Helen Knowles interviewed by curator Paul Luckraft, 9 December 2016

**Paul Luckraft:** Can I begin by asking you to outline the central premise you wanted to investigate in this project?

**Helen Knowles:** I suppose it was the culpability of a non-human entity. The reason I landed on this relates to my research into financial practices during my studies at Goldsmiths. I started to realise how much automated technology was driving many aspects of the world. One key moment was reading an article by Susan Schuppli on the use of algorithms in drone warfare. She talks about algorithms that are learning on the job, and their behaviour changes. There were other ideas I came across once my project was under way, such as Benjamin Bratton's recent writing about the planetary-scale computational 'stack'. It's kind of an abstract sovereignty, a structure we can't quite comprehend. So, it was literally a case of me reading the Schuppli article, and thinking 'Oh, maybe I can put an algorithm on trial'. I then started visiting courts, including the Old Bailey. When I visited courts what struck me the most was the democratic process of justice. Of course there are many problems, such as whether too many members of the legal profession are from public schools and the gender balance. But it's amazing just to walk in off the street and see the process of justice occurring in person.

**PL:** So this was a new context for you to be in? You'd not studied law?

**HK:** No. I was very much a layperson. Because of the opaqueness of what an algorithm is, I was struck by how useful the context of the court could be. I'm really interested in how you can open up a subject and make it understandable and tangible.

**PL:** What was your motivation for having the algorithm as an object, and in some sense a 'persona', in the project?

**HK:** I think there is something very sinister about the algorithm as an invisible abstraction, something that is hard to grasp. But at the same time this technology is reliant on physical servers, linked by cables. This materiality is a subject which artists like Trevor Paglen have made great work about. When I first staged the piece as a performance at Oriel Sycharth Gallery I approached Daniel Dressel, a fellow artist at Goldsmiths. Daniel had built a computer in a transparent box as his own project, quite separate from mine. I found the aesthetic of it very beautiful, very precise, and asked him if he would be interested in showing it in the performance.

**PL:** Were the people who took part in Sycharth the same people who appeared in the later film version?

**HK:** Yes. Laurie Elks, the male lawyer, I knew as I was living in the same house. Oana Labontu Radu I found through writing to all the law schools. I found Mark Frost who played the judge through a random meeting on the train and fell for his sonorous voice! It was then a case of getting together and working out how we were going to script it. The idea to then adapt the performance into a film came from discussions with tutors at Goldsmiths. Although it is my first significant video it felt a very natural step, as I'd always wanted to make one. I was lucky in a way that I had this script. I couldn't really navigate away from that, and it gave me a strong structure.

**PL:** Were you keen that viewers of the film got to experience the full arguments for the prosecution and defence?

**HK:** Well I could have made a shorter 'courtroom drama'-style series of dramatic edits. But what I liked about the court was how boring it was. Court procedures are long. I was watching and thinking about several of Chantal Akerman's films around the time I made the piece. She used this very slow pace, and there is beauty in the tedium. Another thing that massively influenced me is that my ex-partner is an anthropological filmmaker, so I saw a lot of ethnographic films. They can be very slow!

**PL:** The anthropology analogy is interesting, as your work places the viewer as an observer of a process and ritual. Were you in the court directing the shoot?

**HK:** I decided I wasn't going to film myself, so I got three people on camera. Plus a drone camera, and two GoPros, one strapped to the television looking at the jury, and one on a jury member's head. Which was ridiculous of course because in a real UK court there would be no cameras. I had people drawing in court, which is also forbidden. To shoot the film we had to choreograph the cameras like ballet. It was rolling action with no cuts. I used a lot of cameras and perspectives, because I wanted to get close-ups of people's clothes, and of the decrepit furniture; you know, the age of austerity. A lot of people who worked in the court told me it might be closed down. There is tape holding things together and the carpets are all frayed.

**PL:** So you wanted a texture of the 'here-and-now' in the film?

**HK:** Yes. I was also thinking of using the camera angles to suggest the technological verticality of the internet that Bratton maps out, but also to suggest an idea of a horizontal democratic space. I'm not sure how successful that was, and I feel I could have pushed that more. I would have liked more camera footage, more drones, and of course more time!

**PL:** You are also very concerned with the aesthetics of the gallery presentation overall, such as colour, framing and seating.

**HK:** Yeah, I'm really interested in the way people enter into the work through a designed environment. I wanted to suggest a fictional futuristic 'ether court'. I thought about traditional court leatherette, which is always green, and instead made it blue and very smart and crisp. I worked with a great joiner to make the bench, looking at how jury benches contain people.

**PL:** The end of the film is dramatic. It feels quite stressful for the jurors. They have to make this binary choice about the algorithm's culpability in a condensed time frame and in a corridor space. Was that choice deliberate?

**HK:** Do you want the truth? We only had certain amount of time in Southwark court because I was on a tight budget. I was so preoccupied with the staging of the script that it hadn't occurred to me that the deliberation at the end could go on for four hours, and that that could be really amazing. So I'd literally only given the jury ten minutes! And as soon as the deliberation started I realised my mistake.

**PL:** I think it resulted in something fascinating. There is a succinct yet impassioned debate among the jury.

**HK:** Yes! A part of the project I want to develop further, which I will do for my invites event, is to extend the jury deliberation by bringing a set of people together, including those I've met when touring the project to law schools, to allow a more in-depth discussion. Last night at King's College the idea of post-truth in news came up; this fabrication of facts.

**PL:** I think it's interesting that the project looks at a subject but doesn't try to remake it technically, or become the thing it documents. There is no algorithmic coding going on.

**HK:** Making one was always a possibility. I haven't met quite the right coder yet. And to make an algorithm like the one in my narrative throws up ethical questions. I feel artworks that involve a functioning copy of a technology can sometimes lead to a dead end. A postmodern eternal feedback loop perhaps... and I was trying to side-step this loop.

**PL:** In the film there are different degrees of role-playing and authenticity; some are actors, some are legal professionals working from a script, and some people are being themselves and reacting to proceedings.

**HK:** I think that word 'authenticity' is important. Because how authentic is our world? The Forensic Architecture Department at Goldsmiths, led by Eyal Weizman, is examining things like drone strikes, and using digital evidence and witness testimonies to recreate what happened. Whereas postmodern critical thinking can be characterised as questioning what truth is, there now seems a desire to locate it. I think it is a response to a 'bodiless' system we are increasingly living in. Algorithms are part of attempts to minimise human mistakes or risk. Drones remove the need for physical risk in war, for your side at least. And one of the arguments for drone warfare is that because humans make bad choices in moments of stress or fatigue, an algorithm can do things with more precision. This is debatable and controversial of course. A bodiless force takes away the idea of a responsible party. In order to make something more humane, it has to be made inhuman. Such contradictions are troubling. And so my argument is that there should be more conversation in society about these things, and in a time of free-market anything goes, there does need to be regulation in some places.

**PL:** A round-table discussion is quite an old-fashioned idea in a way.

**HK:** It is. But we are in a really strange contradictory state at the moment, and although questions of morality might feel old-fashioned, they have their place.

Reverse: Installation view of *The Trial of Superdebthunterbot*, 2016, Goldsmiths MFA Degree show. 45 minutes HD Video / birch ply and leatherette jury bench

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Sunday 26 February, 3pm: A specially convened 'jury' of specialists from the fields of law, ethics and computer science debate the *Superdebthunterbot* case.

Helen Knowles (b. 1975) is an artist and curator of Birth Rites Collection. She studied for her BA at Glasgow School of Art and Goldsmiths University for her MFA, and lives and works in Manchester and London. Recent exhibitions include: *Gender Generation*, Dyson Gallery, RCA, London, 2016; *Between the Lines*, GRAD, London, 2016; and *COLLABORATE!* Oriel Sycharth Gallery Wrexham, 2015. Her work is held in public and private collections including The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester and Tate Library and Archive. Knowles is currently one of seven artists on the Future Everything FAULT LINES programme.

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