MODES OF OBSERVANCE

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"Surveillance n. Watch kept on suspected person, workers &c. (under s., watched). [sur-2, VIGIL]"

Pocket Oxford Dictionary, Revised 4th ed 1946

"Surveillance n. Close observation of a person in custody or under suspicion. [French]"

The Collins Australian Pocket Dictionary, 1991

1 Note that the suggested connotations, origin and use as defined have changed, at least in terms of the emphasis required by abbreviation in pocket dictionaries.

2

First, I thought about the meanings of the word, then I went for a walk to see what surveillance looks like in Sydney.

3

The different meanings of surveillance were as follows:

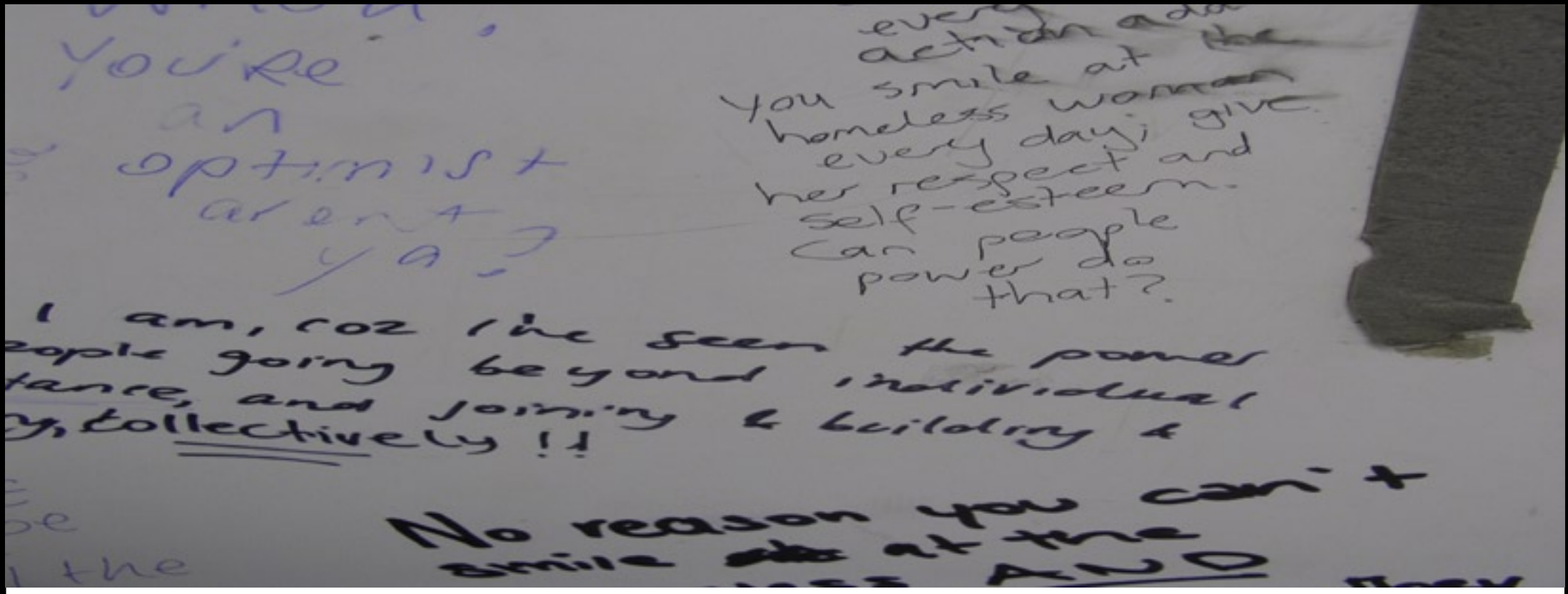
I remembered the close police control we lived with in West Germany. This was because we were fighting for freedom against Communism. Communism kept even closer surveillance on its subjects. The U.S. and German governments paid us (high school students) to visit East Berlin and we duly saw that people there were made uncomfortable, angry and afraid by our presence. Even being seen even close to us could bring them trouble. We had to spend an information afternoon at the American consulate so we'd be able to claim the money; that headcount in turn made us suspicious. Why was the side of freedom force-feeding us opinions? We thought that's what the others did. The headcount that afternoon wasted some of these generously given dollars. At home, the Americans' nuclear weapons were stationed just down the road, so we teenagers of the close-by villages often had to be searched by the police at night. I migrated from one democracy to another, and I am still surprised in Australia when people in authority don't treat me with immediate suspicion, because I look a bit different. In cold war, as in war, citizens become suspects.

4

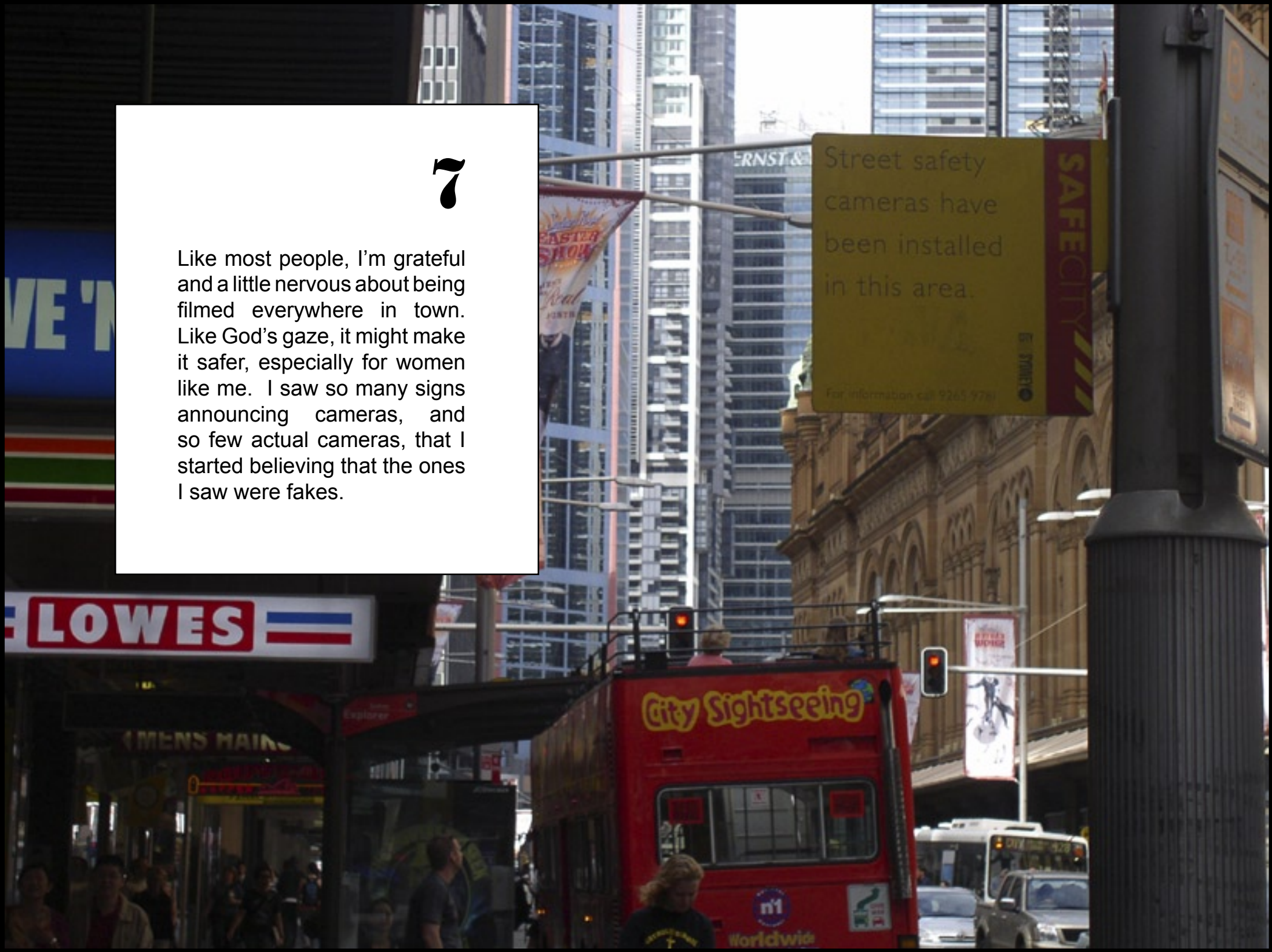
The same goes for a prison colony. Surveillance creates the need for counter-surveillance. All misdeeds require a lookout. There would have been a lot of observing each other here in the early years. I thought I'd walk along the oldest routes I could think of, from near where the first ships landed, to that forever gloriously messy street leading up the hill, initially to a quarry, then to Parramatta. I zigzagged from the water past the Barracks. School kids on excursions here get dressed in convict uniforms for a feel of what it was like.

5

Kids also need surveillance, of the more benign type, for their own good - we hope. Just like that, religious believers may feel watched over by their god. It is a gaze to which you respond: it creates the rules of the world as you experience it. You try to live up to the gods' stare - or rebel against it. Such imaginary surveillance, I wondered, might be around more than we think. Who did the colonisers feel watched by? The Aborigines? Their masters, somebody in England? Angels or Devils? Family? The Future or Past? I wondered who was watching me - Henry Lawson perhaps, whose statue you almost see in this photo. As a writer, when you write you think of audience and academic or literary models. How they look at you can be more or less like surveillance - depending on whether they encourage or forbid your words, what real or imaginary relation of power exists between you and them.



6 The fountain in Hyde Park was a gay meeting place around the 1920s. At night, the bushes were alive with police and what they tried to prevent. I don't get to think about that much, because I'm distracted by the surveillance most of us don't notice. A silent crowd of street people starting their day around me. Like the birds in the park and cats in the Barracks, they watch me, certain I won't look back. I do though, because I've been to mental hospital, and afterwards you personally know half the people out there, they're just sick and there's no treatment and nowhere to go. In contrast, being a citizen-human also means being high on the surveillance hierarchy. Others do the looking out for your safety and you're yourself a stronger, richer being, requiring close watch by fearful or needy ones you can barely see. The birds and animals need to observe us like that, too, and soon I wondered about the trees as well. That's perhaps going too far. Just as well I found Henry Lawson to watch over me for this walk, so I know better who I am and what I'm doing.



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Like most people, I'm grateful and a little nervous about being filmed everywhere in town. Like God's gaze, it might make it safer, especially for women like me. I saw so many signs announcing cameras, and so few actual cameras, that I started believing that the ones I saw were fakes.

8

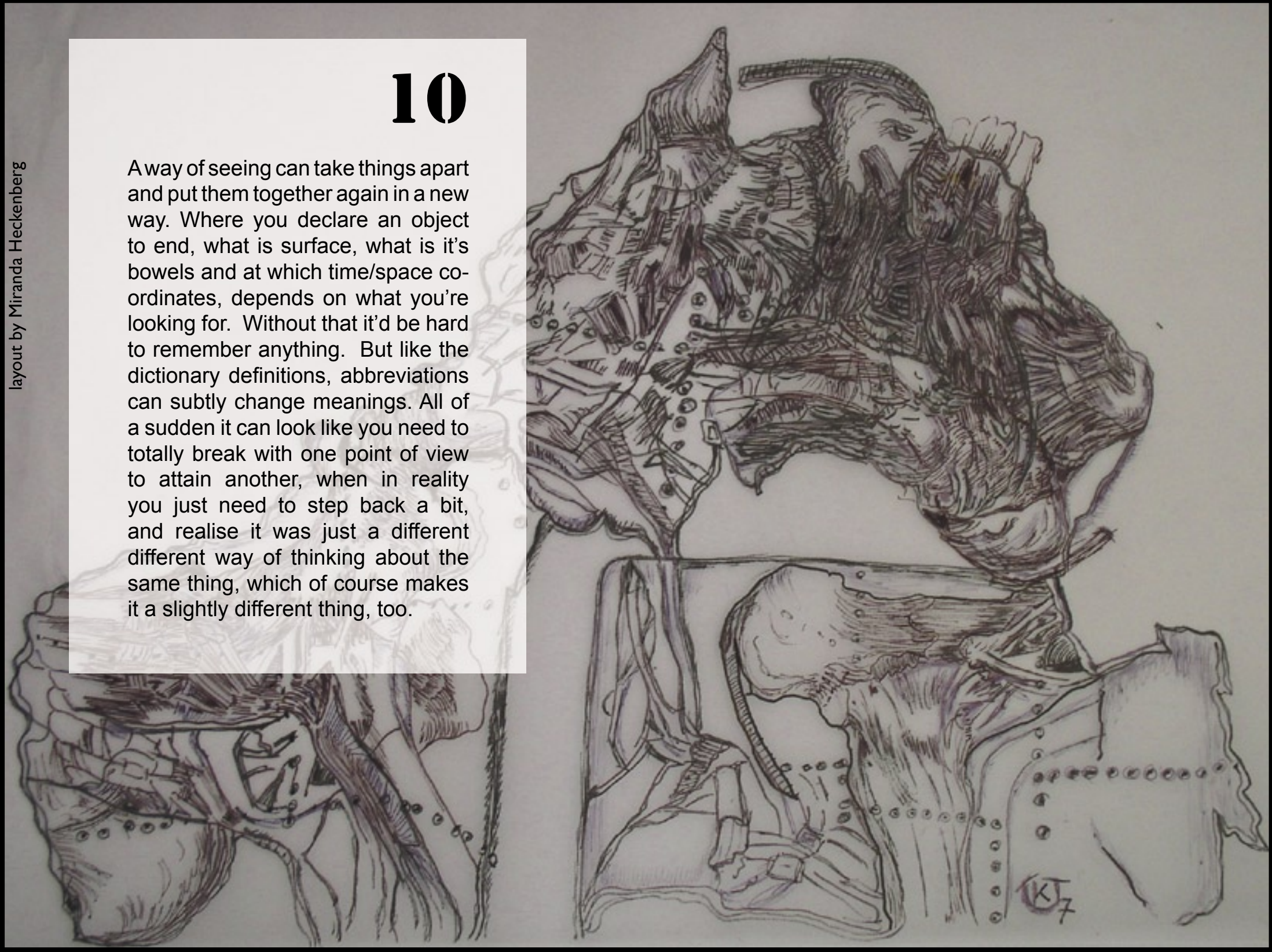
I didn't photograph the street people. I also didn't photograph the teenagers outside of Town Hall station, wagging school. I watched them from the corner of my eye. They weren't hiding at all. The longer they weren't noticed, the louder and more conspicuous they became. It didn't seem like a good technique for avoiding school, but then that mightn't be what it is about. On the other hand, they may have noticed me, and played up for the corner of my eye - who knows?

When you think about aspects of vision like surveillance, it's easy to get caught up in reflections. Quite literally - especially in town, there are so many reflections that a painter might be declared insane or at least surreal, if they were able to capture "just what you see". When I look, I must subtract the reflections, and many other elements, like my own movement, or the object's movement, so that I see a bus and not a blue blur. I might briefly recognise a familiar face. Object constancy and face recognition demonstrate that vision is not like watching a movie in my head. It's more a juggling of actions, maintaining imagined elements, recognising preferred patterns, especially those related to the human form, and updating with new visual data. This makes vision a constant play of memory, expectation, knowledge and outside input. So much psychology tells us.

My theoretical work on vision has led me to speculate further about what a social dimension adds to this equation. Recent theoretical writings about the effect of the gaze of the powerful have alerted us to the ultimately interactive element of vision. But even before that, Wittgenstein's late writings strove to combine scientific and contextual modes of vision. Surveillance represents one aspect of contextual and reciprocal vision, and we can quite easily imagine a reciprocal vision, a way of seeing that has mutual effects. This mode of observance has rules, intention and object. It also has an effect on those seen - it affects how we act, who we think we are: whether you crouch or walk erect, whether you speak or not, whether you belong in the civic or human circle, or get caught. Many instances of vision contain these elements of surveillance and perhaps very few do not.

10

A way of seeing can take things apart and put them together again in a new way. Where you declare an object to end, what is surface, what is it's bowels and at which time/space co-ordinates, depends on what you're looking for. Without that it'd be hard to remember anything. But like the dictionary definitions, abbreviations can subtly change meanings. All of a sudden it can look like you need to totally break with one point of view to attain another, when in reality you just need to step back a bit, and realise it was just a different different way of thinking about the same thing, which of course makes it a slightly different thing, too.



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