Corporate Poetry

Alex Saum

Interactive Storytelling Art

"Thought-provoking and novel use of online forms; the sterile, banal and functional platform interfaces, jars with the two narratives' questions - on subject matters of motherhood, war and death."

ICIDS 2020 Jury

On bodies, surveys, virus and rooms.
Enter *Corporate Poetry*

Abstract

This essay analyzes Alex Saum's *Corporate Poetry* project, focusing on its three main rooms (#1, #2 and #3) as well as backrooms #2 and #3, created with the collected data from Room #2. Through a series of interactive "rooms," these works repurpose the language of a variety of online forms and platforms (Google Forms, Survey Monkey and Zoom) in order to domesticate the neoliberal intent of these data gathering technologies. These poems intervene the kind of corporate language expected in these forms by bringing attention to that other corpora that is our bodies. This way, the poetic surveys regain a surprising type of corporality that engages our embodied reality while making visible the digital infrastructure that is unintentionally brought into our homes whenever we participate in an online survey or take a video conferencing call. In a time where measures to contain the global pandemic are forcing citizens to shelter in their homes, these works illuminate a new dimension of our everyday confinement. Going even further, these works show how the destruction of natural resources and human life (i.e. the 2020 pandemic) is directly related to the evolution of digital technologies that project a perverse sense of immaterial existence. By rethinking the materiality of digital languages these poetry rooms aim to further disjoint that relation.

Keywords
survey, data poetry, electronic literature, video call, COVID-19, quarantine

texts of discomfort

2020 would be the year of collapse, although back in January, few of us knew it. I had just started a poetry fellowship at the Arts Research Center at UC Berkeley[1], working on a project called *Corporate Poetry*. My original intention was to explore how corporate language related to that other "corpora" that is our body. Through a series of interactive "rooms" built on familiar online platforms like Google Forms, Survey Monkey, and Zoom, this project repurposed the kind of language we associate with these data gathering technologies in an attempt to domesticate it, bring it home and, in the process, somehow disrupt the data categories enough to make the information collected useless for the platforms themselves. My original hope was to bring attention to their language and our embodied reality by showing up the digital infrastructure that is unintentionally brought into our homes whenever we participate in an online survey or take a video conferencing call. As I

said somewhere else "we let them in so they can count us; at our most vulnerable, wearing pajama bottoms" (Saum, 2020d).

A few months later, the COVID-19 pandemic hit globally and forced us all to shelter in our homes, to hide in our rooms while simultaneously requiring us to open new digital rooms that would connect us to the outside world. Our everyday confinement and the relation that our bodies hold to language and space became painfully relevant. On the one hand, the poems I had planned to write still bent the utilitarian goals of these technologies by disrupting the type of data they were aimed to collect. On the other, they now brought an acute and affective awareness about the pervasive collecting reality of these platforms, as they now entered—occupied—the domestic and personal space of our quarantines, that space that poetry tends to inhabit.

As poems "Room #1" and "Room #2" state: "I have always talked about poetry as if being in

a room." In opposition to narrative, where things happen and carry you along, a poem welcomes you into a particular room made of verse. Poetry is the tone, the feeling, the space you inhabit while sharing that room with those words and their world. After these long months of mandatory confinement, there is a new dimension to this statement because the words that shape the poem have turned into very physical walls. We are not speaking metaphorically anymore, though the double referential nature of any metaphor still holds. We have become used to being physically trapped while also learning to share our personal space and, simultaneously, peer into others' in a perceptively immaterial way. We are not, really, inhabiting those other spaces, however; they are being broadcast to us by the mediation of another set of invisible walls. As media theorists Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin say, our reality becomes re-mediated by these digital media technologies whose logic

of immediacy "dictates that the medium itself should disappear and leave us in the presence of the thing represented" (1999, p. 6), i.e., they should make us feel like we are indeed sharing someone else's room and not just looking at them looking at you looking at your screen.

Invisible or not, these walls are also not immaterial even if digital technologies have also long insisted on their ethereal constitution by being able to traverse the world and materialize in your phone or computer, or even exist in something fluffy like a cloud. As the logic of immediacy of the digital interface becomes more and more advanced, the more impenetrable the hardware (and even the software) that supports it become. As Lori Emerson puts it "the degree to which an interface becomes more invisible is the degree to which it is seen as more user-friendly (and so more human), but at the cost of less access to the underlying flow of information or simply to the workings of the machine/medium"

(Emerson, 2014, p. 133).

The invisibility of the machine/medium makes us believe it might not even be there, but let us remember that there is nothing immaterial about digital technologies which are not only made from rare minerals like cobalt mined in inhumane and unregulated conditions in Africa (Shapshak, 2019) but are also responsible for levels of environmental pollution close to the aviation industry; 3.7% of global CO2 emissions are a product of our internet usage and its sustaining infrastructures (Ferreboeuf, 2009).

The cloud and all the rooms that magically pop up in our houses are thus, not only very material, but also very alien, since they are sustained by rare minerals that come from all parts of the planet that go into the large infrastructures surrounding the world in a highly distributed manner, namely: the internet marine cables that crisscross the world's oceans, the global servers that store information and heat up the land where they are situated, the local telecommunications systems powered by dirty electricity, etc.; but also because even in their most domestic manifestations, let's say, the computer that runs the software that opens up that familiar chat room is never quite ours. The software that runs and constitutes the digital medium builds the space we are now allowed to sit in, while other hidden software and other larger—yet also concealed—hardware infrastructures permit it. There is, of course, something inescapably poetic about the construction of a platform that structures our reality within it. It is poetic, like my early poetry rooms, and it is perverse, because these organizational structures that allow us to work remotely, or chat with a loved one according to their own parameters of interaction, all have built-in information gathering features that feed on our usage. They not only build our new rooms in mysterious ways, but they are also spying on us dwellers by secre-

tive new methods.

Survey forms are probably the best example of this double functionality because they are meant, openly, to gather user response data while at the same time using that data to feed their own analytical capabilities. And although this is not a secret, the way most companies retain data we collect for them or how they use it is still quite opaque. One can browse the privacy policy of any service and even restrict certain collections, but let's say that our personal sharing is the fee most of us willingly pay to visit someone else's room or welcome them over to ours. We might even feel uncomfortable about it, but we are willing to stay in the dark—like those dark mines in the Democratic Republic of Congo—or to keep certain things hidden—like a buried submarine cable linking Taipei and Los Angeles—in order to justify our usage of these digital technologies.

I am a woman who grew up in Spain du-ring the country's transition to democracy after the death of dictator Francisco Franco, so I know a thing or two about burying silences and the many tacit pacts we are willing to make to keep uncomfortable and destructive truths in the dark. I explain more about this in the sections below, but perhaps that's why I have devoted most of my academic and creative career to writing about hidden formal structures and the correlating physical infrastructures. I also live in the San Francisco Bay Area, in the shadow of Silicon Valley, so my interest in that particular type of ideological alchemy that turns the worst material conditions into evanescent clouds has necessarily taken the shape of digital techno-logies. These two personal conditions, a place of birth and place of living, might not seem too related at first, but I have come to see that the silences that we keep in the pursuit of progress have more than a few things in common.

As it stands today, *Corporate poetry* is

composed of five poems. Rooms #1 and #2 are interactive survey poems, Backrooms #2 and #3 are non-interactive poems built with the data gathered from "Room #2," one being a video poem, the other a print prose poem. Finally, "Room #3" is a website distributed as a video poem, built around the conferencing tool Zoom.

Room #1

"Room #1" is the first poem of the *Corporate Poetry* series, released in January 2020, and later published by *The New River* journal in their Spring 2020 issue. Like all other works discussed in this volume, it was also on display at the *Text of Discomfort* exhibit part of ICIDS 2020. Technically speaking it is a survey built on Google Forms, using the free features any user gets with a private account. It requires a certain amount of interaction from the user since three of its seven sections include mandatory multiple-choice questions. It is not possible to advance through the poem without making some sort of choice regarding the user's feelings around

[

I always talk about poetry
as if
being in a room --

Next

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Google Forms

1

love for a child—supposedly of their own—and their death. The form is live and can be accessed by anyone with the link.

The poem starts with a personal assertion "I always talk about poetry as if being in a room" and then asks for the user's input in evaluating the quality of the lighting in that room on a scale of 1 to 5 that ranges from "kind of gloomy" to "bright like salt and your child's smile as he pulls your hair to bring you closer so he can kiss you in the mouth. Open mouth." It might be worth noting that 29% of participants have chosen 5 as their value to proceed, but values are quite evenly distributed, increasing slightly as the room gets lighter (17.3% for 1, 12.5% for 2, 17.9% for 3 and 23.2% for four). I said it might be worth noting, but the poetic data gathered here is not only anonymous but useless in relation to any formal metric. This, of course, does not make it worthless.

The poem then proceeds in a soft tone, asking the user to follow the poetic voice deeper into the room, literally holding her hand. The options the reader now faces, in a standard multiple-choice manner, are a bit more complicated since the traditional survey categories are broken to make way for poetic enjambement. The quantification of a user's choice of "you" or "pull," over "soft was soft," becomes meaningless when comparing such very different propositions. The next section returns to a more traditional comparison asking users to engage in a game of definitions, wondering about the meaning of "room." However, the game is troubled in a syntactical way asking readers to sort out a poetic simile that is displayed in a drop-down menu. The room in question thus "can drop" "like a bird," "like a sparrow" or "like a menu," but also "like your son when you imagine his small (but not so small) motionless body because your father told you that you should think about dea-th at least five minutes a day to be ready for the worst, and you want to be ready for the worst." Curiously, the percentages here are quite evenly distributed between two main choices, a quarter of most users choosing to engage with loss, while the other quarter selecting the recursive play on words of dropping "like a menu". Finally, the poem ends with a meditation on motherhood and its contradictory feelings, of owning and loving someone, and knowing that this someone is a being in their own right that can never truly belong to anyone.

I am guessing there are many other interpretations of this poem, but this is what I had in mind when trying to address my relationship to my own child. The limitations as well as the affordances the platform interface gave me, shaped the form of the poem while deviating from its expected language and use. In a way, choosing the topic of motherhood, the sensuality that is involved, and the end of this most precious life

are intersecting with the limitations and affordances of traditional poetic discourse. Not just by placing these private meditations in a commercial space powered by Google—who very fittingly displays at the end of each page a set of disclosures of its own "Report Abuse - Terms of Service - Privacy Policy"—and thus twisting the original purpose of the survey platform, but also by asking readers to answer questions about maternity and birth that are still taboo in many literary scenes. There is a lack, an invisibility of these issues, that perhaps has to do with the invisibility of women's experience in spaces reserved for men (or some "male genius"). This applies both to poetry and to digital technologies, of course. Bringing these questions to the aseptic space of an online form, I believe this poem sheds a new light of its own.

Room #2

     With a similar interest in taking on issues about silence and disappearance from public space or discourse, or even public knowled-

[

Son:

Sometimes I think about my son
as if
I were a shiny opal stone, and
I wasn't his mother at all]

Alex Saum

Back   Submit

Google Forms

ge in general, I launched "Room #2" in February of 2020, which also appeared in The New River' Spring Issue, and the Texts of Discomfort exhibition. This new room is built on the commercial data analysis service provided by SVMK Inc., doing business under Survey Monkey. Just like "Room #1," this poem begins with the affirmation that poetry is a room and asks users to choose a color for their room, this time on a sliding scale of 0 ("bright salt") to 100 ("dark cobalt blue, rich mineral soil"). Once the tone is set, instead of guiding the reader with my own series of choices, I offer an open ended response section where they can share who they imagine to be with in that room, to then move onto a standard multiple choice question set, asking where they would disappear: "into the Earth," "inside a little and turquoise box, with vintage yet millennial pink flowers around the edge," "into a progress bar, mint green [below]" or "into a cycle [or circle] or completion." As in the previous poem, there is

a recursive trick asking readers to acknowledge the interface of this survey platform by noticing the green progress bar at the bottom of the screen. This was the option favored by a majority of readers (35%) followed by "into the Earth" (30%). The double metaphor calling attention to the poem as a survey in itself and to the Earth as that metaphorical place we go when we die—as souls traveling through planets or by turning into earthy minerals perhaps—is distributed and understood by readers in a clear percentual manner.

The poem then follows with an open-ended statement: "Some of us are made to disappear:" which generated a wide variety of free answers from users ranging from "softly," or "with words or neglect," to "into rainbow ice cream sprinkles." The diversity in tone and structure is a good indicator of the openness and vagueness of the poem until this point, which then asks three similar questions about the meaning of

* This is how I have been trained - at least;

It is usually a white room:

| bright salt | dark cobalt blue, rich mineral soil | 76 | Clear |

* I am usually alone in that room

But
like salt, or cobalt,

you have been here before, and

like you, others:

* We all leave traces; sweet water, monkey form, form, or not.

Some of us disappear

☐ into the Earth

☐ inside a little and turquoise box, with vintage yet millennial pink flowers around the edge

☑ into a progress bar, mint green [below]

☐ into a cycle [or circle] of completion

* Some of us are made to disappear:

texts of discomfort

disappearance itself. "What does it mean to disappear? Does it look like this?" "Or like this?" each of these questions displaying a drop-down menu with identical options, rendering choice-making futile. Eventually, the commentary of language and interface turns into something else, when the third drop-down menu displays four eroded sentences where the reader gets a glimpse into a new dimension of "disappearing":

"Spain l u ch truth commis ion to probe Franco-era crim s (…) The Sp nish gov r m nt s ys t it wll open n st mtd 1,200 mass graves."

"s y mor t 100,000 of F 's fr m e vil war n its aft rmt r m n buried unmarked graves cr ss pain — f g re, t Amnesty International."

"S ain s sa d t b s c nd y t w n c s to 'missing' persons."
"mass graves"

A whopping 55% quickly identified disappearing now with "mass graves," noticing the poem's intention had changed to point to a particular historical reality, that of the Spanish Civil War and following dictatorship. In a similar

* What does it mean to disappear?

Does it look like this?

✓

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‑‑

‑‑

‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑

‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑‑

‑‑‑

* Or this?

✓"Spain l u ch truth commis ion to probe Franco-era crim s (...) The Sp nish gov r m nt s ys t it wll open n st mtd 1,200 mass graves."
" s y mor t 100,000 of F 's fr m e vil war n its aft rmt r m n buried unmarked graves cr ss pain — f g re, t Amnesty International."
"S ain s sa d t b s c nd y t w n c s to 'missing' persons."
mass graves

* How do you make someone disappear?

☐ Where do you take them?

☐ What do you tell them?

☐ What do you do with their hands, their feet, their teeth?

☐ There's hundreds of thousands of hands and feet buried under freeways, damns and playgrounds in my country

☐ [These green teeth will never be collected]

way, 40% of respondents to the following multiple-choice question "How do you make someone disappear" selected "There's hundreds of thousands of hands and feet buried under freeways, damns and playgrounds in my country," as their answer, rather than engaging with the other options that, instead of answers, provided more questions: "Where do you take them?" "What do you tell them?" "What do you do with their hands, their feet, their teeth?" Like in the previous instance of interface recursiveness in this poem and that which we saw in Room #1, the second most popular choice, with 35% "[These green teeth will never be collected]" refers back to the utilitarian purpose of this survey, which is collecting reader's data.

Backrooms #2 and #3

When asked about "Room #2," I said it was about "loss, death and governmental violence" (Saum, 2020c), because this poem explo-res the question of the 140,000 estimated bodies that still remain missing in Spain 46 years after the end of Franco's dictatorship. There are no official accounts, however, because there has still not been a formal State inquiry into this, but associations like *La asociación para la recuperación de la memoria histórica* have been carrying out exhumations all across the nation since 2000 (Asociación). After the death of the dictator in 1975, there has been a lack of transparency around these violent deaths, a silence that was legitimized in the 1977 Amnesty Law. This law exonerated any crimes committed before December 15, 1976 (BOE, 1977) and has become known as the "pact of forgetting," an institutional attempt that is reflected in the popular behavior of putting the past behind us in order to focus on the democratic future of Spain. I grew up in the shadow of this pact, and like all Spaniards of my generation was taught not to look back, to learn how to coexist with secrets by not

asking too many questions, by never digging too deep. Surveying people about their feelings about mass graves was perhaps my own way of breaking with the previous generation's pact.

Survey Monkey offers powerful analytical tools, but a lot of their inner workings are pretty opaque to the user. I couldn't help connecting the dots between these two different structures: the commercial survey platform that turns all interaction and—in the case of the poem—affect into abstract and obscure numerical data and the sociopolitical and institutional pacts that, in my country, have also successfully turned death into unworkable data as well. I decided to use my own data collected by "Room #2" to make two new poems.

In June 2020, I shared publicly the results of the open-ended statement/verse "Some of us are made to disappear:" and recited them in a YouTube performance I called "Backroom #2. A response poem." At that time, I had already run out of the free analytics that Survey Monkey offers in their unpaid plan for the first 40 responses but decided to go ahead with this portion of collected data. I am used to not working with full data sets, just like coexisting with ghosts.

A month later, I took this same data set collected from "Room #2" and wrote another poem entitled "Made to Disappear." I shared the visualizations provided by the service, pie charts, bar graphs and tables and wrote an interpretative report, published both in digital form and print in the German-Austrian magazine, Perspektive in August:

"What does it mean to disappear?" I asked this question to a self-selected group of 44 anonymous participants during the months of February to June 2020.

40.91% of them understood disappearance to mean disintegrating into three short and conse-
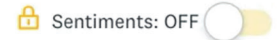
Q4
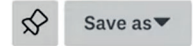
Some of us are made to disappear:

Answered: 41   Skipped: 0

RESPONSES (41)   WORD CLOUD   TAGS (0)   🔒 Sentiments: OFF

☐   Apply to selected ▼   Filter by tag ▼   Search responses 🔍 ❔

Showing **41** responses

☐   All
5/14/2020 12:17 PM   View respondent's answers   Add tags ▼

☐   completely
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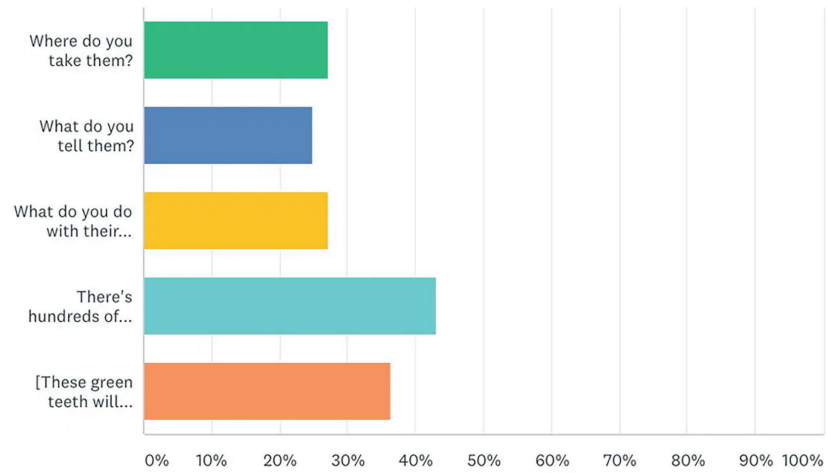5/14/2020 12:14 PM   View respondent's answers   Add tags ▼

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Interactive Storytelling Art

Q9

How do you make someone disappear?

Answered: 44   Skipped: 0

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
▼ Where do you take them?	27.27%	12
▼ What do you tell them?	25.00%	11
▼ What do you do with their hands, their feet, their teeth?	27.27%	12
▼ There's hundreds of thousands of hands and feet buried under freeways, damns and playgrounds in my country	43.18%	19
▼ [These green teeth will never be collected]	36.36%	16
Total Respondents: 44		

texts of discomfort

cutive dashes and, out of which

– – – or perhaps, in of which – – –

100% selected a single dot to contain the fleeting essence of what they mean by

void.

Unfortunately, the data revealed some discrepancies about which exact dot

[". . . . ."]

reflected best the respondents' sense of disappearing. Alas, here lay the limitations of representing the incommensurable vastness of the universe

using dots.

Faced against the limits of human comprehension, 23 participants believed non-existence to take the shape of a fruit [i.e. a pear].

More significantly, 56.82% of respondents selected "mass graves" as synonym of disappearing, while 43.18% confirmed that there's hundreds of thousands of

hands and feet buried

under freeways,

damns and

playgrounds in their country.

I never understood numbers. Thus, I can only confirm that:

– – – = mass graves." (Saum, 2020b)

In that same magazine, I explained that "Most people can't understand large numbers, that's why we turn to visualizations. However, most images are impenetrable" (Saum, 2020c). When it comes to digital interfaces, their hermeticism has made it almost impossible to know what lies behind them, what algorithms power them and what is behind that set of instructions. Looking at a compact set of soil is not that different, when you are not allowed to dig and exhume the bones buried there. "Made to Disappear," this backroom poem plays with the irony of this kind of visualizations. I show readers' responses in a quantifiable way in order to write a report that ends up being as compact and obfuscated as the reality it refers to. This is not an interactive poem in any way, it belongs to print. It is static and unchangeable, reinforcing Katherine Hayles' famous dictum that "print is flat, code is deep" (Hayles, 2004, p. 67). The atrocities this poem deals with have remained carefully trapped under Spanish soil, rendering the land as flat as print; there is no digital depth in which to dig anymore.

Room #3

In May 2020, as we were getting used to the idea of a pandemic that would last not months but years, I released "Room #3." Unlike "Room #1" and "Room #2," or its two backrooms, this is not built using any kind of survey platform but is a simpler hypertext rich HTML site. Even though I consider it to be part of *Corporate Poetry*, it is a crossover work between this and my earlier The Offline Website Project (TOWP) that consists of a series of websites meant only to run locally on the computer where these sites are created and hosted. Because these websites would never be part of the web, TOWP users needed physically to travel to my house and participate in a site-specific experiencing of the works. The idea was to create digital objects that would

texts of discomfort

be unique material objects: non-replicable, non-sharable, non-transferable. In other words, not invisible, always local and ingrained in a particular place and concrete home computer.

The logic of their materiality challenges directly the beliefs about the immateriality of digital technologies, while the decision to emphasize my own face as protagonist of all the sites brings attention back to the subject and the body. New materialist critics have told us that things always exist in a concrete space and time but they are always connected and are co-constituted by other material existence. The interdependency and interrelation that shapes all life and events on Earth, from the ontological discussions of Karen Barad to the philosophical construction of Donna Haraway's Chthulucene to the mushrooms at the end of the world of Anna Tsing, all emphasize the need to make kin and coexist with a world in collapse. The "webiness," or tentacular structure in Haraway's lin-

go, of these sites expands outside of them and brings them and their users back into my home, materializing the networks of travel, energy use and, eventually, the emergence of poetry from the user's engagement with these digital works of poetry.

The domestic constraints of regular travel that existed before COVID-19 meant, however, that the sites would rarely be experienced in their true interactive form and thus, access to them was limited to video documentation. This, in its own, pointed to the tension and almost impossibility of living by certain environmental standards in late capitalism and its larger destructive constraints. The shelter in place orders that eventually locked us all in our homes brought an acute new reality to these poetic experiments. I built "Room #3," an interactive HTML website that, this turn around, would never exist as such, but would from its inception be considered an unworkable website: a video recording,

in other words, that exposes our contemporary relation with the video conferencing platform Zoom and quarantining.

"Room #3" begins by asking the viewer why they are watching a video of someone else's interaction with a website, providing an answer as well: "because you are alone in your house, and no one is allowed over/ that's how it feels/ but don't worry/ you are never alone." When the cursor on screen clicks "Enter Room #3," a new window opens, and we enter the familiar interface of Zoom. Two chat screens on speaker view, the larger one showing a recording of myself on mute, trying to speak to a black screen (camera off). Eventually, the speaking image realizes she can't be heard and the video stops. The illusion of the call is broken, and the cursor on the screen clicks on the smaller black screen to open a new video chat room. The windows here multiply showing four screens. The earlier speaker is now joined by another one, showing the same person (me) now asking to "unmute yourself" before both screens freeze, again breaking the immediacy of a real conversation. The cursor clicks on one of the new black screens and the chat room is now occupied by two more cha-

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you are never alone

Enter Room #3*

*you are about to waste 5 minutes
of your life

racters, indeed still different versions of myself, trying to connect. They remind each other who is the host, who needs to unmute, who has their camera off… No meaningful communication happens, they are all happy to see each other online, however. The videos loop in a mechanical manner, repeating their problems in establishing a connection for about a minute until the cursor clicks on a small button that asks "Feeling less alone? Leave room." Once the user leaves the room, a series of messages appear reassuring her there is no need ever to feel alone, and a new screen appears showing one of those characters working with her computer unaware of her being recorded. She is not participating in any failed call, but she is still being videotaped, being counted. New screens start appearing and multiplying showing all kinds of content: funeral calls, classes, meetings, religious services, Zoom booming with hate symbols, and every time the user is prompted to "Leave meeting"
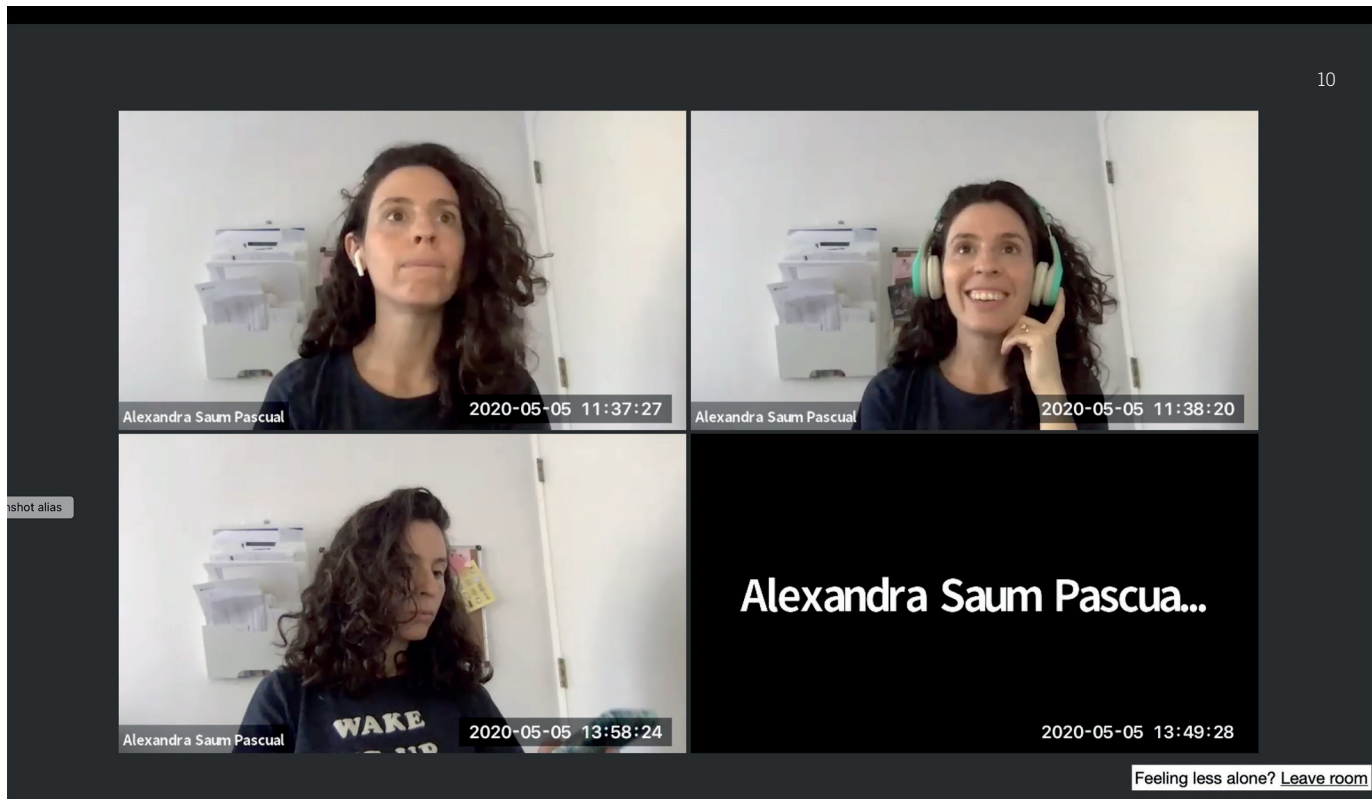
new screens appear until she "Ends Meeting for All." A final reminder appears on a white screen: "They are always watching."

Søren Pold reads this poem as a meditation on the creeping loneliness behind the screen, about being present "without being present" and our simultaneous entrapment within the small rooms that a platform such as Zoon delimits (Pold, 2020). The construction of reality that is afforded by the platform mixes presence and absence, and while the video is on showing my own face and so many others, there is a sense of hidden realities within the remediated aspect of the service. Eventually, Pold wonders: "hvem det egentlig er derude, der kigger på os?" (Pold, 2020), or "who exactly is out there looking at us?."

Conclusion

Wondering about who is looking is perhaps another way of asking who may be counting. "Who" or "what," since the posthuman algorithmic hand that is behind most AI analytics is yet another unsolved mystery for most users of these everyday technologies. We are constantly interacting with other intelligences and material bodies that constitute our technological infrastructures, yet we are not fully aware of this cohabitation, let alone our inter-dependence. A way to highlight this precarious inter-dependence—I use the prefix inter- because I assume technology has not reached singularity yet, even if one side of the balance relies more heavily on the other—is to create works that bring infrastructure to the forefront as I have been explo-

10

Alexandra Saum Pascual   2020-05-05 11:37:27

Alexandra Saum Pascual   2020-05-05 11:38:20

nshot alias

Alexandra Saum Pascual   2020-05-05 13:58:24

Alexandra Saum Pascua...

2020-05-05 13:49:28

Feeling less alone? Leave room

ring with these poems.

My preferred technique to show creative intertwining with external infrastructures is always to build upon already existing digital platforms that bring a level of familiarity to any user and do not require extensive technical knowledge. Rather than operating within open-source software, on most occasions I have privileged commercial services that explicitly rely on user generated data to exist, e.g., YouTube, Google forms, Survey Monkey, and that replicate the predatory logic of late capitalism. A perfect example of this unequal symbiosis is the appearance of providing a free service to users who want to post and share videos or surveys widely while feeding on their behavioral and resulting data. As a user I provide content and valuable information to the YouTube engine, for instance, and effectively lose control of its circulation and economics beyond the act of publication. Whatever poem that I decide to share on YouTu-

be necessarily participates with the platform's codes of, for example, virality, even if my poems never go viral. I can choose to create purposely boring and anti-viral poetry to raise awareness of the exploitation of the professional amateur that YouTube has created, but regardless of their content, the poems and whichever interaction users have with them, are also feeding the larger machine. This is because even if the poems are "mine," they are only guests in someone else's home. In Google's mansion, more precisely.

And as such, their door can be closed at any moment. All *Corporate Poetry* is built and stored by either Google, Zoom or SVMK Inc. Content has not been created or endorsed by them, as their disclosures clearly state, but my poems are only guests on a platform that could limit my access to them or shut the surveys all together. If the platforms were to go down, so would my poems, disappearing forever because once I have built them I have to accept that I have contribu-

ted to an unequal economy that allows me to offer my cultural capital, creativity and labor—not to mention the resulting data generated from these processes—in exchange for a certain right of use, but never ownership. The use I make gives me something, but it will always be disproportionally small in relation to what I have to give in exchange. Isn't this the perfect example of life in late capitalism? There is no illusion of sustainability or collaborative coexistence, but predatory symbiosis or, perhaps better put, of viral reproduction at the guest's expense, in this case.

Digital artist Eugenio Tisselli has written about code as "the vector that transforms your desires into data // code extracts desires from your body, delivers them to the machine, and transports them through the full stack" (Tisselli, 2019). In doing this, code is what connects us to the material world having real environmental implications—Tisselli talks about the burning

forests that are the result of algorithmic economics, but the implications are wider and all-encompassing as I have mentioned earlier.

On the other hand, the compression of code also references the obscurity of impulses behind human desire, or "like the DNA of a virus enclosed within a protein cloak. Code that spreads, apparently insignificant in size, easy to copy and paste, yet cryptic and immanent" (Tisselli, 2020). The materiality of digital technologies and their co-constituting code are distributed through a wide variety of systems and infrastructures as I have shown but their dispersion happens in an almost invisible manner. Code travels and gets executed locally and externally, spreading indeed like a virus. In the post-COVID world we now inhabit, the metaphor is self-explanatory. Its propagation depends highly on human behavior, a behavior that is increasingly dependent on cost and benefit evaluations, optimization and rationalization—which

as Tisselli himself has pointed out, following Franco Berardi, represents the homo economicus—and as such, participates in the same logic of executable code (Tisselli, 2020). The evolution of digital technologies and capitalism are now more intertwined than ever. Humans acting like machine code, machine code spreading like a biological virus, and together changing material life in the world—creating even new viruses like the COVID-19 that has changed the course of our world forever.

In a much more modest way, *Corporate Poetry* participates with this same logic. It is built on external codes that shape it and determine the way the poems look and sound. The poems travel and gather user data, and this gets repurposed with a poetic intent that is entangled in the perverse logic of their platforms and their profit. The emotion they generate and how poetry resonates in our bodies connects with the many other invisible bodies the poems refer to—the mother's, the disappeared; all victims of infrastructural violence—as well as the other silicon and cobalt bodies that hold everything together and are also subject to invisible violence. Invisible and material, like the forces that brought 2020 to be the year of collapse. Surprisingly enough, just like the virus, some of us are still here.

Alex Saum

texts of discomfort

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Images

1. Room #1" by Alex Saum. Opening screen. Detail;
2. Room #1" by Alex Saum. Example of the poem's poetic use of Google Form multiple choice option;
3. Room #1" by Alex Saum. Final screen. Detail;
4. Room #2" by Alex Saum. Example of the poem's poetic use of Survey Monkey's open-ended response option;
5. Room #2" by Alex Saum. Text extracted from one of the poem's multiple choice questions;
6. Room #2" by Alex Saum. Example of the poem's poetic use of Survey Monkey's multiple choice option;
7. Backroom #2. A Response Poem" by Alex Saum. Screenshot of YouTube reading;
8. Backroom #3. Made to Disappear" by Alex Saum. Bar graph visualizing data gathered from "Room #2;
9. Room #3" by Alex Saum. Final opening screen;
10. Room #3" by Alex Saum. Looping video call. Screenshot.

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