

WELFARE AFTER DIGITALIZATION



**WELFARE
AFTER
DIGITALIZATION**

FOREWORD

Responding to calls for critical engagement with the ongoing digitalization of almost all spheres of life, the Welfare After Digitalization (WaD) project has concerned itself with welfare 'out there', looking towards the state and sites of public service practice.

As we do so, we ought also to look inwards and consider welfare within the academic spaces we create, manage and inhabit; our projects, our research groups, our students. After all, as academia interrogates power 'out there', it does so fueled by the work of junior colleagues, precariously employed and lacking any assurances of future positions in the academia they are contributing to and co-producing. What of welfare within academia?

This booklet comes from the intent to provide a space for well-being and creative expression. Exploring different ways of expressing ourselves, and our experiences in engaging the digitalization of welfare, aided by a variety of individuals who claim writing as their craft. It was an exercise in redistributive care that nonetheless, became entangled in the broader extractivist pressures that increasingly permeate academic hierarchies.

Throughout the lifespan of the WaD project, adapting to SARS-Cov2 lockdowns demanded yet another layer of sacrifices: attending conferences remotely, difficulties accessing field-sites or dealing with the abundant stressors to mental health and wellbeing, to name but a few. These were/are disproportionately borne/d out by our junior academics who rely on their bodies to remain functional throughout their time limited contracts, need their sites to be accessible and get their "lifeblood" from the networking and inspirational opportunities provided by conferences, workshops and other gatherings. Meanwhile we witness senior academics rejoicing in being closer

to their families, having more time to write, applying for funding, and overall receiving lessened pressures to nurture the communities that they subsist on.

Challenges to welfare are not just 'out there' but also 'in here'. This booklet helps us understand both the mundane and the intricate challenges that permeate welfare provision in times of instability. It documents a wealth of engagements that showcase not just how welfare works from above, but the pressures it places on people participating in caring and maintaining those infrastructures we find valuable. One of the many lessons that can be taken from these accounts is that participation and inclusion, while important vectors of just welfare provision, do not in and of themselves constitute as much. In fact, when framed in those terms, they do little more than to obscure power differentials and exacerbate the unequal burdens of maintenance. Compensation and reciprocity, whether individual or collective, need to be considered as core components of any participatory process. This applies not only to processes involving welfare provision at a state level, but perhaps more urgently and consequentially when we look within academia.

It is in this spirit of participatory tensions, mitigating increasingly precarious welfare provisions, and bottom up struggles with the impacts of not only digitalization, but also SARS-Cov2, that I hope the contributions in this booklet are read. These are localized pictures of Welfare after Digitalization struggling with shifting and competing understandings of welfare 'out there' that resonate 'in here'. If academia, as it interrogates power, has regularly, and spectacularly, failed to ensure the welfare of its most vulnerable, who is interrogating academic structures?

*Happy readings!
Pedro Ferreira*

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DIGITALIZATION AS SLIME: THE MAKING OF THE NEW WELFARE STATE

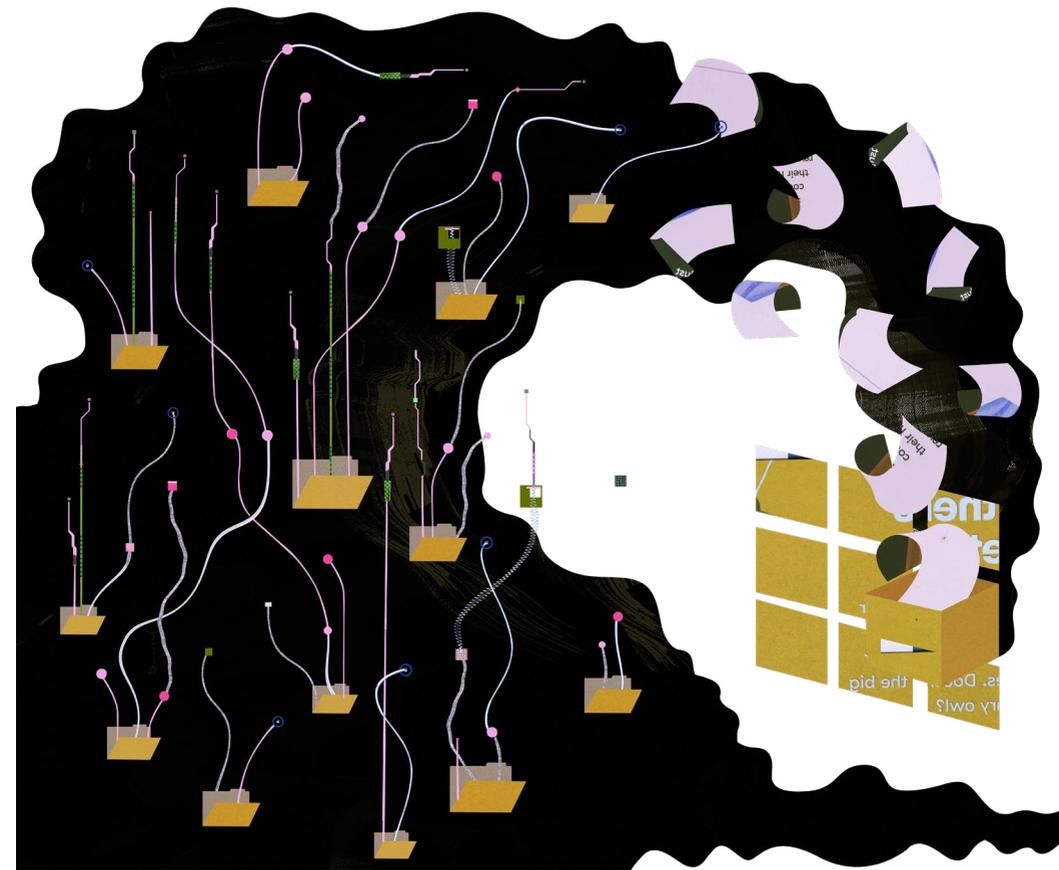
There is another story about to be written about digitalization in Denmark. A different story than the one that is being written as we write this introduction, which tells about digitalization's potentials. This story has been written already for many years, and it keeps things open and in process. There is power in seeing potentialities rather than consequences, and digitalization is often about that which is just about to happen. Mostly good things. The other story is about the things that have already happened.

We named our research project 'Welfare After Digitalization' to counter the emphasis on process and potentialities. The research we have conducted is about the things that have already happened. In the past tense. Our research is about the changes, big and small, that have followed in the wake of digitalization. Changes on public education, the health care system, the energy infrastructures, the labour market, and in law enforcement. With this conference publication we invite you into a collective reflection on the

digitalization efforts that have already taken place. We invite you to help take stock.

After digitalization. What does that even mean? As if there were 'before' and 'after' of something so all-encompassing. Digitalization seems to be everywhere; what if we wrote the story of digitalization as something that happened, like Charybdis, the daughter of Poseidon that flooded large amounts of the Earth to expand her father's kingdom and return it to him. What if digitalization flooded the aged body of the Western welfare state and returned it in a transformed shape. What characterizes this state in which we live?

One way of thinking about it is that we live with monsters or monstrous technologies whose actions and impacts we have no way of fully knowing. Their affordances are 'infrastructural', meaning that their effects are distributed across time and space. We know of digital monsters from Watts (2019) and Douglas-Jones et al (2018). These



authors, in each their way, speak to our fears and fascination of the uncontrollable technologies that are both of us and not us.

Talking about monsters, a bit of the cyborg meeting Leviathan. It is a political program that gobbles and transforms everything that moves in its vicinity: schools, law and order, health care and local governance. It draws people in. The UN Special Rapporteur for Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Philip Alston, warned us in 2019 that the world was

"stumbling zombie-like into a digital welfare dystopia" (UN 2019). It makes things valuable that used to be nothing, like when excess heat becomes electricity, and things that used to be valuable are less important, like a physical meeting between a doctor and patient. On the other hand, when it works it sometimes is modest, immanent perhaps, but failing and apologetic, like when platform workers say they like the flexibility working on platforms offers to them.

A monster in the shape of a friendly ghost. The threat of profiling in the shape of objective and neutral police visualizations. Digitalization appears to be implemented through the dreams and myths that these creatures inspire. Total digitalization is a mythical monster (Raso 2021). Digitalization stands for several immaterial and immanent processes unfolded in public administration that have transformed welfare beyond recognition. Organizational changes, alternation in work practices, employment positions such as secretarial work that upholds, an online bureaucracy. But also, a dilution of the meaning of ethics. Digitalization has led to reimagining a public sector with less documentation, 'bureaucracy', and more surveillance (Plesner et al. 2018). It has rendered certain jobs and positions redundant and demands workers to acquire new skills (Frey & Osborne 2017). The digitalization of the welfare state has come to signify another general global trend: with the right technologies, every single issue becomes solvable, there is no problem that does not have a "technological fix" (cf. Morozov 2013).

'After digitalization' is a story of slime, of digital welfare politics as phlegm (Palmås, 2009). Slime, a monstrous substance, helps conceptualize digitalization partly as hard-to-grasp evolving form (morphogenesis) and as affording agency on top of a rhizomatic structure. As to the latter: Slime, beyond sticky, once you have been in contact with it, you need to put in a lot of effort to contain it. After digitalization recognizes the stickiness of the welfare state transformations. The calculative devices of the digitalized welfare state – rankings, visualizations, metrics – are sticky and grow on the body politics of the digital state. Citizens become resource for processes, procurements, operations, and contracts intended to extract data about them to streamline the

public administration and commercial activities. Sometimes the boundary of digitalization comes and goes between the public and the private, sometimes digitalization appears as ideological leakage pointing to disruptive economic doctrines that power the freeing of public resources for commodification (Wark 2015).

Digitalization as slime does not define or explain the new welfare system, but its stickiness invites us to speak about delegation of responsibility. To whom have they been outsourced? Who else is stuck in the slime? How do they govern and what instruments are in their hands?



ACCESING YOUR FIRST VIDEO CONSULTATION

You open your laptop to prepare for meeting your hospital doctor. Last time you agreed to try having the meeting as a video consultation. You've had FaceTime chats with your grandchildren during the Corona lockdown, so the idea of a video meeting is familiar and you accepted the offer. Typically, it's your wife who deals with the computer, but she's not at home today. Still, you are sure you'll manage to get the video meeting working. Your doctor has assured you that it will be fairly straightforward and that she will call you on the phone if you aren't online.

The clock on the screen reads 9:45. You have 15 minutes before the meeting starts. You open Google to find the website your doctor told you about, place the cursor in the search field, and then have the horrifying realization that you've forgotten the website's name. Something about the health portal? Was it "sundhed.dk"? You remember you had a letter in your e-boks about the consultation, and navigate to the e-boks website instead. You login with your NemID, hear

your phone go 'pling' in the other room – the NemID notification to approve the login – stand up to go fetch your phone, grab it from the table, and slide the approve button as you walk back to your PC. You check the time again – 9 minutes before the meeting starts. Your hands start to go a little sweaty. Will you be able to get the video meeting working in time? You glance through your e-boks to find the hospital letter. Finally, you find the right one and skim through the meeting instructions. The patient portal address is written in the letter, and you click on the link. Your computer opens a web page with "Min sundhedsplatform" written at the top and a blue NemID/MitID login button underneath. You click the button and a popup



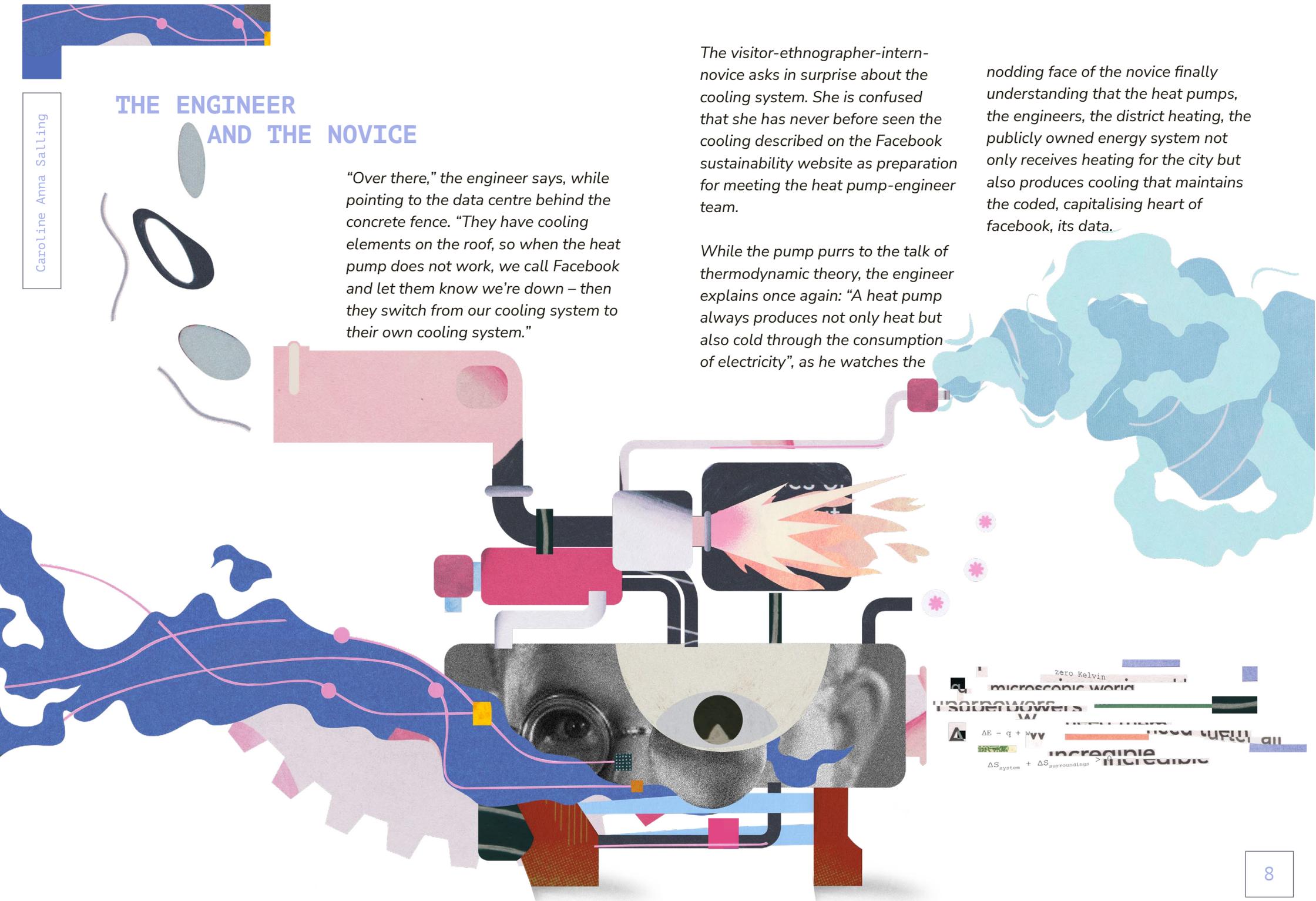
THE ENGINEER AND THE NOVICE

“Over there,” the engineer says, while pointing to the data centre behind the concrete fence. “They have cooling elements on the roof, so when the heat pump does not work, we call Facebook and let them know we’re down – then they switch from our cooling system to their own cooling system.”

The visitor-ethnographer-intern-novice asks in surprise about the cooling system. She is confused that she has never before seen the cooling described on the Facebook sustainability website as preparation for meeting the heat pump-engineer team.

While the pump purrs to the talk of thermodynamic theory, the engineer explains once again: “A heat pump always produces not only heat but also cold through the consumption of electricity”, as he watches the

nodding face of the novice finally understanding that the heat pumps, the engineers, the district heating, the publicly owned energy system not only receives heating for the city but also produces cooling that maintains the coded, capitalising heart of facebook, its data.





THE CHILD AS DESIGNER

[SPOKEN WITH MOVIE TRAILER VOICE]

In a not-so-distant future... a digital world... full of cyberbullying, social media, and loot boxes; of evil tech giants, fake news, and wicked problems.

A bullet train of digital technologies run amok.

A glimmer of hope for democracy, participation, and equality. The child of teknologiforståelse sees design challenges.

The child reimagines and reworks the digital material—cardboard, code, filament. Prototyping, programming, 3D printing.

The child must fight bugs, poor wi-fi, gender norms... But through the power of exploration, iteration, fejlmodighed, and collaboration comes computational empowerment.

And the digital competitive Danish welfare state sees growth and wins the global economic competition.

The child as designer. Coming soon.



HOMECOMING

You grab your name tag from the table and scan the list of attendees excitedly. You know some of the names, others ring no bells. Some you've met—but just on zoom—while others stand out as authors of papers you've read. Many of the listed people are leading voices or contributors to teknologiforståelse.

The sound of rustling jackets fills the atrium. From the smiles being shared, everyone seems to know each other. It makes you feel a bit insecure, but you tell yourself that it's your job to get to know these people and what they do. That's kind of cool, right?

Your insecurity is dulled when you realise how interesting it is that the vibe is so familiar. Hugs and handshakes are everywhere. Twice you hear the attendees exclaim to each other, "Welcome to the family reunion!" You sense that, truly, this is the village that raised the baby named 'teknologiforståelse'.

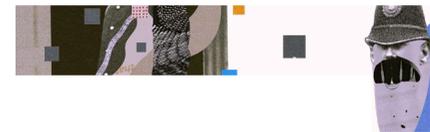
When lunch time comes around, you're determined to join the conversation. And so you do, without thinking about where you sit, or with who, or why.

The mood is light: cutlery clanking, spoons scraping, lively conversation.

After introducing yourself to the table with the obligatory description of your research, you bring up that, earlier, you heard people call this event a "family reunion" and that you've chewed on this all day. Your remark is followed by a brief but noticeable silence. Knowing glances are cast between your immediate neighbors.



The person across from you leans in, smiles, and says, "Well, yeah, but there are, of course, cliques and factions." It turns out you have inadvertently plopped yourself down with the researchers who themselves feel rather left out of the teknologiforståelse homecoming.



LETTERS FROM THE FIELD

Prediction. Anticipation. Prognosis. Future. Can you really predict crime? What is crime? Another day digging academic grime. I am struggling with flexibility. Interpretative flexibility, they said. Assembling pictures with analytical tools. The art of making words. Logopoeia. The hustle of convincing.

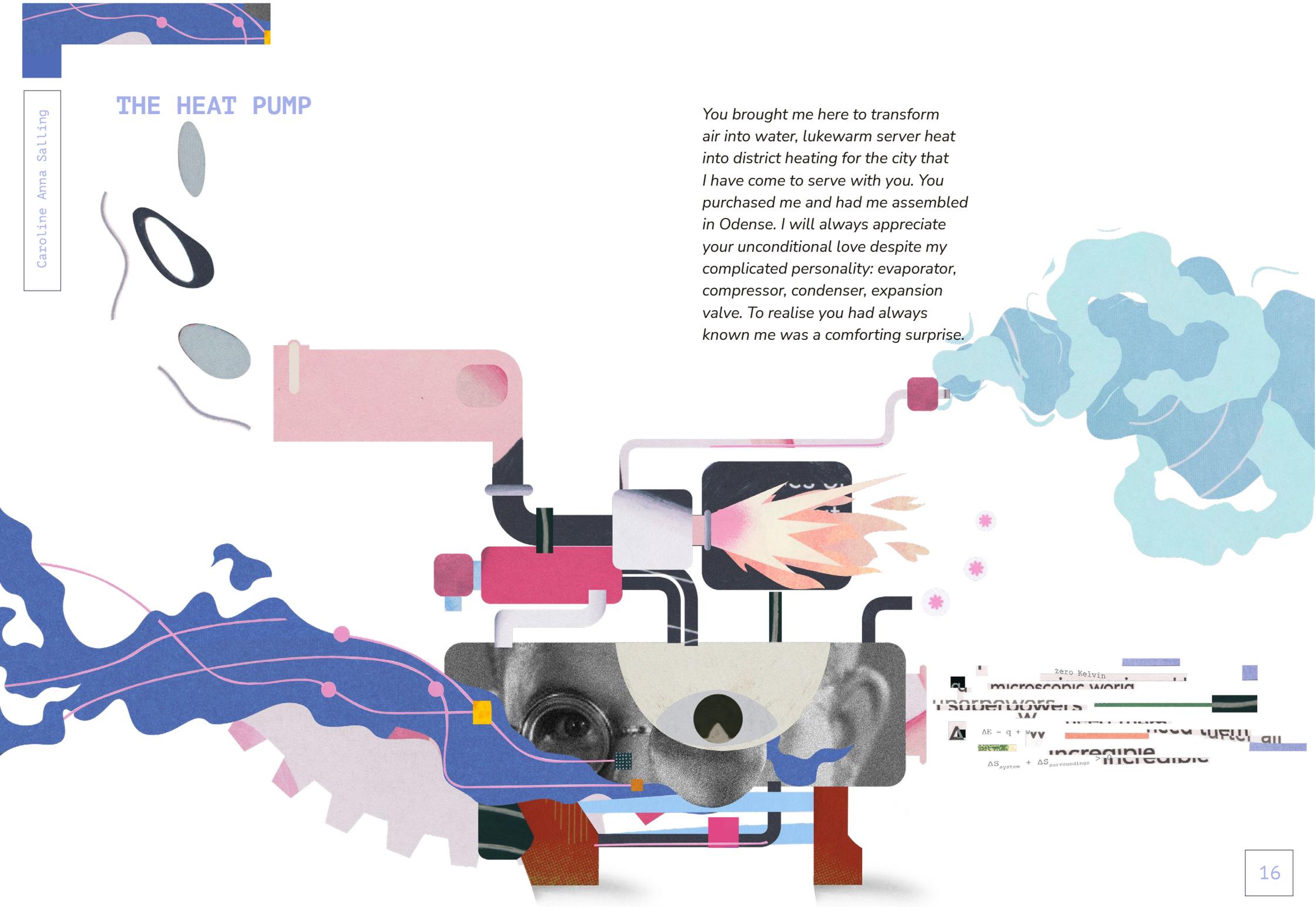
We entered the room. Several people waited for us. One was smiling. One was the bad cop. The rest of them were just sitting there with an undefined crack on their lips. That set the tone. Prediction, we said. This immediately electrified the atmosphere. There is no such thing as predictive policing, said the smiling man. The bad cop grimaced. The other two competed with the decorative plants in lethargy. If we wanted to go on with fieldwork, we had to re-invent our main concept. Logopoeia again? Inventing a new set of words, a new set of convincing arguments? Flexibility. Interpretative flexibility. Forgetting about prediction, anticipation, prognosis. Intelligence-led policing, this is what we do, declared the smiling man. A general feeling of relief dominated the room. Even the apathetic plants smiled. I can live with intelligence-led policing, I said to myself. We left the room with a promise of meeting again. Soon. Indefinable. We are going to check up on you, barked the bad cop while we were walking out. Nothing intelligent about that. I went out and lit up a cigarette. Saying goodbye to prediction. Anticipation. Prognosis. What about the future?

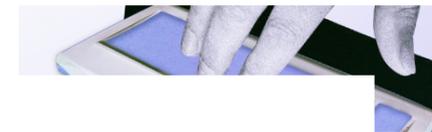
We met again. Some fresh faces. Same decorative plants. A new deal. Many smiles. The perfect corporate setting. Serious business. The Police. Several doors opened. Distributed satisfaction among all participants. Human and nonhuman. Smiling and barking. Fine presentations, informative answers. Underlying skepticism. But mutual feelings!



THE HEAT PUMP

You brought me here to transform air into water, lukewarm server heat into district heating for the city that I have come to serve with you. You purchased me and had me assembled in Odense. I will always appreciate your unconditional love despite my complicated personality: evaporator, compressor, condenser, expansion valve. To realise you had always known me was a comforting surprise.





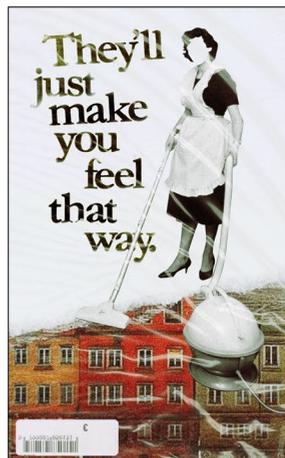
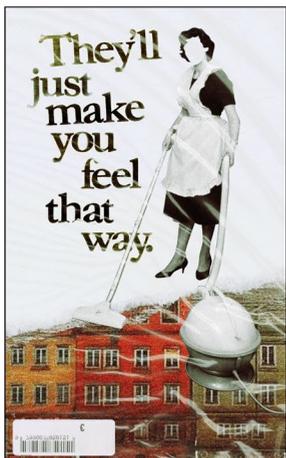
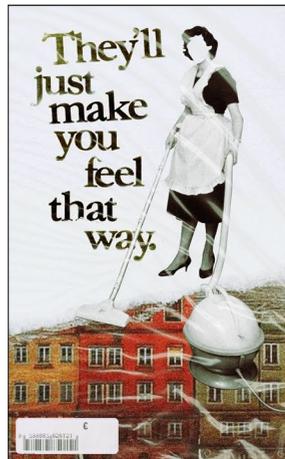
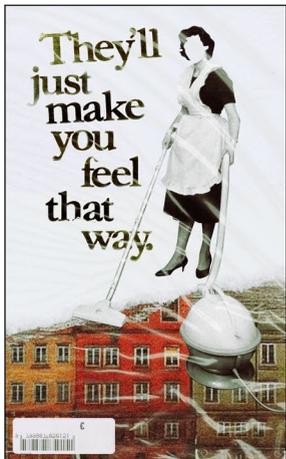
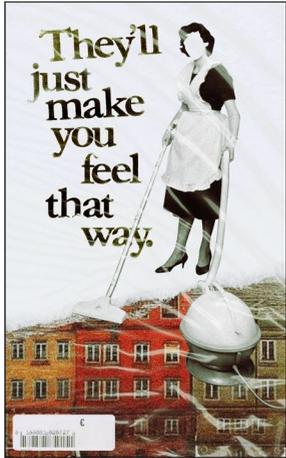
window opens with the terms and conditions of Min Sundhedsplatform. Oh no. You skim through the long text while you keep glancing at the time. You scroll to the approve button. Click. The portal's front page appears. It shows an overview of your upcoming appointments, and today's meeting with a button saying "Start meeting". That's lucky, you think and click it.

The computer shows a new window, but then a popup opens in the corner with text too small to read. What is this? You put your head closer to the screen to read the text. "Allow access to camera and microphone," it says with a button for allowing or declining. "Well, I'd better say yes to that," you think and click the "Allow" button. The video meeting opens and a text reads "Virtual waiting room" with more text underneath as well as three big buttons with icons. In the right side of the window, you see a small square with the video yourself. A calm but slightly mechanical male voice begins to read the text aloud,

"You have now joined the video meeting. The person(s) you have an appointment with will soon log on. However, some waiting time may occur. Please wait. Thank you." You lean back in your seat and look at the clock. It is now 10:00.

The minutes tick by, and the recorded voice repeats the message every now and then. You drum your fingers on the table and glance at the clock. Do you have time to go to the kitchen and make a cup of coffee before the doctor arrives? You'd better stay in front of the screen.

A few more minutes pass and, finally, something happens. The image turns black, and a few seconds later your doctor appears on the screen. You smile and say "hello".

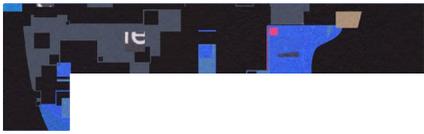


SOMETHING IS INVISIBLE IN THE STATE OF DENMARK

People – predominantly migrant women – working as housecleaners have been an invisible labor force, contracting work through word of mouth, social networks and personal references. Housecleaning concentrates most of the conceptual definitions of invisible work: workers are physically out of sight, cleaning private homes behind closed doors; their work is ignored or overlooked, culturally and economically devalued, and unprotected in various ways.

Digital housecleaning platforms claim to provide safe, easy and affordable cleaning, while simultaneously rendering this work formal and visible. Who sees what, though? Cleaners become visible to potential customers but invisible to each other. Their work is visible to the Tax Agency but invisible when it comes to benefit entitlement. Cleaners are seen as female, migrant, young, and self-employed. What is overlooked is that they are often treated as employees.

What is totally invisible is their lived experience, their ignored needs, and their unheard voices in the public debate.



DIGITAL CITIZEN

*The more flexible, the more stiff.
Rushing through the city to get a new phone, so
I can update NemID
to MitID.
When is a digital citizen?*



"Oh, but if only we could escape!"



SOMETHING IS ROTTEN IN THE STATE OF DENMARK

I have heard all kinds of different narratives and confidential stories in my fieldwork. The only term appearing more times than 'off the record' is 'housecleaning platforms'. This is OK since my project is on digital housecleaning platforms.

'Off the record' and 'you can't quote me on this one'. Specific platforms promoted or impeded. Policymakers patting stakeholders' backs. Diffused apathy. Platform lobbyists and public sector officials using the same terminology. Who gets invited to policymaking committees? What do minister X's schoolmates say about their past? How did public authority Y target unions and organized workers? Who collaborates with whom, why and how? How can knowledge of labor platforms come to the surface and what kind of knowledge is really sought after?

Digitalization of work, of welfare, of the public sector, it is supposed to be all about transparency, efficiency, fairness. But in the case of platform work, off the record, there is something rotten in the State of Denmark.



IMPLICATED IN THE DIGITAL STATE

In a café, in a city somewhere in Denmark, one of the world's most digitized countries, volunteers are helping citizens complete tasks online. A woman gets support with applying for residency, another with confirming her residence status. One woman's husband could not join her in the café due to attending a mandatory Danish course, so she brought his passport along with his phone to be able to prove his digital identity through an app. As she proves his identity the volunteer comments, "Well, I will have to close my ears and eyes now. This really isn't allowed."

Once a week the same volunteer comes to the café to help people. A lot of his work is informal digital support. Not because the problems are designated as 'digital' but because to solve their problems residents must go online. Solving problems involves public websites, identification apps, digital post, and online forms. People come here because they need guidance in navigating the state bureaucracy, which is both technically and organizationally complex.



In 2021 the Agency for Digital Government ("Digitaliseringsstyrelsen") and the Association of Municipalities in Denmark ("KL") published a report on digital inclusion. It showed that approximately one million adults living in Denmark (17-22%) should be considered digitally vulnerable. These people experience difficulties when completing tasks online that interact with the state authorities. Is the example of the woman with her husband's phone a case of digital inclusion in practice? Not if you ask the volunteer. When asked about digital inclusion, he says, "We are just helping with papers." He goes on to show us a spreadsheet of all the inquiries he has helped solve since 2016, many of them 'digital' in nature.

We are interested in the volunteer's modesty as much as the informal digital support in the café. We picture a modest volunteer as a shape-shifter located in the corner of a painting of a digitalized welfare state. Analogous to the cuttlebone, which is also a skull and a memento mori in Holbein's painting 'The Ambassadors' re-described by Winthereik & Verran (2012), the modest volunteer helps us see the digital state in a different light. In our painting of public digitalization, we see state authorities as people of the world.

They stand, full of themselves, surrounded by measuring instruments and self-service solutions. In the corner of the picture, the shape-shifter: a modest volunteer. He carries a significant and important load. He is a key actor, a main figure in the success of public sector digitalization in Denmark. But he is also a memento mori to the state. He reminds us that the digital state is vulnerable if its success rests on this unaccounted-for dependency.

The imagined picture tells us something important about the role of volunteers in a digitalized society: they are implicated actors in the ongoing, society-wide process of digitalization. Implicated actors, Adele Clarke tells us, are actors who are present, but silenced or simply ignored or made invisible in a social arena (Clarke, 2015: 93). Implicated actors are not present and cannot represent themselves or negotiate the conditions of their work, since their thoughts, opinions, and identities are not explored, sought out or valued by the dominant actors.



Volunteers are implicated actors in digital inclusion because municipalities rely on them to solve a number of tasks with digitally vulnerable citizens. The state relies on them, but they are not represented in state strategy and have no voice in the debate. Volunteers are just there to help but, increasingly, put themselves at risk as state authorities depend on them, not just for guidance, but for services that lie within legal jurisdiction as well. This begs

the question: Can the state authorities' be accountable in relation to its citizens when processes of digitalization depend on informal support work by volunteers?

What are citizens' rights in relation to volunteers who are 'just there to help' if the volunteer misleads them?

We suggest that the figure of 'the modest volunteer'

brings important analytical traction to analyses of digitalization processes if we consider him a shape-shifter that shows how state digitalization depends on free labor that can be risky for the people involved.

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