

«APRIL 2020»

## Drawing An Autoethnography In An Exceptional Time

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This January I moved to Slovenia for my exchange year at the University of Ljubljana. In the first three weeks I attended a language class. Every morning I sat down next to my awesome classmate who is from China. Most mornings he would be rather upset and tell some news about the situation in China and the new Coronavirus. Me, much more worried about the confusing grammar of Slovene or about the administrative workload my first days in Ljubljana entailed, would try to calm him down. "Listen, the whole world is talking about this virus, I'm sure there is a lot of money spent on it so they will find a vaccine very soon" or "well but it's just like some flu, isn't it?".

And since these days everything somehow changed in ways that I never imagined.

(Naturally I drastically changed my latter opinion, this statement at the moment of writing serves as an alarming marker of individuals that fell for conspiracy theory; it unites anti-lockdown protesters in different countries, fueled by weird online videos and some powerful men. And although we are months away from having a vaccine, in these circles it is already protested as an unacceptable infringement of fundamental rights and many people claim that they will never get vaccinated).

In the last weeks the sensation of witnessing some remarkable chapter in history was widespread. This came with the stunning effect that in media, politics and the private realm COVID-19 was and still is the dominant, if not exclusive, topic of discussion. A lot of content was and is produced and many people attempted to record this situation somehow.

In this time I started one paper diary, one fieldwork diary, a file with the name "diary" on my computer and a project of drawing a diary for one week.

The only thing even remotely successful are the drawings, as the other diaries have almost no entries.

Here I present the drawings that I started on Monday, April 6th and followed until the weekend after, which happened to be Easter. Using them like ethnographic fieldnotes I then take parts of the drawings and re-arrange them to discuss different subjects that seem important.

Another form of diary is the Facebookgroup "Vsakdanje življenje v casu krone", in which we collected everyday corona impressions among a class of anthropology students. There I posted my drawings after a week and wrote some texts next to them. Some snippets of these texts are added in this document, as well as thoughts from my various diaries. The rest is written in the week of May 18, when Slovenia declared the pandemic as over. Thus, the document gives insight into my thoughts on the situation broadly in the months of April and May. Why am I describing this so closely?

What seems remarkable to me is that once I made these drawings of a week, my attitude towards them changes almost every week. Small details that seemed important then went to totally unimportant to important again, and vice versa. I'm sure this also will happen to this document, it might at some points seem tedious or unimportant, and in other times serve as an interesting memory to an exceptional time.



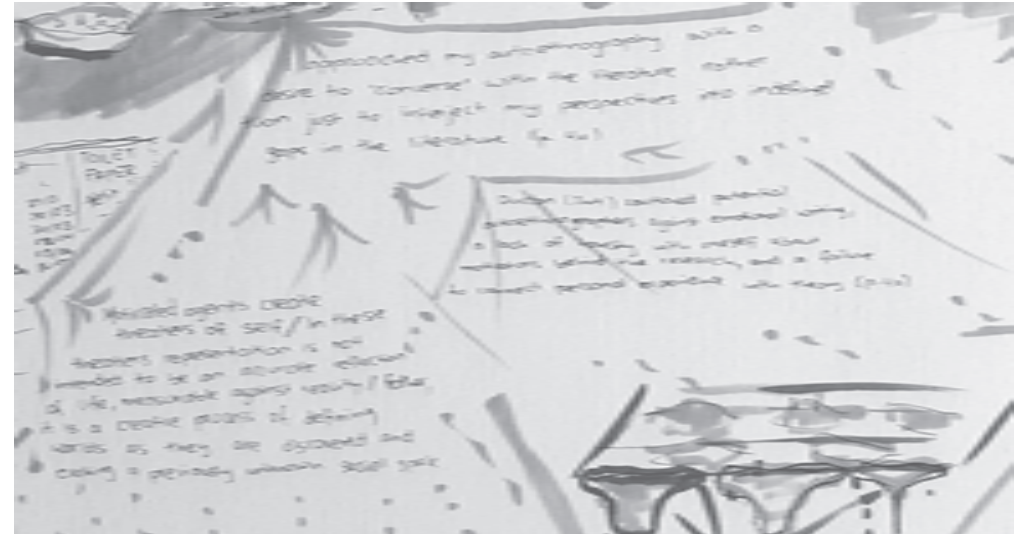
Since its outbreak, the most common global reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic was to practice social distancing, thus whenever possible to stay at home and avoid personal contacts. This goes counter to the most widespread ethnographic methods, like participant observation or personal interviews. Scholars were quick to react and find creative ways of nevertheless conducting fieldwork, most of them entail online research (see Lupton 2020).

An alternative to this is autoethnography, and the following pages document my first approach to this method.

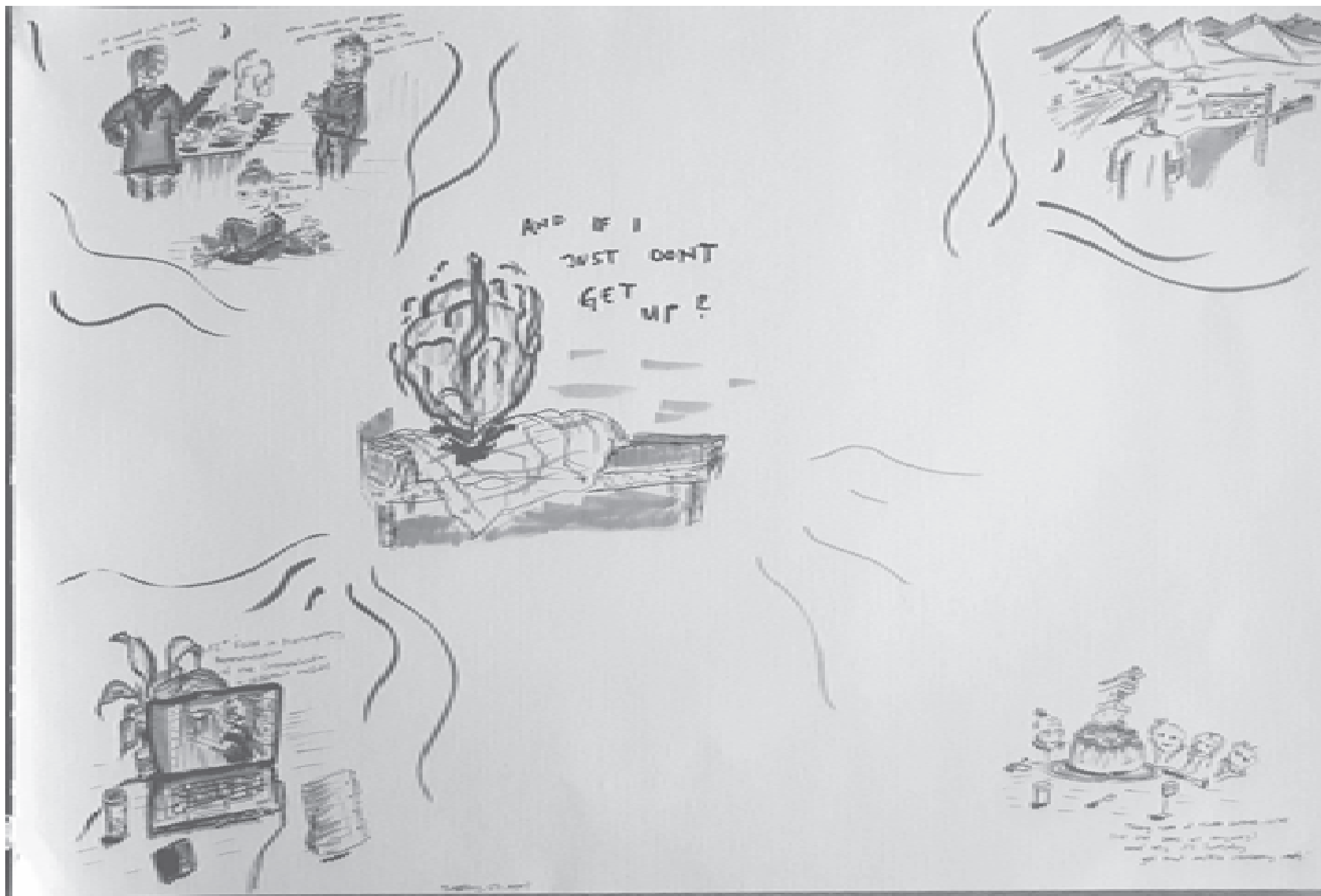
Autoethnography "is an intriguing and promising qualitative method that offers a way of giving voice to personal experience for the purpose of extending sociological understanding" (Wall 2008: 38). Ellis et. al. point out that autoethnography, "as method, attempts to disrupt the binary of science and art. Autoethnographers believe research can be rigorous, theoretical, and analytical and emotional, therapeutic, and inclusive of personal and social phenomena" (2011).

Thus I think this approach is very suitable with the method of ethnographic drawing. Taking drawn fieldnotes instead of written ones can help to observe situations and objects more closely and represent them in new, sometimes unusual ways. Anthropologists such as Tim Ingold, Michael Taussig or Andrew Caussey have pointed out advantages of this method. Personally, drawing instead of writing or typing was a welcome change in my "quarantine routines" and helped me to cope with the situation.

One further point is, as Michaela Schäuble points out, that the "reason drawings, cartoons, and animated images are so appealing for anthropology is their capacity to visualize situations and events for which no actual images exist" (Schäuble 2018: 16). Accordingly, my drawing fitted more smoothly in most situations in the everyday life of our apartment than for example taking a picture. And in the drawings I also tried to express feelings or thoughts that would be more complicated to capture on camera or in a written text.

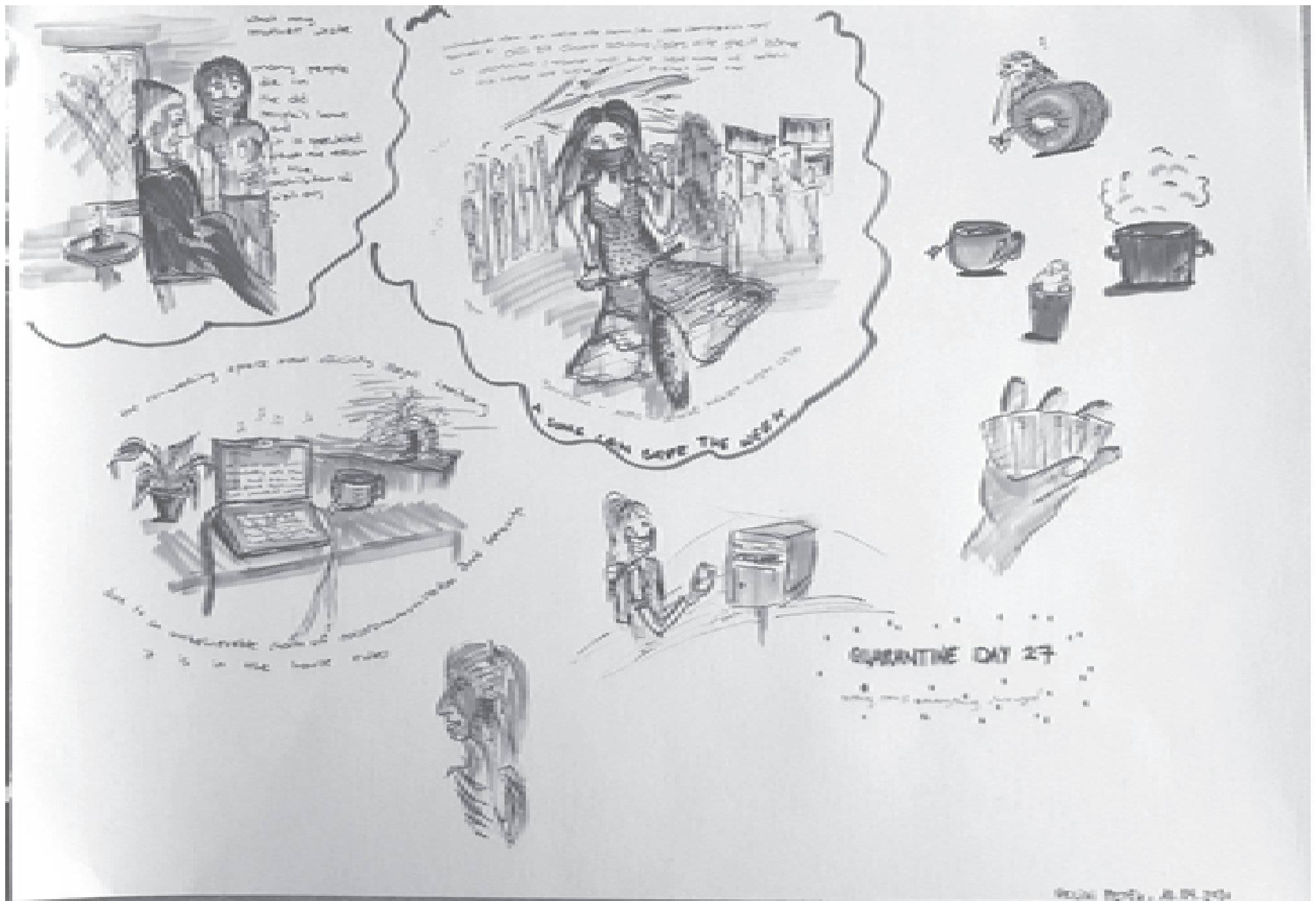






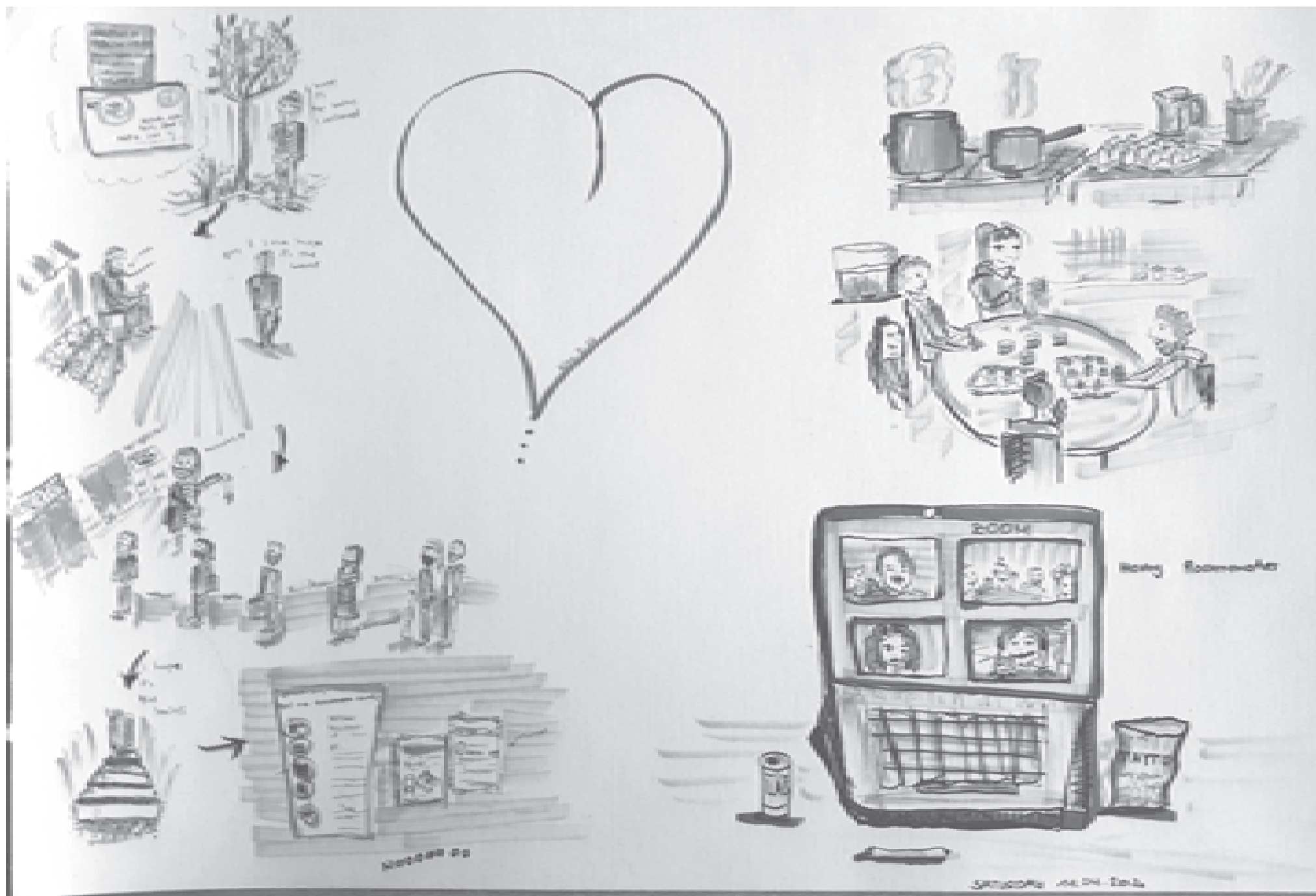






Quarantine Day 27, 10.29.2020

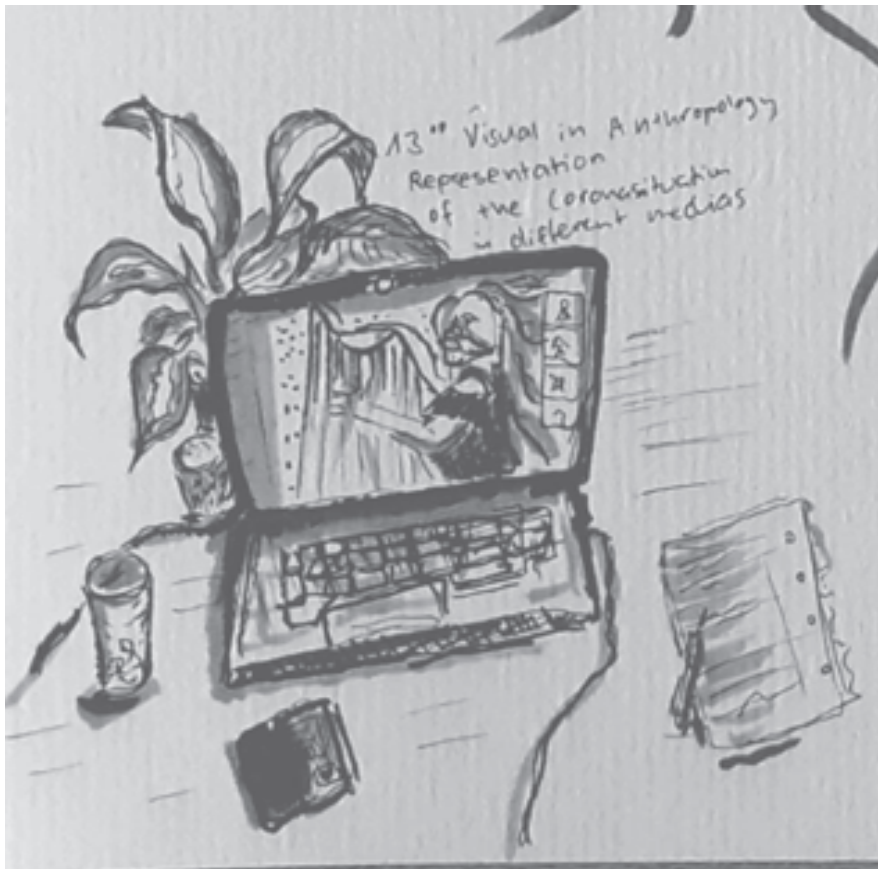




online classes became a new normality surprisingly quickly

pants are not mandatory but  
teachers and classmates sometimes sound like robots  
and freeze

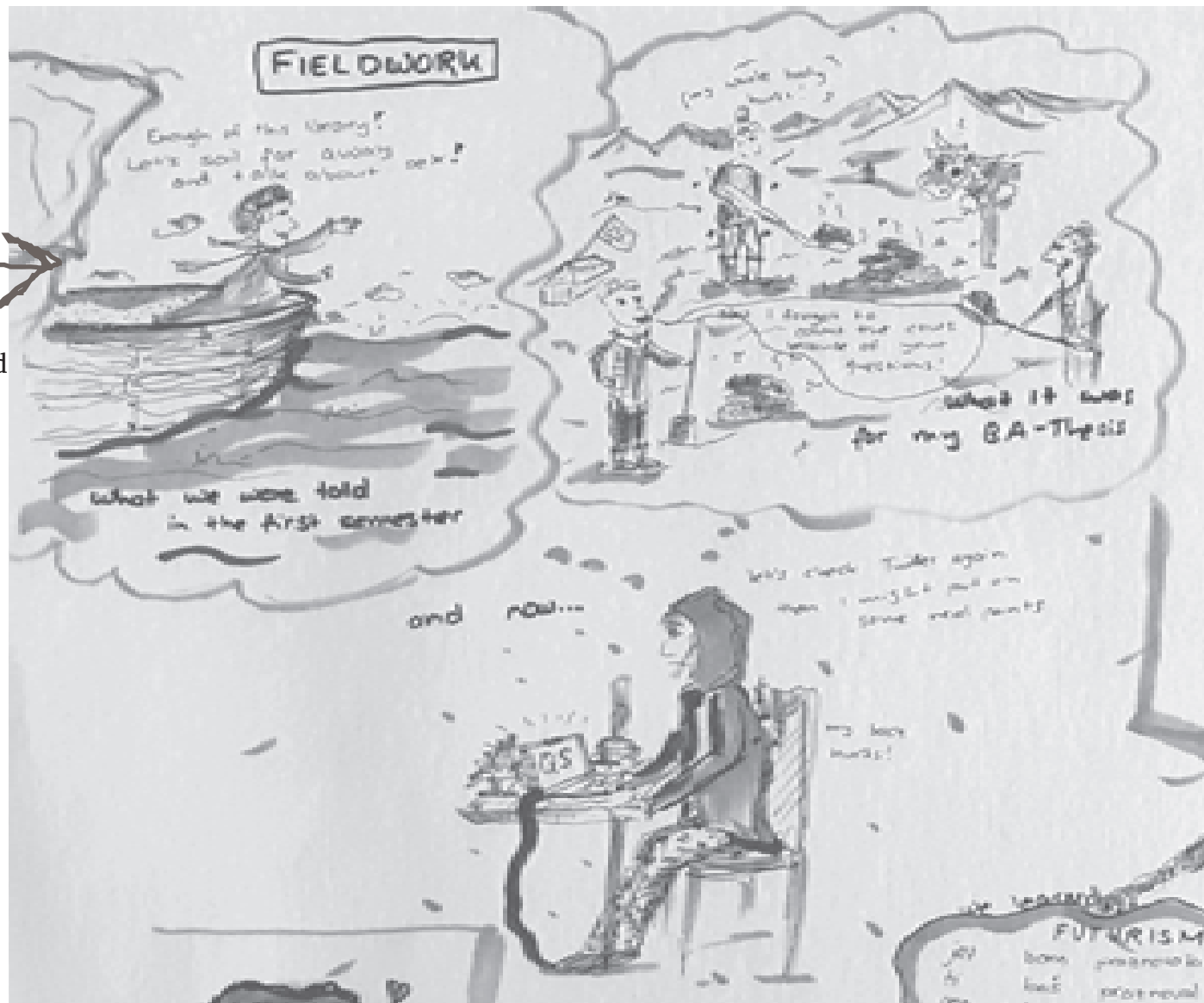
the wifi is not very good in our flat so we try  
to coordinate our internet use and when many people  
have class it doesn't really work for anyone  
which makes the whole endeavor quite exhausting



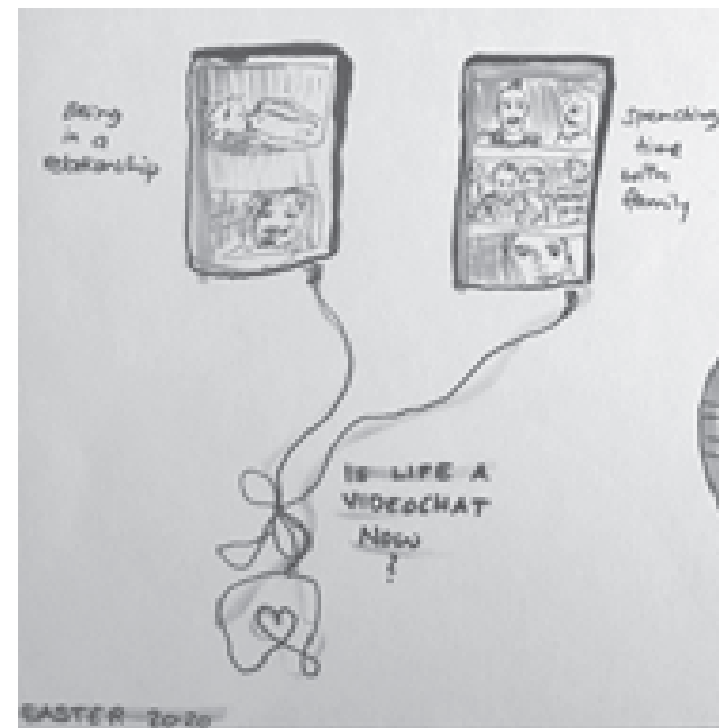
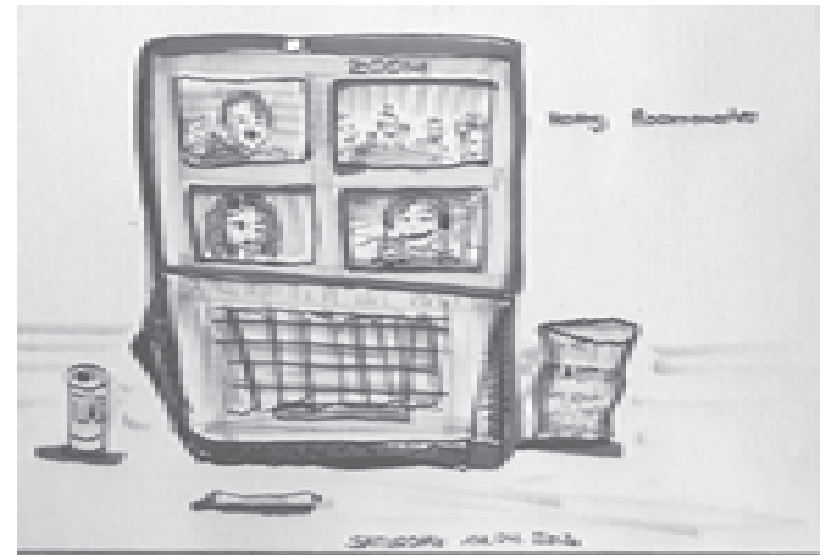
but  
especially in the first weeks it meant a lot to see the faces of  
other people and to discuss the subjects. because I mostly  
attend classes with exchange students (and many of them  
went home) people from all over Europe join the meetings  
and we hear different news and learn about specific local  
situations.

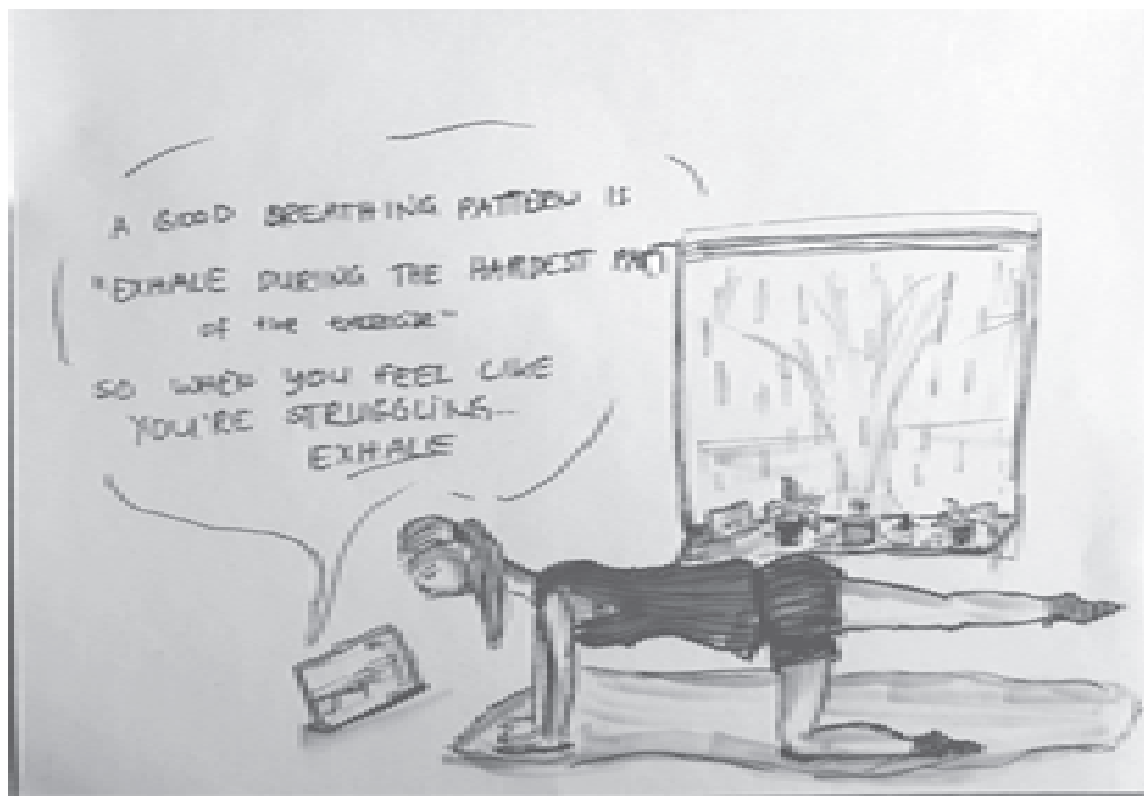
but it is not only online classes, most of life now seems to be happening on screen

Margaret Mead



reading news, analyses of the situation  
and  
maintaining social relationships





... and sport.

I was so happy it rained that day, that is why it is on the picture (from the first week in May). In April, at the same time as I felt that a lot is changing and falling apart also many things seemed frozen. What was and still is hard to grasp for me is how disembodied this whole month of crisis felt. I was not in pain, nothing fell apart around me, the best I could do for the people around me was to stay at home.

And this was reflected in the weather, April was a constant string of sunny mild days. Reminding us of the much greater danger lurking and being ignored, the climate change happening right now, the forests slowly drying up. The thunderstorm on the first of May was a relieve and at the same time as things are slowly opening up again, the weather started to be more diverse, some rain, some sun, some storms.



another thing moved into our screens are online exams  
the first one in our apartment was a latin exam of my flatmate

added to the normal nervousness caused by exams are now concerns about the technical aspects and the internet connection (for example in one exam program, if you are disconnected for three minutes you wont pass)

now it is May and there are more exams, still they are a thing of big excitement and care, because everyone has to stay out of the internet and since we of course also care a lot about each other and our studies

the situation is not only exceptional for us but also our teachers because with no warning they had to overthrow their whole teaching style, schedules and of course also the way they test our knowledge. while some teachers try and adapt their questions - so that you have to think more instead of learning by heart (because it is much easier to cheat in an online exam) - others stick to their methods and employ surveillance techniques that make Big Brother look feeble.

me (and my teachers) are lucky that in anthropology we don't have exams usually and we just write our essays more or less in peace (the problem to solve there is access to literature, since libraries had to close, another subject...).

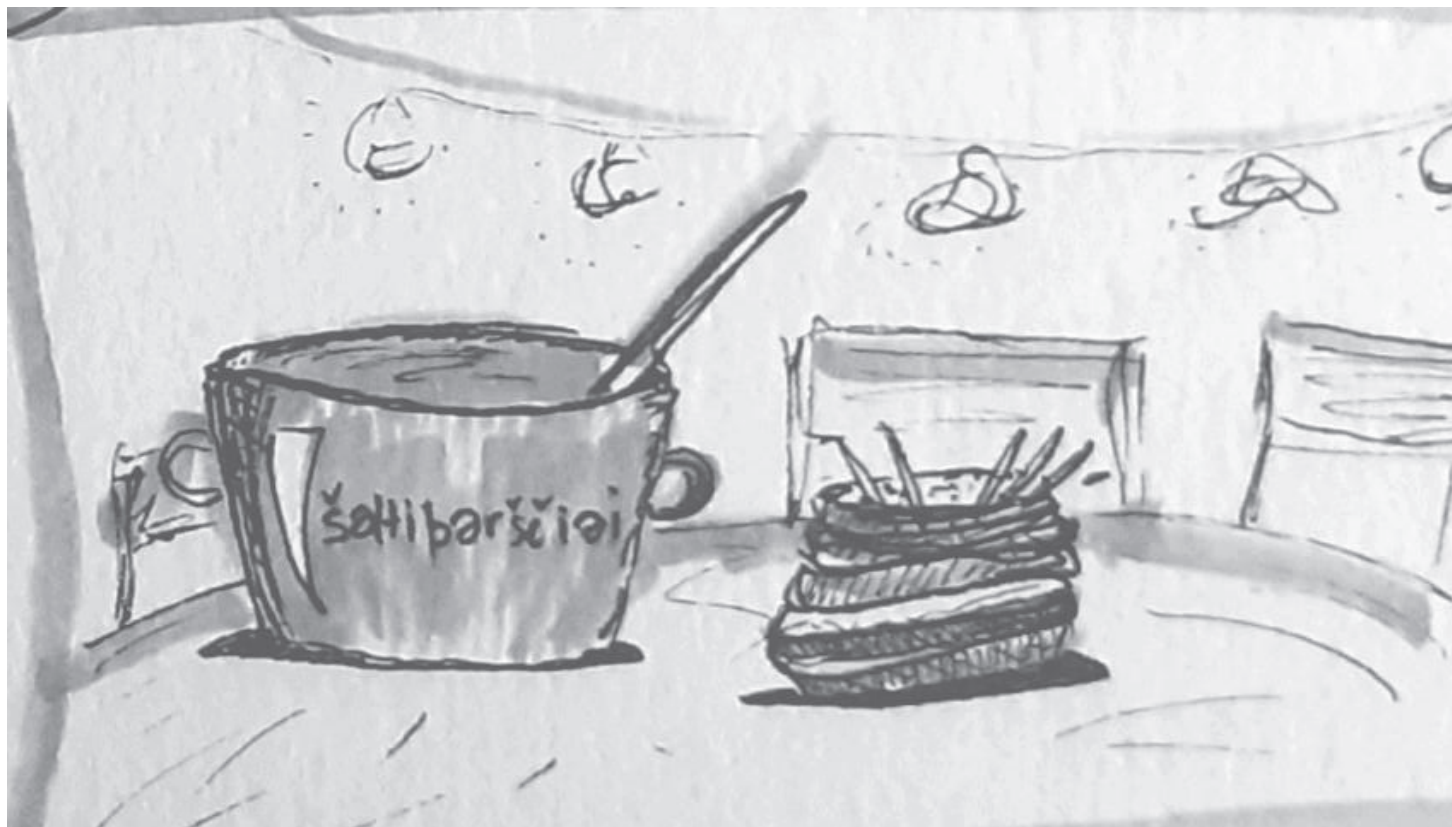
one effect of the screen fixated life is the greater appreciation of non-screen-based-activities. preparing food and cooking, simple household chores or walks (sometimes even jogging) are given special attention, so they are an important parts of my drawings.



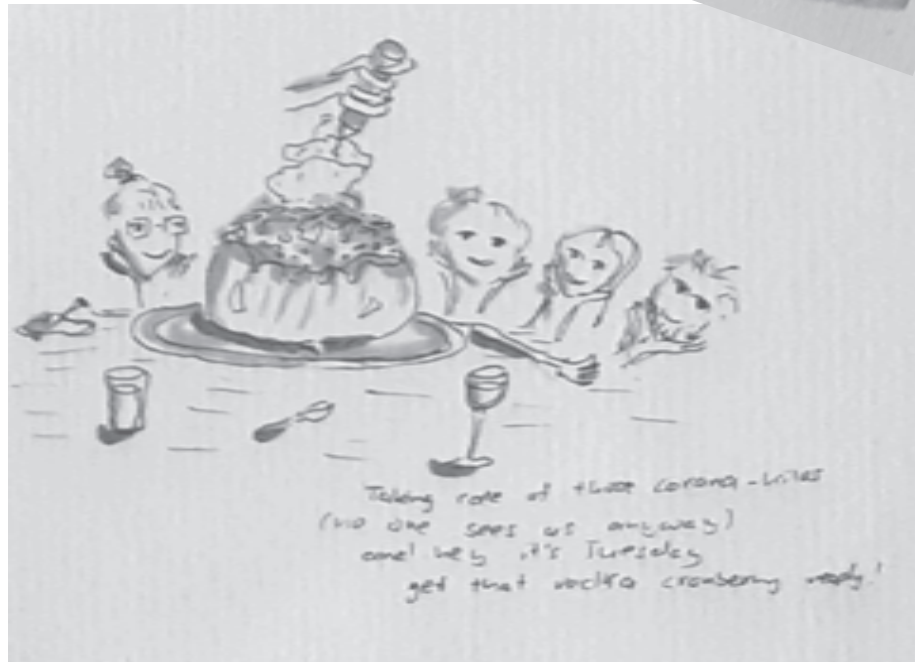


especially cooking is nice, because for me it is connected to my flatmates  
while we have quite different daily rhythms and rituals (this is a good thing about quarantine, people that work better at night can now without many problems adjust their day to this)  
for the last two months we spent almost all evenings together, cooking elaborate meals and enjoying that we have at least some good people around us that are not trapped in that little screen

coming from different countries we try our best to put our feelings into English.  
Talking about complex topics or specific vegetables, not always easy!  
The good thing is that we get to eat food from different countries, like the pink soup from Lithuania we had that evening.









while we are in some senses quite homogeneous in being European students in a similar age, world open and rich enough to do this exchange

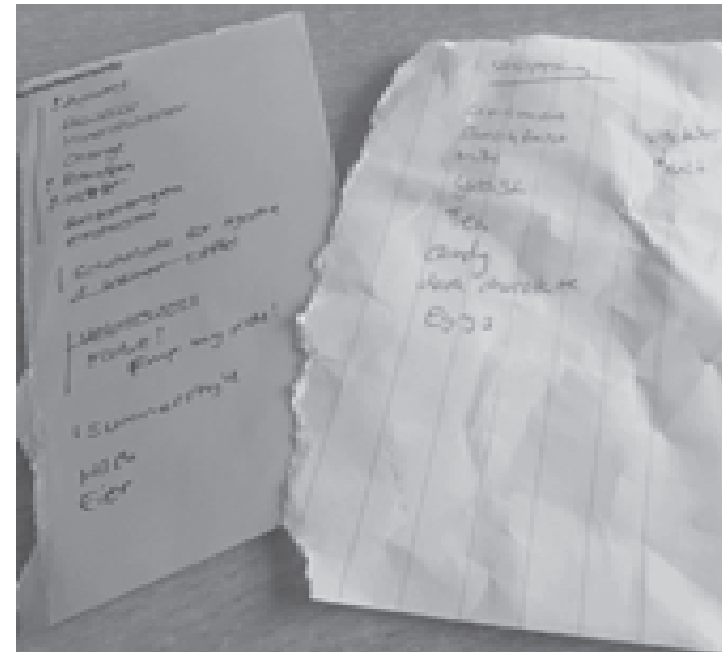
we come from different academic backgrounds and have many basic discussions fueled by the pandemic that coldly shows the deep flaws in our systems

I'm sure  
we have saved the world  
a hundred times  
in our weird little kitchen



our landlord showing a possibly new tenant around in midst of our attempts to carefully follow physical distancing... led to some angry reactions from our side and we learned some valuable lessons about the power difference of owners of properties and the rest

also shopping for groceries of course got a whole new attention  
as the only activity connected to the outside  
and accompanied by a whole new sets of rituals and bodily movements



this is a good example for the changing meaning of these drawings  
while in that week the measurements of wearing gloves and masks were fairly new and thus seemed somehow complicated and in a way exciting (to stand in a shop full with masked people, you have to get used to that!)  
it now seems normal  
when after some time we stopped wearing gloves it felt weird to not wear them once and now it's normal again  
I think it is a good example for how quickly we adapt, much more than any of us imagined, I guess, or why are we struggling so hard with some changes to prevent climate change or that would make our world just a little brighter and fairer?



Diary, 6. April

17:15. went shopping (very elaborate techniques of the body now, how we all stop a few meters in front of the store and put on gloves and wrap all kinds of tissue around our nose and mouths (the trash in the street changed to single gloves and lonely masks). Now also refined techniques for example to weigh your vegetables are needed, because the little stickers can ruin your plastic gloves by putting holes in them.

Draw the guy in the store behind me, who pulled his jumper all up under his cool sunglasses, on the counter a single bottle of wine and the two coins to pay for it.





Facebook post in group Vsakdanje življenje v casu krone, 10. April

#corasmus2020: while we are doing quite fine with toilet paper, since a week we struggle to buy yeast. sometimes it's sold out, sometimes also the fact that we don't speak enough slovene doesn't help. another failed attempt yesterday

today I read an article that mentioned sold-out yeast. it discussed the weird attempt of some privileged people to see the crisis as a chance for self-improvement, a chance to read books / learn a language / finally get in form / bake your own bread (hence sold-out yeast)...

while it is important to find some ways to stay mentally sane, this desire to use even a global health crisis as chance of self-improvement with the according mindset of "I achieve thus I am" has many unhealthy aspects and feels like a mad joke for people who are working in precarious situations right now, worried for the health of the people around them etc. (Linnartz 2020).

anyway, for me and my roomies we need the yeast to make our own pizza dough. we cook huge elaborate dinners every evening because it's a nice activity for us to bond, because cooking feels great after a day of online-lectures, because we eat our feelings and gain a million corona kilos, because we need something to go with the gin tonic.

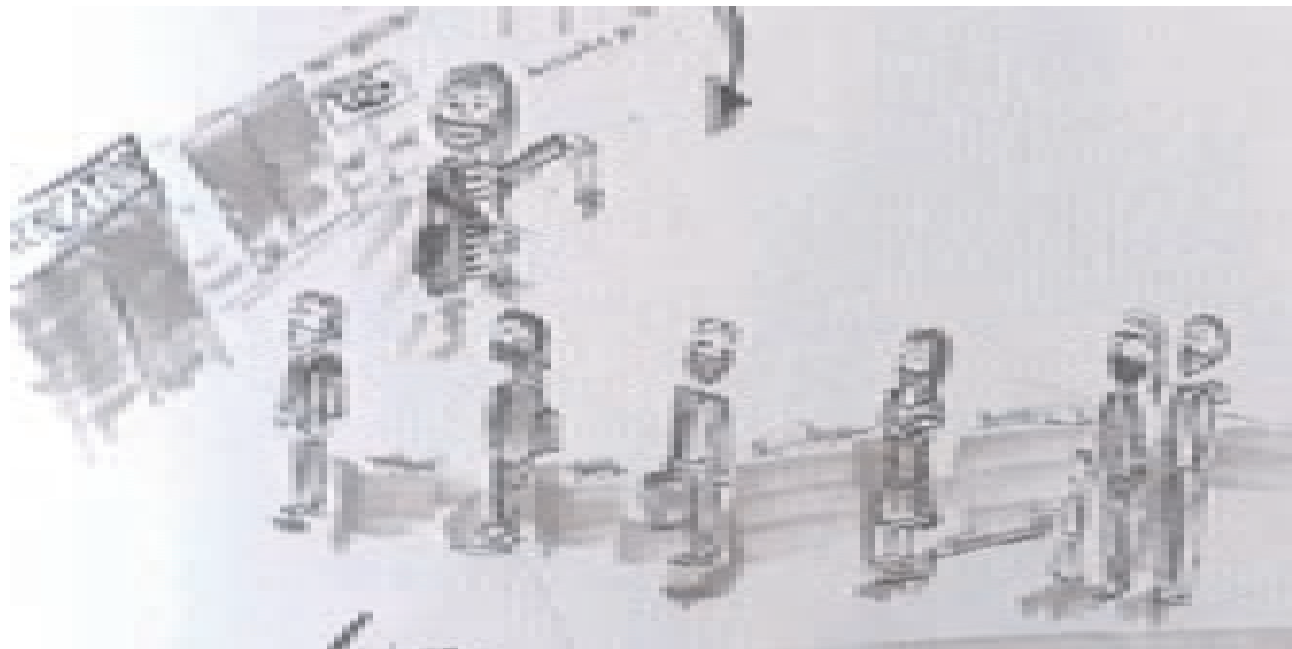
Slovenian Press Agency (STA), 13. May: Food delivery apps and bread baking in spotlight amid lockdown. Survey by Nutrition Institute, Slovenia

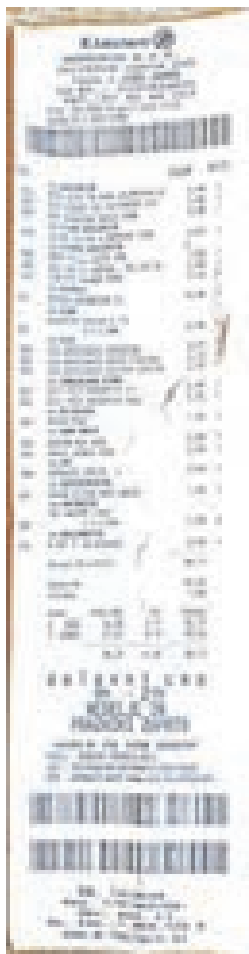
"Whereas Slovenians bought groceries multiple times per week in the pre-corona times, the epidemic has changed their shopping routines with most going to the shops once per week or even less frequently. A total of 60% are equipped with a grocery list and more than 40% have stepped up storing extra food".

"Food has increased in value with home growing and homemade meals getting more attention. More than a third have been consuming more food during the epidemic. A similar share have also reported throwing out less food".

"More than 60% have been baking bread at home at least once a week with a third of those saying they will keep up the habit".

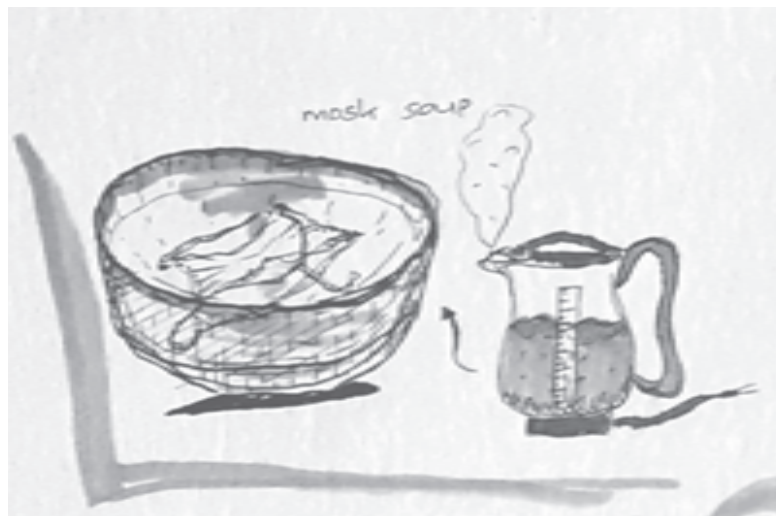
"The institute thinks that the epidemic will have a long-lasting impact on Slovenia's food supply and dietary habits".

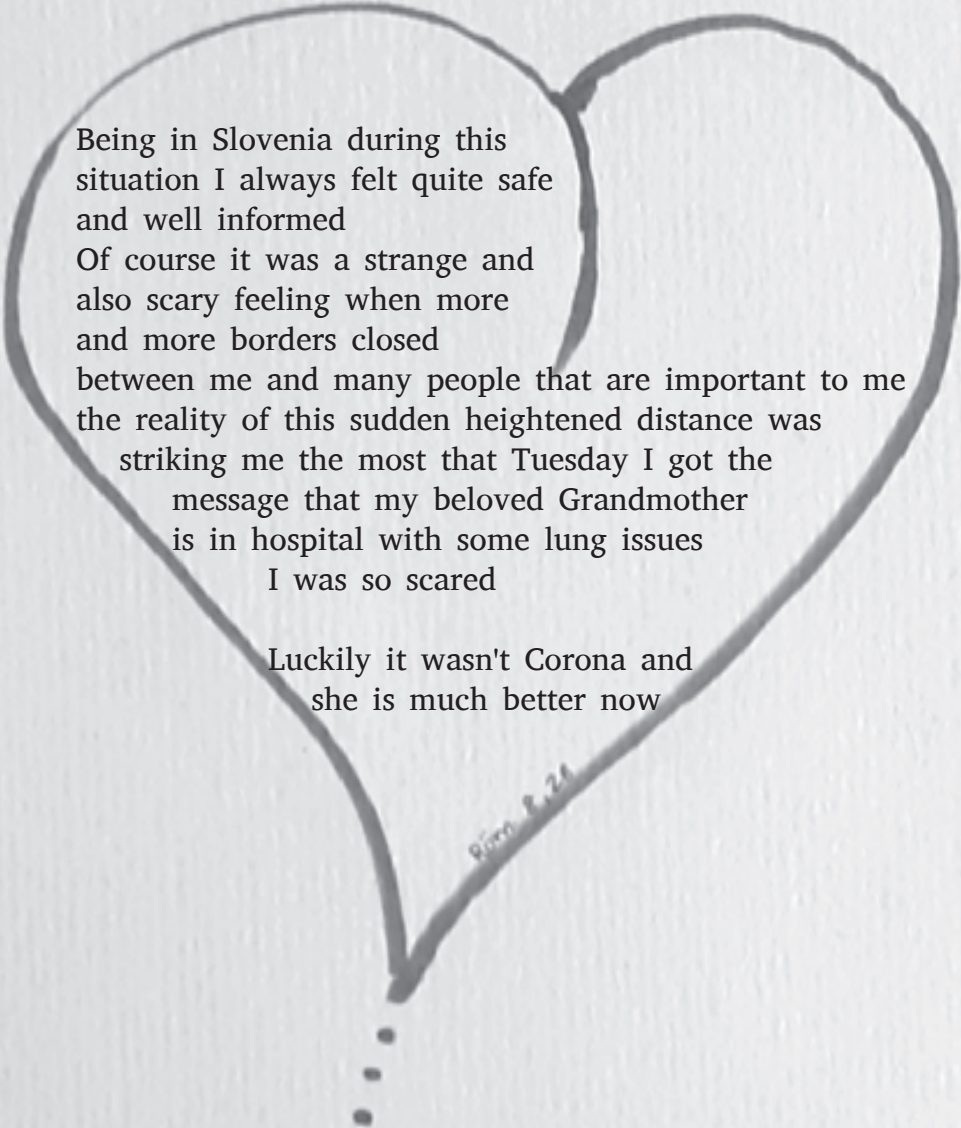




Diary, 26. April

Because at the moment there are no big stressful events I make small events big and stressful. For example a call scheduled in advance. Or going to the shop. Because of this, I also dream about shopping often, and I am always confused when people don't wear masks or gloves or I dream of a lot of people crammed in one place in the shop and get nervous.



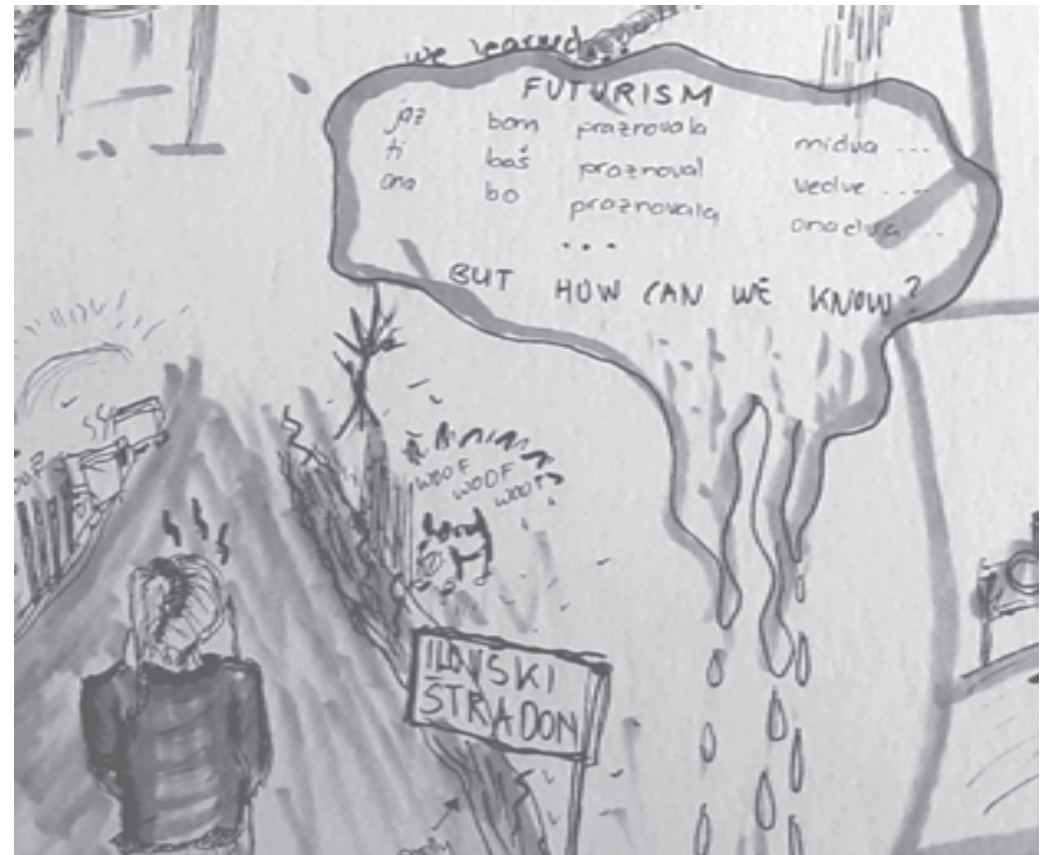


Being in Slovenia during this  
situation I always felt quite safe  
and well informed

Of course it was a strange and  
also scary feeling when more  
and more borders closed  
between me and many people that are important to me  
the reality of this sudden heightened distance was  
striking me the most that Tuesday I got the  
message that my beloved Grandmother  
is in hospital with some lung issues  
I was so scared

Luckily it wasn't Corona and  
she is much better now





after that language course in January I also take some further Slovene classes

so we study future tense when

everything seems to crumble

The good thing about drawing - for example compared to photographing - is that you can show the things that are not directly visible but still influence your mood, your day, your week.

In this case it was a song.

Post in Facebook Group Vsakdanje življenje v casu krone, 20. April

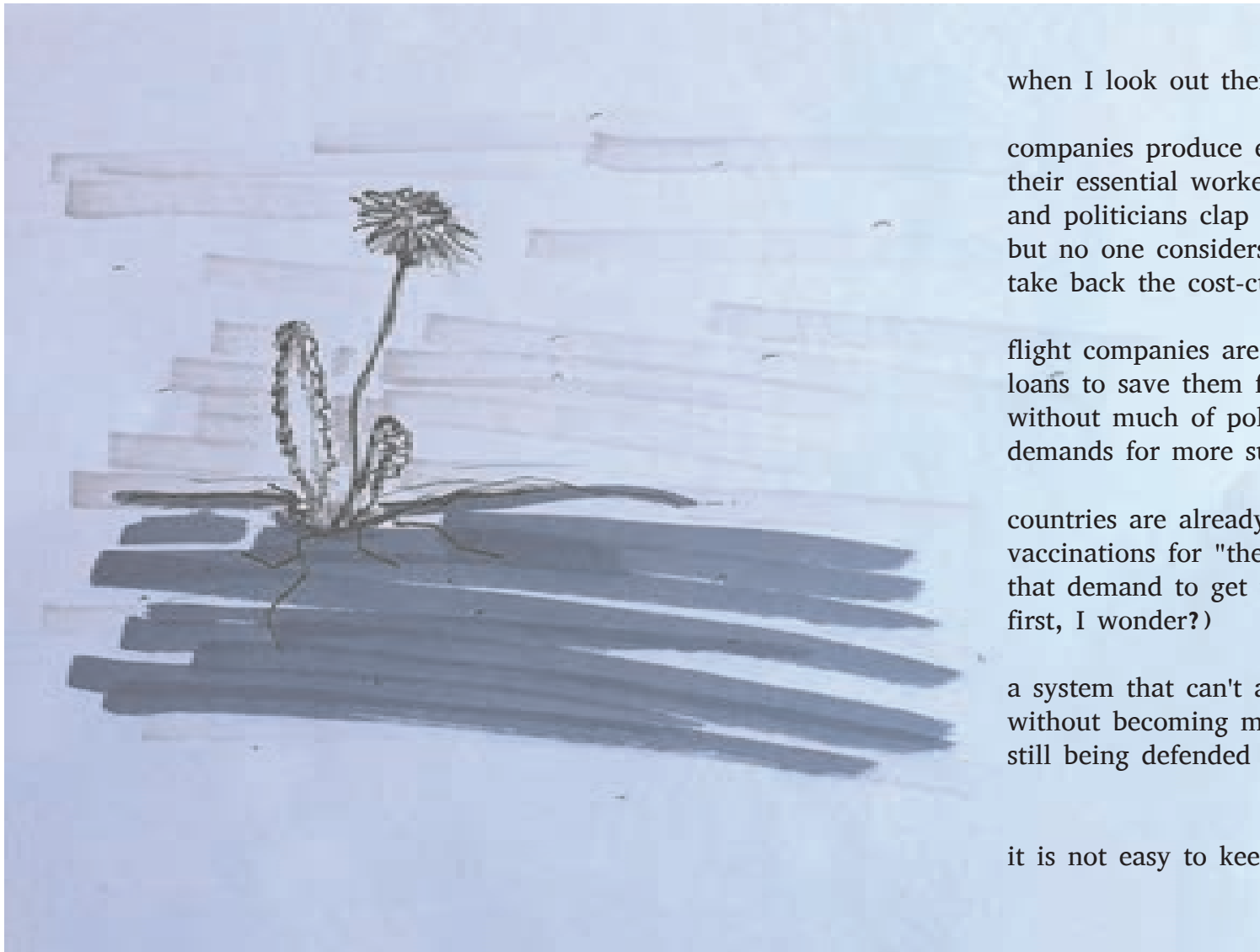
a song about seeing a beautiful person on a bike and finding hope in midst of protesting people, tear gas and water cannons.

I suppose around a year ago we started the climate protests?! Those long marches with parole singing and everything were never my favorite thing but now I miss them. At least it was loud, somehow embodied, and physically close to many other people with the same ideas.

Now I just sit behind in front of my laptop and hope that people are not serious when writing about "getting back to normality soon". The pandemic shows some serious and deadly flaws in this system and it's not a "normality" I wish to go back to.



"The questions most important to autoethnographers are: who reads our work, how are they affected by it, and how does it keep a conversation going?" (Ellis et. al. 2011).



when I look out there and see how

companies produce expensive advertisements to thank  
their essential workers  
and politicians clap for the health personnel  
but no one considers raising those people's salaries or  
take back the cost-cutting measures of the last years

flight companies are being supported with generous  
loans to save them from grounding  
without much of political debate and without any  
demands for more sustainable behavior

countries are already making deals to get possible  
vaccinations for "their people first" (who are the people  
that demand to get the solution to a global pandemic  
first, I wonder?)

a system that can't afford to slow down even a month  
without becoming more destructive than it already is  
still being defended

it is not easy to keep on hoping

so while politicians are playing their power games and economic actors try to raise their profits

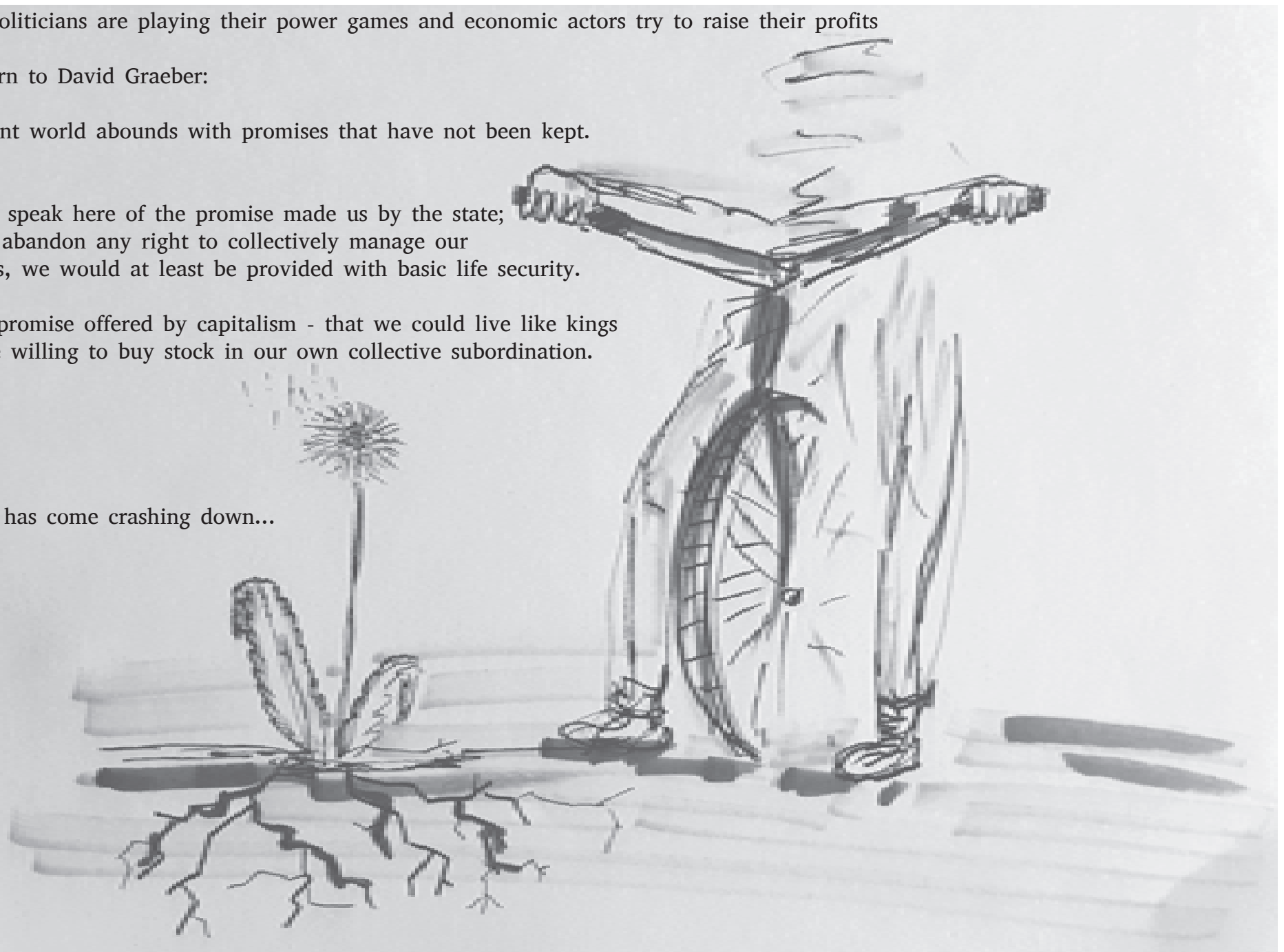
I prefer turn to David Graeber:

"The present world abounds with promises that have not been kept.

One might speak here of the promise made us by the state; that if we abandon any right to collectively manage our own affairs, we would at least be provided with basic life security.

Or of the promise offered by capitalism - that we could live like kings if we were willing to buy stock in our own collective subordination.

All of this has come crashing down...



... What remains is  
what we are able to promise one another.  
Directly. ...





... Without the mediation of economic and political bureaucracies.  
The revolution begins by asking: what sort of promises do free men and women make to one another, and how, by making them, do we begin to make another world?" (Graeber 2008: 4-5).

«Za 1. maj solidarnosti, ne pa krize in ustrahovanja! V petek v spomin na okrutno umorjene anarhosindikaliste v Chicagu konec 19. stoletja praznujemo 1. maj, simbolno točko globalnega delavskega upora.

This year 1st May marks a beginning of a new wave of economic and social crisis unleashed as a consequence of the struggle against the coronavirus pandemic. The response of the current and of the future governments to this crisis can already be easily predicted: budget cuts, austerity, state sanctioned robbery of people as a means to ensure the survival of the banks, repression, populism, suppression of those that think differently and the significant limitation of our freedoms.

No matter how much they will try to convince us in the coming weeks - employing both the carrot and the stick - that the plan that is outlined above represents the only possible way out from the crisis, we must not forget that another world is possible to be not only imagined but realized as well. It is up to us to take this moment as an opportunity for a fundamental reflection on what kind of society we want to live in. Do we want to live according to the script that the authorities have written for us or do we want to write the script by ourselves and through a self-organized and grass-roots effort? It is up to us to re-inscribe to the global dictionary the words such as mutual aid, solidarity and anti-authoritarianism. We cannot count on anyone else, except on ourselves, our friends, our neighbours and on all those comrades that we are yet to encounter through the struggle itself.»

- komunal.org, 28. April 2020

«Despite poor weather and the ban on public gathering which has been in place for two months due to the coronavirus epidemic, several thousand protesters took to the streets of Slovenian cities once again on Friday, expressing dissatisfaction with the government's policies.

For the fourth consecutive Friday, protesters rang their bells and honked horns, shouting paroles like "thieves" and "we won't give up freedom".

Initiative Slovenia Wake Up and a Facebook group supporting the whistleblower who revealed the political meddling have also invited people to take to the streets. Some protesters criticised the government as lacking transparency, being corrupt and stealing taxpayers' money.

Meanwhile, the protests gained an environmental aspect after legislative changes were passed restricting the involvement of NGOs in procedures to acquire environmental and construction permits.

The 8 March Institute meanwhile warned that the measures designed by the government to address the challenges of the coronavirus epidemic further deepened hardships of many and deepened the existing balance of power. They say that the government had ignored experts and has subjected the police and military forces to itself.

The Movement for Social Responsibility meanwhile wonders whether the government will stop the "ideological battles" against the media, intellectuals, the judiciary and civil organisations.»

-Total Slovenian News, 15. May 2020

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Ljubljana, 26. May 2020