing access to our communities and entire worlds.



DISTRACTION

A continuous bombardment with distractions, delight, and drama. Abortions are outlawed in the states. There is a cute cat on the internet. Climate refugees are dying. Have you tried ice cream and peanut butter on a hot dog bun?

UPDATES

We need immediacy. We need news. We need instant feedback. Let's do it now, we want it now. From a distance it looks like we are sprawled out on a couch, tapping and scrolling. (Find Olia Lialina)

URGENCY

The feeling of urgency threads through everything. It's conductive wire threaded into the weave. We are reactionary. It's impossible to know what is urgent. We churn through new bad news every day.

We're kept so busy we can't stop, check in with ourselves. We can't ask ourselves what we need. There's no time. There is never enough, never enough time, never enough money, never enough something.

COVID The whole world gets sick. We get sick. We have a curfew. The world closes and reopens. Closes and reopens. We continue to get sick.

CODEPENDENCY

What myth that any of us could survive without the others. We nurture, we mirror, we co-regulate. We are entangled, we are relational and fungal to our core.

PRECARITY

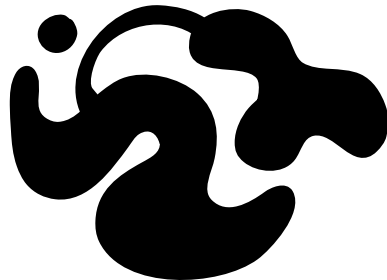
We don't feel ready for divestment. It's all so precarious. Everything is on devices and platforms that we don't own, creating dependencies and leaving us needing further support: mental, financial, social, material. (Find Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing)

CHOOSING SMALL

What if we just had enough? What if it was enough to simply sustain ourselves? We can choose to avoid growth. Seeing the consequences of growth is necessary in avoiding it. (Find D. Squinkifer)

NOWORKING

We explore what it means to not work. We rest. We resist. (Find The Nap Ministry)



SEARCHING FOR NO

Is there space for us to say no? We refuse and we are at a loss. Divestment friction has a different weight for different people. We search for a no that is not compliance, that isn't ignoring, that isn't pretending. It's harder than you might think. We search for a way to occupy space without being complicit in violence against our bodies.

OUR YES

Our no makes our yes solid, our no makes our yes real.

INTERRUPTING

We interrupt the organizations and companies that are actively working against our empowerment and healing. We look them in the eyes and say: no.

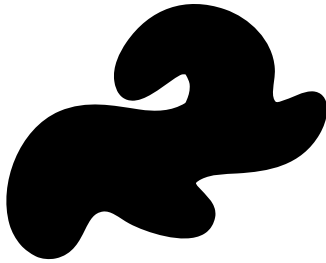
QUITTING SMOKING The only way we are able to quit smoking is by imagining our child selves, climbing to the top of a swaying tree and feeling perfectly content. Of course we need things. We need water, food, love, shelter. But it felt rotten to need this extra thing, to know we had been manipulated into needing something more than the wind on our face in a tree.

TOGETHER NO

Our no comes from our bodies, alone and together. Our no comes from our own experience and our communal experience. What does it mean to say no? We push back on the solitary no, the refusal that wanders off alone, leaving others behind in the fire. (Find Jenny Odell)

SEEDS

We stare at the seeds we planted yesterday and wait for them to sprout. Brambles, vines. Garden clippings. The underground network. There are manifestations above ground, but you have to dig to reveal what is happening down there.



PAIN Divestment can feel like forcing pain on ourselves for reasons that feel abstract, disembodied, disconnected from our lived realities. We divest, and suddenly everything is harder. Why choose pain when everything is so hard already?

CYCLES Just like all things, quitting isn't immediate. We find ways to create intimate platforms by repurposing tools. We cycle in and out. We take dopamine detoxes. We depart over and over and over through the seasons.

DOING THE WORK We make small changes. We detangle. We are squeezed tighter and tighter, forced into compromises so we can support ourselves. We fall back in. We channel patient urgency. These things take time. We do the work. We show up.

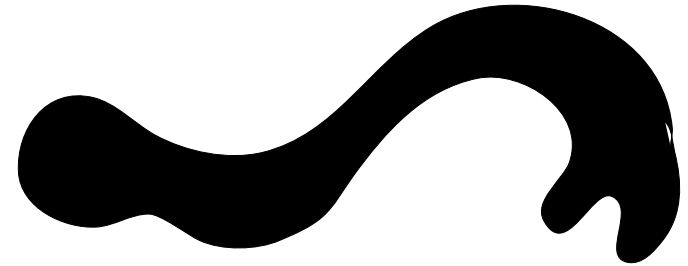
All that we touch, we change (Find Octavia Butler)

Everything starts as **DREAMING**. We find courage. We unleash our radical daydreams. We have been holding our breath.

WHOSE DREAM Whose dream is this? Who is the dreamer here? This is not our dream. We're living in a well-meaning, meditation retreat attending, fair-trade coffee drinking, San Francisco tech worker's recreation of Elon Musk's dream. What needs to happen to shift this to our dreams? How do we shift?

WAKING

We have power. We are waking up. And we are hungry.



SNIFFING OUT THE JOY

One night we find that we are suddenly able to dance. We haven't danced in years. But we feel moved to move.

We are sniffing out the joy. We are keeping our noses on the joy trail. (Find Buffy Sainte Marie)

POSITION: Describing the position we take rather than absolute coordinates, because the landscape is shifting. Living work, making time and space to reconsider; to change to grow.

JOYFUL CONSENT: Being present at the moment where we are open to change and shifting rather than dragging people through a door or moralizing or pushing.

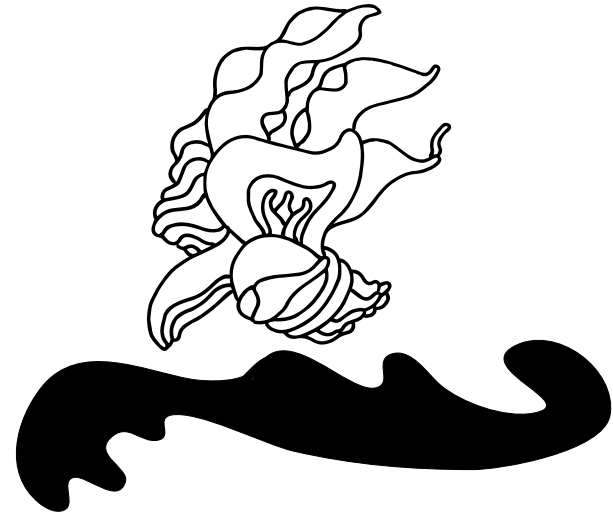
TINY: Offering localized solutions. Making things for and with our communities and people. All things in relation to the specific group of people we are working with. Tiny collaborative sketches rather than an all-encompassing rule-set or definitive plan for “everyone.”

DIFFERENCE: Clear acknowledgement that friction and weight of decentralized systems are different for different people. Relational, aware of relations, working with awareness of the system and how power flows.

PROCESS: Actively and consciously resisting the tendency of systems of power to reproduce and reinforce themselves always. Prioritizing how we do it together above what we achieve. Value compost as much as fruit.

Thank you reader, for holding this in your hands.

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