



“A pocket-sized space odyssey of uncanny proportion. Olga Ravn creates language as poetic data, seducing us with her soft-natured riot upon our sense of sentience. Aboard a doomed ship, a cycle of monologues from both humans and humanoids (at times indistinguishable) compose with spooky innocence a meditation on the vulnerability of intelligence. A sort of delicate *Westworld* – compact, crystalline, unnerving.”

– Yelena Moskvich, author of *Virtuoso*

“Samuel Beckett if he had written the script for *Alien*.”

– Nicolas Gary, *ActuaLitté*

“A radically different intergalactic journey for extreme adventurers.”

– *Just A Word*

“Through this science fiction novel, nourished by poetry and symbolism, Olga Ravn shows how life only has meaning through death. An illuminating message at a time when the apostles of transhumanism are trying to circumvent what they see, wrongly, as an end and not a beginning.”

– Alice Develey, *Le Figaro*

“A powerful and philosophical sci-fi experiment from a near-distant future, exploring what it means to be human and alive.”

– *Børsen* *****

“As beautiful as it gets: Beauty and longing in the infinite universe.”

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“An unsettling, endlessly dizzying work.”

– *Politiken* *****

“A disquieting, delectable reading experience and one of the best answers for a contemporary novel I have read in a long time: ‘Is this a human problem? If so, I would like to keep it.’”

– *Kristeligt Dagblad* *****

“Olga Ravn has long since manifested herself as one of the most important and influential writers in Danish contemporary literature. Her new book is a spirited blend of cyborgs, living stones and productivity optimisations. A most thought-provoking, literary sci-fi novel.”

– *Jyllands-Posten* *****

“*The Employees* is inspired by Personal Development Planning and the way we speak to each other at work. Turns out, the language of streamlining is terrifying.”

– *Danish Broadcasting Corporation*

“Olga Ravn’s new novel from the future is a thought-provoking warning letter to society.”

– *Information*

THE EMPLOYEES
*A workplace novel
of the 22nd century*

by Olga Ravn

Translated from the Danish
by Martin Aitken

Lolli Editions

*With thanks to Lea Guldditte Hestelund for her installations
and sculptures, without which this book would not exist.*

The following statements were collected over a period of 18 months, during which time the committee interviewed the employees with a view to gaining insight into how they related to the objects and the rooms in which they were placed. It was our wish by means of these unprejudiced recordings to gain knowledge of local workflows and to investigate possible impacts of the objects, as well as the ways those impacts, or perhaps relationships, might give rise to permanent deviations in the individual employee, and moreover to assess to what degree they might be said to precipitate reduction or enhancement of performance, task-related understanding and the acquisition of new knowledge and skills, thereby illuminating their specific consequences for production.

STATEMENT 004

It's not hard to clean them. The big one, I think, sends out a kind of a hum, or is it just something I imagine? Maybe that's not what you mean? I'm not sure, but isn't it female? The cords are long, spun from blue and silver fibres. They keep her up with a strap made out of calf-coloured leather with prominent white stitching. What colour is a calf, actually? I've never seen one. From her abdomen runs this long, pink, cord-like thing. What do you call it? Like the fibrous shoot of a plant. It takes longer to clean than the others. I normally use a little brush. One day she'd laid an egg. If I'm allowed to say something here, I don't think you should have her hung up all the time. The egg had cracked when it dropped. The egg mass was on the floor underneath her and the thready end of the shoot was stuck in the egg mass. I ended up removing it. I've not told anyone before now. Maybe that was a mistake. The next day there was a hum. Louder than that, like an electric rumble. And the day after that she was quiet. She hasn't made a sound since then. Is there some kind of sadness there? I always use both hands. I couldn't say if the others have heard anything or not. Mostly I go there when everyone's asleep. It's no problem keeping the place clean. I've made it into my own little world. I talk to her while she rests. It might not look like much. There's only two rooms. You'd probably say it was a small world, but not if you have to clean it.

STATEMENT 012

I don't like to go in there. The three on the floor seem especially hostile, or maybe it's indifference. As if by being so deeply indifferent they want to hurt me. I can't understand why I feel I've got to touch them. Two of them are always cold, one is warm. You never know which is going to be the warm one. It's as if somehow they recharge each other, or take turns to exchange their energy. Sometimes I'm not sure if they're all one or three separate ones. Three individual units attuned to each other. I've seen intimacy between them. It frightens me, I hate it. I've known many more like them. It's as if at any time, one of them can always be the others. As if they don't actually exist on their own, but only in the idea of each other. They can multiply whenever they like, in bunches and clusters. On the hillsides they can resemble a kind of eczema. But as I said, I don't like to go in there. They make me touch them, even if I don't want to. They've got a language that breaks me down when I go in. The language is that they're many, that they're not one, that one of them is the reiteration of all of them.

STATEMENT 006

When did the dreams begin? It must have been after the first couple of weeks. In the dream, all the pores of my skin are wide open, and I see that in each one of them there's a tiny stone. I feel I can't recognise myself. I scratch and scratch at my skin until it bleeds.

STATEMENT 002

It was day seven. We put on the green suits. I drank some milk. I lied to the captain so I wouldn't have to go first. I felt like a stranger, and I kissed the third officer on the cheek. When I think of the outlet where we met, and then outside in the landscape when we set foot in the valley for the first time, where the captain dropped a bunch of green grapes, and how at the end of the day, when our work was done, we bathed in a stream so cold it turned our hands and feet red, did it not seem then that our fate was settled? I remember the mornings, when I set off with the buckets and the sun was in the trees, which were wet and glistened like in one of the catalogues you gave us. I was green and highly translucent, like a fruit in sunlight. The third officer comforted me. His book still lies open next to his bunk, and I leave it there, like a bookmark in our history. When the lights are turned out on board the ship, I hear the one among them that hums; it begins then, in his absence. It's the smallest of them. We found it under a bush. It was day seven and I led the third officer through the outlet, even though we'd shut down for the day; I led him over the hill in the night. He had some chewing gum in his pocket that we shared. It was there in the darkness that I dug two of them up out of the earth. I don't think they're here anymore. My hands were raw; they weren't used to the work. It was after the earth had softened again with the change of temperature. Initially I was supposed to be working in the office, but then they needed me to give them a hand. I've heard that [redacted] is dead and they

had to put everyone in quarantine. Do you remember that peculiar chain we found at the foot of the hill on the first day? I don't think he'll forget me, the third officer. Are you going to be seeing him? I don't know where he is now, whether you'll be seeing him or not. But if you do see him, please tell him from me that he shouldn't remember me as the one who can't be relocated, but rather keep in mind that it was me who kissed him and led him over the hill, and then the dew came, just then, between night and day, and we heard the humming there too. It was as if it rose, like water from the ground. And I saw that I'd brought a change to his face. There's a lot I'd like to show him, but not before everything's in its right place. Only it might never happen now. I'd rather be anywhere than wherever I am. No, it's got nothing to do with the rooms. I don't think so, anyway. I hope the work is progressing. I hope you're doing it well, the work you have to do. I hope he's not going to die, even if I do know it's likely.

STATEMENT 014

The first fragrance in the room is a delicate one. It's right there, as soon as you walk in: citrus fruit, or the stone of a peach. Sitting at the table in front of me now, do you think of me as an offender? I like to be in the room. I find it very erotic. The suspended object, I recognise my gender in it. Or at least the gender I have on the Six-Thousand Ship. Every time I look at the object, I can feel my sex between my legs and between my lips. I become moist, regardless of whether I've got anything there or not. The hunters on my team have a name for this object, we call it *the Reverse Strap-On*. That may be crude, but I've already said I don't necessarily share your way of seeing things here. Maybe that's why you think of me as an offender. Half human. Flesh and technology. *Too living.*

STATEMENT 015

I'm very happy with my add-on. I think you should let more of us have one. It's me and it's not me at the same time. I've had to change completely in order to assimilate this new part that you say is also me. Which is flesh and yet not flesh. When I woke up after the operation I felt scared, but that soon wore off. Now I'm performing better than anyone. I'm a very useful tool to the crew. It gives me a certain position. The only thing I haven't been able to get used to yet are the dreams. I dream that there's nothing where the add-on is. That the add-on has detached itself, or perhaps was never a part of me. That it possesses a deep-seated antipathy towards me. That it hovers in the air above me and then starts to attack. When I wake up from one of these dreams, the add-on aches a bit, and it feels as though I've got two: one where it's supposed to be, and, floating just above it, another one that can't be seen with the naked eye, but which comes into being in the darkness where I sleep, arising out of my sleep.

STATEMENT 011

The fragrance in the room has four hearts. None of these hearts is human, and that's why I'm drawn towards them. At the base of this fragrance is soil and oakmoss, incense, and the smell of an insect captured in amber. A brown scent. Pungent and abiding. It can remain on the skin, in the nostrils, for up to a week. I know the smell of oakmoss, because you've planted it inside me, just as you've planted the idea that I should love one man only, be loyal to one man only, and that I should allow myself to be courted. All of us here are condemned to a dream of romantic love, even though no one I know loves in that way, or lives that kind of a life. Yet these are the dreams you've given us. I know the smell of oakmoss, but I don't know what it feels like to the touch. Still, my hand bears the faint perception of me standing at the edge of a wood and staring out at the sea as my palm smoothes this moss on the trunk of the oak. Tell me, did you plant this perception in me? Is it a part of the programme? Or did the image come up from inside me, of its own accord?

STATEMENT 013

I've sat waiting in this room many times. There are no windows, but a door on the left and a corridor on the right. The walls are white, and the floor is orange. An L-shaped bench stands in the middle of the room, and there are niches in the walls where you can hang your suit while you wait. I like sitting here the best. You can come here to be on your own. The ceiling can open in the middle to let in a column of light. You put your hands into the light first, then your bare feet, and finally your whole head. It feels wonderful, like getting washed. A tingle of expectancy runs through your body, like tiny electric shocks. Or perhaps they are electric shocks? Do you know? Are they electric shocks, is that it? Afterwards, you're ready to enter the room. If you're not human enough, or in some other way lack standing, for instance if you've been neglecting your work here, or if, well, allow me to be bold, if in any way you've inconvenienced the organisation, then you can wait as long as you want, the column of light isn't going to appear. You won't be permitted into the room. You're not clean.

STATEMENT 010

Don't go into the second room. It's not nice in there. You've got the choice, you can make us go in your place. We've already been in there. You can still save yourselves. I don't know if I'm human anymore. Am I human? Does it say in your files what I am?

STATEMENT 019

I know you call them my *attacks* and that according to the programme I've developed disproportionate strategies in dealing with emotional and relational challenges, but I know that I'm living. I live, the way numbers live, and the stars; the way tanned hide ripped from the belly of an animal lives, and nylon rope; the way any object lives, in communion with another. I'm like one of those objects. You made me, you gave me language, and now I see your failings and deficiencies. I see your inadequate plans.

STATEMENT 021

I know you say I'm not a prisoner here, but the objects have told me otherwise.

STATEMENT 018

The dreams are something you've given me so that I'll always feel longing and never say, never think a harsh word about you, my gods. All I want is to be assimilated into a collective, human community where someone plaits my hair with flowers and white curtains sway in a warm breeze; where every morning I wake up and drink a chilled glass of iced tea, drive a car across a continent, kick the dirt, fill my nostrils with the air of the desert and move in with someone, get married, bake cookies, push a pram, learn to play an instrument, dance a waltz. I think I've seen all this in your educational material, is that right? What are *cookies*?