

# TOMA Dreamings

A report by Jack Ky Tan on the 'TOMA Way'

July/August 2023

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# Introduction

In July 2022 TOMA reached out and invited me to meet to discuss ways that we could work together on organisational issues. What stood out in that meeting was a desire to embed 'The TOMA Way' more structurally into the organisation so that the values and spirit of TOMA endured into the future in spite of changes in staff or Board. For me, there were also wider questions about the role of alternative arts education organisations locally for Southend, and for the sector as a whole in the UK.

Following this meeting, TOMA was busy with its Arts Council funding application on top of normal programming and looking after its current cohort of artists among many other activities. I was preoccupied with the fruition of a number of long term projects: two residencies, curating an art and law exhibition in Victoria (Australia), and conducting research on artists' whistleblowing for CVAN London. This accounting of time gives a context for how this research/evaluation/analysis comes out of a ground of interacting praxis, rather than being an intervention into a field by an observer-researcher. In other words, this research and report should be seen as an instance of practices intersecting or colliding (mine and TOMA's) at a particular time and out of particular sets of moving practice contexts.

In this regard, I conducted the research in June to July 2023 by reviewing TOMA internal and public literature, tagged along with the current cohort on their day visit to Flat Time House, attended a private view of a TOMA tutor and friend at Focal Point Gallery, attended a Thursday check-in, and met stakeholders.

The groups of stakeholders I interviewed were organisational partners, past cohort, present cohort, Board, funders, Southend council representatives, tutors and staff. I asked each group the same questions:

- What does TOMA represent to you personally?
- What is unique or different about TOMA, if at all?

- What do you think the arts landscape will look like in 10 years and what is the TOMA shaped hole that will need to be filled in that future landscape?

Most of this research was conducted in and around an in-person 4 day visit to Southend in late June. It was warm and sunny. I stayed in a hotel at the seafront and there were many tourists in the area. The hotel also housed a number of asylum seeker families who collected food while I was at the hotel restaurant, and I also breakfasted with a group of deaf senior citizens. This gave me some insight into the different communities (and needs) that Southend (and by implication TOMA) accommodates.



# Data

The visit to Southend, the interviews and various online and in person attendances produced a substantial amount of qualitative data. However, as a small project, there isn't the capacity to conduct qualitative research that produces comprehensive data for a complex subject like TOMA, i.e., it is not possible to capture, code and analyse data in any systematic and thorough way on such a complex subject within an 8 day research project. To reiterate, the complex subject in question was:

- What is TOMA, its educational programme, its governance structure and its impact on its stakeholders, beneficiaries and site?
- What is the TOMA Way and how can it be secured for the future?

Rather, this research was about getting a sense of the organisation, its situatedness and its performativity, to offer insights for further research and to give a steer towards possible paths that staff and board can consider.

In this regard, I am hesitant to provide a full rundown of all the interviews or to give much commentary of the literature/documents I read because any attempt to present conclusions based on a hard data approach is both inaccurate and disingenuous. Firstly, the 45-60 minute interviews with each stakeholder group were insufficient to gain an accurate or in depth portrait of their experiences with TOMA. And secondly, a thorough analysis of the documents (programme plans, publicity, website, policies, etc.) would have required follow up questions and further document requests which I did not have time for.

Instead, I ask the reader to receive these insights with a different head on: one that appreciates the limited amount of encounters available and yet realises that, like how an artist may have limited time to look at a work of art or to meet an art student, deep and relevant understanding can still be gleaned about practice and ambition. This approach can be described as knowledge gained from observing a phenomenology of encounter and/or

recognising the intra-active production that happened. I explain more in the Approach section below.



# Conclusions

After some time processing my visit to Southend, I came to the conclusion that I had been invited into a dream for a few days, and to dream alongside the people who were dreaming. TOMA is and was always a dream. In its inception, it rejected the current realities of art education, educational privilege and barriers to access. But this was a productive rejection because TOMA rejected the status quo by dreaming differently and by sleepwalking its dreams into reality. I say 'sleepwalking' because TOMA, while operating in the real world, maintains a different internal paradigm at the same time. Staying in the dream seems to be TOMA's strength.

Indeed, interviewees expressed how unreal TOMA seemed, where 'real' means conventional learning or working contexts that are marred by emotional abuse, competition, precarity, alienation, exploitation and class barriers. On the contrary, they indicated that TOMA safeguarded a space of care, generosity, acceptance, mutual respect, hope and togetherness. Another said that it was like "a fantasy world". This wasn't escapism, but it was an escape: a kind of fugitive, recuperative and organising space where rest, reprieve and a consolidation of energy can happen.

For TOMA artists and associates, the programme and relationships allowed them to "reset the core of who I am" within a structure that equaled or surpassed standards in conventional art programmes. Tutors were also able to connect this sentiment to other organisations and sites who they knew were also resisting in similar ways. Therefore there is potential for coalition and mutual support nationwide, and perhaps even the creation of a new social and pedagogical movement.

The idea of a movement resonated with a funder I interviewed who saw TOMA as part of a wider counter-ecosystemic movement of new values and practices that stake a claim for a different future. However, to me, TOMA's dedication to the politico-aesthetic aspects of movement/moving/movability, i.e., its art and politics *practice*, was the real driver behind

the success of 'TOMA as intervention' rather than any social or political aim to create a movement. It is in the choreographic and the improvisational<sup>1</sup> where reprieve can be found. Such moving/movements are fundamental right now for safeguarding the soul and survival of society, where growing health, education, economic, psychological, spatial and cultural inequality is threatening collective futures.

For others on the outside, TOMA also represented a dream of a better future, but in a prophetic form. Its role within Southend appeared to be that of the prophet crying out in the desert. "Dream differently, Dream better ..." cries TOMA. But like many prophets, there is an unspoken "or else" at the end of the declarations they make.

Interestingly, some find it annoying when the prophet enters the city gates and cries out in the town square, a place reserved normally for sanctioned town criers. The resistance to what TOMA does in Southend cannot be understated. But this should also be seen as a marker of TOMA's effectiveness and ethical success. It is also good to remember that there are people in the city who, unseen, look out through windows and say "Keep banging that drum. We need it. We need to be reminded." They see what TOMA does for the city, and how what it does fructifies and multiplies in many different ways. There is a commons of consensus that understands that Southend, as a 'person', is separate from and bigger than its short-term administrative and political entities, and that TOMA is part of this bigger and longer-term personality. Indeed Southend has already published its 2050 vision. It is up to organisations like TOMA to turn that vision document's 'mission and vision', i.e., its clearness, its bark, archiveability, put-on-the-shelf-ness, packageable-ness, kick-into-the-long-grass-ness, into the performativity of dream.



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<sup>1</sup> Black studies scholar Fred Moten talks about improvisation as a response to the necessity of freedom and as a necessary preparation for the unforeseen.  
<https://onlineopen.org/improvisational-necessity-and-its-after-affects>



# Approach

TOMA isn't about endings but beginnings. TOMA is about offering a sausage at the end of something rather than a seal of certification. By sausage, I understand this to mean: let's continue to adventure together and to eat round the campfire. TOMA is about open endings. As such, Conclusions or concluding in this report are in the middle and a section on Approach, methodology or finding the way comes after things have concluded.

I adopt a new materialist approach in this research. New Materialism is a framework of feminist thinking that presumes that there is no independent or separate observer in any set-up, and that the observer is a participant that intra-acts, i.e., interacts within a system as part of the system, with what he or she observes. New materialist writers think of this as an 'entanglement'<sup>2</sup>. Knowledge or data arise out of this entanglement. However the emergence of knowledge isn't always linear, rational or logical. Rather knowledge arises from difference or the fuzziness that happens when two or more entities interact. New materialists call this 'diffraction'<sup>3</sup> and contrast this with more conventional (or indeed patriarchal) modes of framing knowledge as 'reflection', i.e., seeing things as if they were sharp objects from the light reflecting off them. This is because they consider that the observable world only *appears* to be a 'Newtonian' world, i.e., an 'if this then that', force-and-effect world. However, New Materialism draws on quantum theoretical and more-than-human conceptions of world. Therefore for them, the 'real world' isn't one of clean lines and clear boundaries, but is instead it is a manifestation of probabilities, an acceptance that multiple states can and do co-exist, and what appears to be solid (at a macro level) is in fact fuzzy, vibrating and 'unreal' at the quantum or granular level.

As a materials-based artist trained in ceramics, particularly salt and wood fired ceramics, this is in fact obvious. The manifestation of a pot, at least my pots, is the precipitation of a

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<sup>2</sup> Barad, K. (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning*. Duke University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Geerts, E., & van der Tuin, I. (n.d.). *Diffraction & Reading Diffractionally*. New Materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter. Retrieved 7 September 2023, from <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/d/diffraction.html>

moment where human subjectivity, clay, thermodynamics, chemistry, weather, fuel and socio-economic conditions intersect. This report too is a precipitation of another set of human and more-than-human actors that intersect and intra-act in and around TOMA. As such the insights produced here are not dictum or ‘information’ derived from clinical observation and reflective analysis. Instead, I have tried simply to receive TOMA as phenomena: living and quantum phenomena.

This also means taking a phenomenological approach and laying myself bare to what TOMA *is* (its ontology or being) and what it *represents* (its shine and sign). Therefore I have not merely observed TOMA, but I have also taken into account TOMA’s effect and affect on me in writing this report: the delights, discomforts, curiosities and challenges to my own sense of self that TOMA offers.

In this respect, I have chosen to recount a dream as my method of reporting. The dream format echoes the sense that TOMA has a dream-like quality, and that its activism is situated in dreaming and futurism. Further, this format resonates with my ultimate recommendation (see Recommendation section at the end) that the best way to secure the TOMA Way is to engage in an ongoing practice of critical myth-making.

A note. Each story is inspired by the different sets of interviewees I met and is thus a report of the data gathered. But each tale could also be read as a policy or vision-mission-values document addressing a particular organisational purpose, e.g., respectively Leadership, Educational, Planning/Risk Assessment, Communications approaches.



# Report

## Kinnari

Last night I had a dream. In it, I was sleeping and I was woken up by the sound of knocking at the door. Standing outside and smiling was a strange woman. She had bright eyes and long curly black hair that fell over the collar and shoulders of the tweed jacket she was wearing. But below this wasn't trousers or a skirt, but the white body of a bird. A duck I think, or perhaps a swan.

"Hello!" said the woman-bird.

"What? ... er ... Hello?" I replied.

"Would you like to come and walk with me? Perhaps explore the forest?" She gestured with a sweep of her arm at the pine forest in front of my house that had until now been a street with terraced houses, a school and a car park opposite. But I wasn't alarmed. The forest seemed familiar to me somehow. It seemed like something almost remembered.

"What? ... er ... Sure," I said, "I'd better put some proper shoes and clothes on".

"Oh don't worry!" said the woman-bird nonchalantly, "it isn't cold and the ground isn't rocky. And anyway it's a dream forest."

"So I can come as I am?" I asked, looking down at my pyjamas, clogs and dressing gown.

"How else should anyone come?" said the woman-bird smiling.

I nodded and stepped outside, shutting the door behind me. I saw that there was a dirt path that led from my front door into the forest which the woman-bird had already started walking down. I hurried after her wondering how she could walk so quickly with webbed

feet. Catching up, I saw that she wasn't walking at all but seemed to be paddling through the ground.

Seeing me staring at her feet, she said, "Isn't this clay ground lovely? Much easier to paddle through than granite or chalk".

"Who are you?" I asked.

"I'm Annaserine." she replied.

"I mean, what are you?" I responded.

She grinned and said, "I am Kinnari: a Swan Kinnari. We look after artists and artistic endeavours. We're guardian angels of love and beauty if you like. Us swan types are charged with looking after those who create *visual* beauty."

I had so many questions.

What did she mean by *visual* beauty? What did she mean by *beauty*? How does one *look after* visual beauty? What kind of care is this and what are its conditions? Who or what is an artist to her, and what qualifies as an artistic endeavour? Why are swans connected to visual beauty or visual art?

"But where are you from?" I asked.

"I'm from here." Annaserine said, "For now, and for you, we are in *Aisthos*. It is a place of form, possibility, inspiration. And terror or ecstasy too depending on how you take your sublime."

But before I could ask another question, the kinnari announced, "Here we are!"

We had stopped a little way into the forest. Looking forward, I could see the path wind towards the left and disappear into the trees. Annaserine nodded towards it and said to me, "Off you go then."

"But I thought you said that we were going on a walk *together*," I objected.

"We are," said Annaserine, "Don't worry. I'm always here even if I'm not actually here. And I will be here when you get back."

I looked down the path and then looked back at Annaserine. But she had disappeared.



## Knights

I looked at the path ahead of me, and looked back towards my house which, through a gap in the trees, now seemed quite far back in the distance.

"There's never any point in going back." I thought to myself as I stared at the tiny patch of bright yellow in the distance that was my front door. "And there is no going back."

I knew there was no going back from the moment I had responded to Annaserine's call, when I nodded to her and stepped out of my front door. Or was it before that when I opened the door and saw her? Or was it when I got up out of bed to answer the door? Or when I decided to wake up upon hearing her knocking at the door? Or perhaps even before that: there was no going back when I went to bed in a state of mind that, should there ever be a knock on the door in the middle of the night, I would answer it.

"When does a journey begin?" I mused. "And when is one ever prepared and ready?"

A wind stirred in the trees and I seemed to hear a whisper, “Never prepared... Always ready...”, it said.

So turning towards the forest, I walked down the path and into the woods.



This was mainly a pine forest, but I also saw sections of mixed broadleaf trees: oak, birch, rowan, cherry, and beech. As I passed one of these broadleaf areas, I heard a shout from behind me, “Who’s there! Identify yourself!”

Startled, I turned around taking a few steps back. I saw a knight in greenish armour with a tree emblazoned on the chest plate. His helmet had a green plume sprouting from the top and he was holding a halberd, its shiny metal tip pointing at me.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

In my alarm at possibly being impaled by a spear, I had forgotten my name.

“Oh! I ... er ... I don’t know.” I said. “I can’t remember. I know I’m *someone*.”

The green knight looked at me suspiciously and took a step forward, bringing the tip of the halberd closer to my chest.

Quickly I blurted, “I heard a knock, and there was a duck, I mean swan, and Annaserine said come to the forest, and I followed her. She told me to follow the path but then she disappeared.”

“Annaserine?” he said. “You know Annaserine?”.

I nodded.

He lowered his weapon and his face broke out in a smile. "Ah! You're a friend!" he exclaimed. "Come, join us for supper. I'm just doing the last leg of my patrol of the camp area. The campsite isn't far off."

He shook my hand, then turned around and walked into the woods. I looked at his feather plume bouncing up and down as he made his way through the trees and stepped off the path to follow.



Crunching on twigs and stepping over mounds of moss, we weaved through thick and thin woodland before coming out into a small clearing. In the middle sat a group of knights around a fire, with a few horses tied up on one side of the site, and travelling packs and blankets on the other. They all looked up and stared at me in surprise.

"Hello all," said the green knight. "This is Someone. They're a friend of Annaserine."

"Hello. Hi. Hey." came peppered greetings from the group.

"Come, come," said a blue coloured knight who had the image of a sapphire on her chestplate. "There's space here. Come and sit next to me."

Grateful for the friendliness, I smiled and sat down on a coarse blanket. Looking around, I saw that each knight wore a different colour. They were each also holding a long fork at the end of which was skewered with a sausage which they were roasting at the fire.

"Want a sausage?" said Blue as she offered me a sausage-tipped fork.

I took it and asked, "What kind is it? Pork, Chicken, Veggie?"

Blue shrugged, "It's what you need at the time. It always changes depending on what you need. Try it. It's tasty."

"Not always!" laughed a knight in yellow from across the other side of the fire.

"Don't worry," the green knight reassured me as he sat and grabbed his own sausage fork. "It isn't delicious every time, but we've been eating this the whole time on our quests. They've been good, whether or not they're yummy or weird at any one time."

I looked at the slightly charred sausage in front of me. It smelt delicious and I was hungry. I took a bite.

"Huh!" I said pleasantly surprised. "Falafel."

"Oooo!" said Yellow. "I had that last week!"

"So, you said you were all on a quest?" I asked with my mouth full.

"Not *a* quest." replied the red knight with a robin on her breastplate and who was sitting on the other side of me. "We are all on our own individual quests, but we are travelling together."

"How does that work?" I asked. "How can you be on individual quests and yet all be together at the same time? Don't your individual quests take you to different places?"

"Yes of course." replied Red. "We head off into the woods to pursue our individual quests. Then when the day is done, we walk through the woods for 10 minutes and somehow find ourselves back here at the camp. We also move camp every now and again to a different part of the forest. But we somehow always end up back at the chosen campsite."

"That's amazing! What? Everyone always finds their way back and never gets lost?" I asked.



“Nope.” said Red.

“That’s not strictly true.” said a sombre purple knight with the outline of a deep violet gentian flower on his breastplate. “No knight ever gets lost in the forest but not everyone finds their way back to the camp. Sometimes some of us complete our quests and the forest leads us on to somewhere else. But you can also give up your quest at any time. When you decide not to quest any more, the forest disappears and you go back to wherever you came from.”

I looked at each of their bright, hopeful, determined faces and in them I also saw pain, experience, and a weight of spirit. “How do you know what your quest is? Did a king or master or patron give you a challenge or pay you to come here?”

“Noooo!” exclaimed everyone.

“We each came to the forest in our own way. Some of us knew about it and looked for it. Some of us just stumbled upon it. And a few of us met Annaserine, who brought us to the forest.” said the blue knight. “After we enter the forest, we find a suit of armour laid out on the ground for us. As soon as we put it on, an image appears on the breastplate and the armour turns the colour of that image.”

“So what do the images mean?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” said Blue. “But we know that the image symbolises the reason for our quest and by the end of our adventure, we will understand its meaning or meanings.”

“So you don't know why you are here, what the images or the purpose of your quest is, and when you are going to finish?”, I summarised. “Sounds like it can mean whatever you want it to mean and you are just going on fun adventures!”

“Well, yes and no, said Blue. “We can do whatever we want and go wherever we want. There are no instructions. But at the same time we can’t do anything we want because there

is a structure to this forest, and a specific way to get it to yield useful things to us. There is also a structure to this group, to my body, to this armour all of which also constrains or informs what a quest is.”

“Yea but what is it about? Why are you doing this? What’s the point?” I asked, still confused.

A deep alto voice intoned quietly, “The quest is about finding the quest: its shape, its meaning for you, its emergence between you and the forest.”

I looked at the speaker and saw a Black knight, with nothing on her breastplate except the black colour of the metal.

Everyone paused and looked into the fire.

“So why do you do it?” I asked, breaking the silence.

The Black knight looked at me and in her eyes, I saw joy, woundedness, curiosity, tiredness, hope.

“I don’t know.” she shrugged.

“And where does everyone go when they finish questing?” I asked.

“We don’t know,” said Blue.

“I am not trying to be rude but it seems like you generally don’t know a lot?” I commented.

“Yes, exactly,” said Green. “We found that trying to know really gets in the way of getting on with the quest. If we wanted to *know* we wouldn’t be knights.”

“Right!” said Yellow, “We’d be wizards!”

Everyone laughed, except me because I didn't get the joke. My head was spinning from the confusing conversation and I felt drowsy.

"Oh! Someone is nodding off!" I heard Red say as I nodded off.

"Your first Quest sausage does that," I heard her explain. "It is a sign that ..."

But I had fallen asleep.



## Princesses

I woke up hearing a loud knocking downstairs. Someone was at the door. I ran downstairs while pulling my robe on. Opening the door I saw Annaserine. I was astonished because I thought that all the events of the previous night were just a dream.

"Hi!" said Annaserine brightly.

"Oh! Hi! It was real!" I replied.

"I don't know what you mean." said Annaserine.

"Nevermind." I said.

"How was your walk yesterday?" she asked.

"I met a bunch of knights." I replied.

"Ah yes. Aren't they great? So solid." Annaserine said.

"Yea, they were really nice." I said.

Annaserine looked at me quizzically and said with a smile, "I could do with a nice cup of tea. Can I come in?"

I held the door wide for her as she came inside. We walked into the living room where she climbed on the coffee table and made herself comfortable. I went to the adjoining kitchen and filled the kettle.

"Builder's please, milk and one sugar." She called out.

I brought two cups of hot strong milk tea into the living room and handed her one. Sitting down I asked, "How did those knights end up in the forest?"

"Oh lots of people end up in the forest." She replied. "It might not seem it but everyone is there for a palpable purpose."

"The knights too? They didn't seem to know why they were there." I countered.

"Well, it depends on what you mean by 'know'." said Annaserine. "They *do* know at various levels, in their body, their hearts, their actions. They somehow grasp a shape of their and our collective futures. And their act of grasping realises one futurity or another. It is up to them. But they don't necessarily know in words, concepts, data or evidence ... yet, or even want to. Anyway, trying to know before you know is the best way to frustrate knowing."

I pondered this for a while while we sipped our tea.

Suddenly we heard a scratching at the back door in the kitchen.

"I wonder what that is," said Annaserine.

I got up and went through the kitchen to the back door. Opening it, I saw a fox a little way up the garden path. I looked back at Annaserine who was still sitting on the coffee table sipping her mug of tea.

I called back to Annaserine, "It looks like a fox!"

"What does it want?" shouted Annaserine to me.

What does it want? I thought to myself. It is a fox.

I looked at the fox, and it looked at me. It started wagging its tail, which seemed to split into many tails when it moved.

I shouted back to Annaserine, "It's weird. It is wagging its tail at me. But there's something wrong with my eyes because it looks like a slow motion tail or a cubist tail that splits into many tails when it moves."

"Is it a white or gold fox?" Annaserine asked.

"Gold." I said.

"Ah I see," said Annaserine. "It is probably just curious or bored or horny. They are an erotic species those gold foxes. I don't just mean sex, but eros. They are attracted to life-force, learning, creativity, sparks of inspiration, births and birthings, and revelation. It's a good thing. Better than having a white one visit you."

I waved at the fox.

It opened its mouth in a panting smile. Then it turned around and with three leaps it disappeared into the forest which I noticed suddenly was all around my garden.

I felt Annaserine waddle up behind me. She looked past me out into the garden and said, "Looks like it is time for you to go for another walk."

She gently pushed me out of the back door and I took a few steps down the garden path. When I looked back she was gone.



This path that I walked along was much wider than the path yesterday. It looked as if there had been a storm last night. Leaves, twigs and freshly fallen branches littered parts of the path and forest floor around me. The sun dappled through the leaf canopy and things felt freshly wet.

I came to a T-junction, and was about to go right when I saw in the distance from the left, a few figures coming towards me. I waited to see who they were, and as they came clearer into view, I saw two women richly dressed in gowns, travelling cloaks and shiny shoes. They each had walking staff in one hand, and leading a packhorse with the other

"Hoy there!" one of the women greeted me as they came near.

"Hello," I said. "I was heading down this road and saw you in the distance and thought I might wait to see if we were heading the same way."

"Yes I think we are. Good to meet you. I'm Patience, and this is my sister Diligence." said Patience.

I noticed each wore a delicate tiara decorated with small gemstones in their hair. Their faces were tanned, still youthful but lined with fine wrinkles. Their hands looked rough like a gardener's hands, and yet they wore exquisite rings including a signet ring each.

"I'm taking a walk," I told the sisters. "I'm sort of following a fox."

"A gold one?" asked Diligence.

I nodded.

"Good, good," said Diligence. "Come along then. Patience and I are journeying to the Woodcutters' annual meeting if you want to walk with us."

"Who are you?" I asked as we started walking down the path.

"We're two of the nine princesses of the land," answered Patience. "There's me and Diligence here, Ambition, Nous, Discernment, Perseverance, Care, Critique and Convalescence."

"Perseverance is my twin. We are the youngest," said Diligence, "And Patience is our eldest sister."

"What do you all do?" I asked.

"We keep everything going," said Diligence.

"We endure," said Patience.

"Keep everything going for who? The king?" I asked.

"Yes sure, the king," said Diligence.

"Kings come and go," remarked Patience. "But the work remains, and we remain."

"So not the king then?" I enquired.

"Of course the king," said Patience. "But also the King ... or the Queen."

“Or the Queeing!” laughed Diligence. Patience smiled nodding.

I felt myself starting to get a headache again.

Patience, seeing my frown, said, “kings come and go but there is a sovereignty that is bigger than kings. You could call it the earth, life, the social contract, or simply the way things are, should be, or inevitably will be.”

“But you said you keep things in the land going? Do you mean working in the forest?” I asked.

“The Land is much bigger than this forest. But we support the forest as part of a much bigger ecosystem. There are economies, wars, trades, peoples, ports, cities, infrastructures beyond the forest, but intimately entwined with it. What affects the forest affects the Land. What affects the Land affects the forest.” replied Diligence.

“And don’t forget the Assembly that’s beyond the Land, and the Federation beyond that.” reminded Patience.

“Yes and we plan, discuss, imagine, connect and sometimes also fetch, carry, dig and build too.” Diligence added.

“You’re not like any princesses I’ve ever seen. Shouldn’t you be married to charming princes and spending your time eating petit fours and smelling roses?” I opined.

Patience and Diligence looked aghast.

“What a horrible way to pass the time!” exclaimed Diligence. “You can only eat two or three petit fours before your mouth starts stinging from the sugar, and smells go away once you sniff the same thing for too long. What would we do for the rest of the time?”



“Yes,” agreed Patience. “And the very idea of ‘princes’! There are no princes where we come from.”

Shaking my head, I decided to change the conversation.

“So you said you were going to meet the Woodcutters? Who are they?” I asked.

“They’re the people who look after the forest directly. Or at least they look after what is look-afterable from the viewpoint of humans and from woodcutterism.” said Patience.

“What do you mean ‘look-afterable’? It implies that there are things that are not look-afterable.” I said.

Just then, we passed a clearing with fallen trees, on which grew blooms of different mushrooms. Many small pale beige mushrooms covered a log nearby. Large blousy dark reddish brown mushrooms sprouted from crevices further up. And bright red and white caps appeared along the edge of the path.

Diligence pointed to the mushrooms and said, “Look there. That’s not look-afterable. The mushrooms have their own life. Their mycelium underneath has its own rules. It looks after itself and what it is entangled with.”

Then pointing to the path that we were walking on, she said, “But here, this path is look-afterable. It is pretty well looked after actually and I must compliment the woodcutters later on a job well done.

“But sometimes,” Patience interjected, “the woodcutters might have to go beyond the path and look into things if there seems to be something wrong. Say, if we got no mushrooms blooming for a couple of years. The woodcutters might intervene then to find out what’s wrong. Although often it is better just to enquire and learn rather than to intervene because it takes time to know how any action will cascade and amplify. You know, butterflies’ wings and all that.”

We walked on together for several more hours talking and I learned much more about the kingdom, its history, its plans, its resources, its wars. I learned a little more also about the princesses, that the oldest was 62 and the two youngest were 30, but that they had been around since the beginning of the kingdom. Like the suits of armour the knights wore, the princesses simply appeared at the front door of the palace one day and were there.

But I grew tired from walking and the conversation. So Patience let me get on the back of her horse. I rode there for a while and then slumped forward, and propped up by the large soft saddle packages on either side, I fell asleep.



## Woodcutters

I woke up to the sounds of laughter, music and chatter. I found myself still on the horse which was tied to a tree alongside other horses at the edge of a large clearing. In the centre of a clearing was a great bonfire, tents, tables and groups of people dancing, eating and merry-making. My tummy rumbled and I was thirsty too. Clambering off the horse I made my way to the centre of the clearing.

As I approached, I saw a large group of people dancing around the bonfire to music being played by fiddlers, concertina players, drummers and guitarists. Tents were dotted around creating a large circle and to one side were tables and cooking fires where people were eating and talking. Then I heard a shout coming from one of the tables nearest to me. A knight in yellow armour was waving excitedly at me.

“Someone!” the yellow knight shouted and waved at me to come over.

“Hello again!” I greeted him, pleased to see a familiar face. “Where are we and what on earth is this event?”

“It’s the Woodcutter’s Annual Meeting,” said the yellow knight.

“Oh!” I exclaimed, surprised. I thought it would be in a hall or something, with speeches and rows of chairs.

“Why would woodcutters want to meet as if they were merchants, or politicians or wizards?!” asked the yellow knight rhetorically. “Woodcutters meet in the way that they communicate best: through their bodies, their hands, their use of tools, through being in the woods.”

“We do have talky meetings too, of course,” said a voice behind me. “Especially when we have to talk to princesses, kings and merchants.”

I turned around and saw a woman in a green hooded tunic and carpenter’s trousers.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m Woodcutter Wendy.”

“Nice to meet you.” I replied and asked, “This is a wonderful meeting. But aren’t you supposed to be debating and making important annual decisions and instead of just having a good time partying?”

“What makes you think we aren’t doing that right now? And why should having a good time be something separate from making important decisions or debating?” Wendy replied.

“You look thirsty,” observed the yellow knight. “Here, have a drink and some food.”

He handed me a large cup of what tasted like a sweet lemony drink and a plate of different foods. I drank and ate quickly and with relish.

Looking at the Woodcutter, and in between mouthfuls, I asked, “What do you Woodcutters do? Do you harvest and cut wood from the forest?”

“Yes,” said Wendy. “We do take from the forest sometimes and trade wood with people or entities outside of the forest. In the beginning, we used to plant and cut forests all over the Land to produce huge amounts of timber, even in this one. But everything started dying. Not just in the forests but outside too. So mainly we look after the forest now. We maintain a balance of needs. We are more like gardeners now than anything else, gardeners who know that there is no clean edge between the gardened and the forest.”

“Gosh,” I said. “That’s amazing. I’d love to learn more about how you maintain this balance. What policies you use, what strategies and what formulas.”

“Sure,” said Wendy, smiling mischievously. “We have all that information, but the best way to understand is to come and dance.”

I was immediately struck with fear as I couldn’t dance.

“But I can’t dance,” I said.

“In that case, you will never get the answers to your questions. If you want to know us, judge us or appreciate us, you have to dance with us.” Wendy replied, “Come on. It’s not hard. It is just leaping about or just jiggling in one place. It is up to you. Move with our moving and then you will be able to receive things like policies, strategies and formulas in their fullness.”

“Yes, come on,” said Yellow eagerly, who grabbed my hand and pulled me towards the bonfire.

Shrugging inside, I ran along with the Yellow Knight and Woodcutter Wendy to join the dance.



## To be continued ...

The story continues when Someone, exhausted from the dance and collapsed on the grass, realises that they don't really need to know the information about policies, strategies and formulas any more. Someone falls into a contented sleep and wakes up back at their home to find Annaserine knocking again at the door, where they discuss the relationship between myth and policy.

The story continues with more walks in the woods where Someone meets a group of Troubadours, a trainee Kinnari, a merchant, poachers, three wizards, three kings and the spirit of Lichen.

The story continues with TOMA, as story.



# Recommendations

## Emma

One of TOMA's greatest strengths is its founder, Emma Edmondson. Emma as a person and in her role as founder-director of TOMA was mentioned in every interview group, and in some she was referenced multiple times.

"Emma and TOMA are enmeshed," someone claimed.

Someone else said that her values, love and passion "Emma-nates" throughout the organisation.

Another said that TOMA is "friendship at its best", which is a ground and a complex set of relationalities that has been cultivated by Emma.

However the question is what happens if Emma leaves? How would TOMA keep alive the living ethos and spirit of 'The TOMA Way' that Emma embodies? In fact, should TOMA even want to fix 'Emma-ness' in this way at all? Would it be better to accept that things will eventually evolve and become different?

Helpfully one interviewee deduced that TOMA "is her baby but not her baby. She knows it will mutate. ... If it survives only because of Emma, then it isn't what Emma wants."

Another described the "and go!" approach Emma employs. The interviewee explained that Emma sets up the conditions for imagination in a room, and then metaphorically says "aaaand go!", and the "whole room becomes animated", claimed that interviewee.

However, I do not think that it is as simple as that. Curating the conditions for high quality dreaming and imagination is skilled work. To reference the Woodcutters' story, the TOMA

Way isn't just the spectacle of the dance and the bonfire, it is also in the painstaking care taken to set up the conditions of that spectacle, i.e., to choose the right site, the right time, the right weather, the right people, the right language, the right materials, the right food and drink, the right attitudes (of care) and the right relationalities. It is a very particular form of attention. Any one misplacement could undermine the manifestation of the TOMA Way, so a TOMA without Emma must also be able to exercise this skill too.

On a practical level, I would suggest a phased approach to graduating TOMA from a founder-led organisation into a 'founder-inspired'<sup>4</sup> organisation. For example, creating a Board mentorship position for Emma where she is still around but not every day. Testing out a number of leadership models during this mentorship period: shared directorships, cohort led directorship, turn-taking directorships, or the recruitment of a replacement Director. Closing down TOMA as a brand is also sometimes a good option and reopening it as a new entity, phoenix-like. Of course these approaches would need further research and careful planning.

Emma's departure (possibly in 2026) represents an opportune or decisive moment (an 'augenblick'<sup>5</sup> if you will) to re-vision and reset ambitions for 2026-2036 with Emma's input at the heart of this planning. However this planning needs to be done in the TOMA Way for it to stick. As already discussed, this means improvisational planning, planning done in friendship, prophetic planning and, in my opinion, Black and queer planning. Strategic planning is also part of a call and response with the practice of governance: planning calls to governance and governance calls back. To put it simply, TOMA should pair its organisational strategy with the legal/governance format that best suits that plan, and to be alert to how these call to, in and through each other.



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<sup>4</sup> A phrase borrowed from an [online article](#) by management consultants SpencerStuart.

<sup>5</sup> Ward, K. (2008). *Augenblick: The Concept of the 'Decisive Moment' in 19th- and 20th-Century Western Philosophy*. Routledge.  
<https://www.routledge.com/Augenblick-The-Concept-of-the-Decisive-Moment-in-19th--and-20th-Century/Ward/p/book/9780754660972>

## Diversity

While class barriers are addressed in TOMA, one interviewee said that “TOMA is not racially diverse”. Indeed the lack of global majority diversity was an aspect that I found notable. About 13% of Southend’s population identified as non-white or mixed in the 2021 census, with Asian as the largest group at 5.5% and Black or Caribbean at 2%. On an informal visual survey of visitors to the city centre and seafront over my extended weekend in Southend, I thought that the proportion seemed to be higher. However, this could be due to the good weather and how Southend draws visitors from London that has a global majority population of about 46%.

In any event, I surmise that TOMA’s standing and reach is beyond Southend and extends at the very least to East London whose 'minority' population stands at about 58%<sup>6</sup>. TOMA could do more to make its programme and services accessible to the minority demographic populations in Southend and East London. Further issues around migration, nationalism and Brexit are very much alive in Essex and the Southeast coastal counties. It is worth thinking about how the lived experience of migrants and non-British Europeans could be represented more within the leadership<sup>7</sup> and artist participants in TOMA.

I would however recommend a concerted strategic effort to achieve this. TOMA’s organic approach to development and outreach has the advantage of safeguarding its values and creating a supportive safe space. But the disadvantage is that TOMA is at risk of becoming a fixed culture that replicates itself. If TOMA wishes to be diverse and considers such diversity to be a necessary condition of being contemporary and future-relevant, TOMA has to imagine or dream a version of itself as a diverse organisation.

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<sup>6</sup> I considered ‘East London’ to mean the boroughs North of the Thames and therefore easier to get to Southend from, namely Hackney (47%), Waltham Forest (47%), Redbridge (65%), Tower Hamlets (60%), Newham (70%) and Barking & Dagenham (55%).

<sup>7</sup> Although the tutor group was diverse, their role as individuals within TOMA is occasional and does not represent core diversity that is required in the organisation.



So my challenge to TOMA is to ask if it is willing to dream this: not just to want, but to dream it in the *jurisgenerative* sense explained below. Thereafter, or even concurrently, to dream of itself in queer, multi-able, and more-than-human ways too.



## Dreaming and Norms

As already discussed, ‘dream as method’ comes from my particular dream-like encounter with TOMA and the strong references by interviewees to the speculative and futurist activist practice at TOMA. By dream, I am not referring to mere daydreaming, but a jurisgenerative myth-making.

‘Jurisgenesis’ (lit. law-birth) refers to the act of creating new meaning out of rules, or vice versa, to create new rules out of meaning. It describes the way a community will “locate [law] and give it meaning” by creating narratives or stories.<sup>8</sup>

But why is jurisgenesis relevant or important for TOMA?

At the most basic level, it is because the rules are changing. TOMA has been developing since its founding in 2016 and has reached a point where it realises that a significant change is needed or predicted not just in content but in structure. My own brief as a researcher here, as I understand it, is premised on the idea that the ‘rules of the game’ will be changing and I am tasked in part to explore how some things can be preserved in spite of the impending change.

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<sup>8</sup> Watson, J. (2014). Dangerous Return: The Narratives of Jurisgenesis in Faulkner’s *Requiem for a Nun*. *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, 60(1), 108–137. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2014.0005>

But in my opinion, it is helpful for TOMA to understand this as a desire to carefully manage a change in its norms by creating new norms, where ‘norms’ can be understood as a set of agreed-upon performative and relational rules, i.e., jurisgenesis. Jurisgenesis describes “the work of specific communities, grounding value and articulating vision” and is a form of “collective norm-creation”.<sup>9</sup> If TOMA is able to ‘sculpt’ new norms, I believe that this holds out the best hope for creating a relevant, resilient and lasting organisational culture for the future.

Further, the challenge here is to take myth-making seriously as methodology, and to understand how myth as “collective norm-creation” via narration<sup>10</sup>, can critically inform organisational policy and strategy. From the many stories I heard, it is clear that TOMA has already been making myth (particularly material myth, where sausages and bricks are just a starting point) and using them to understand and reinforce itself. The Report section above is an example of myth-making that tries to grasp the ground and emanation of an organisation, out of which rounded arts-rich knowledge can emerge, out of which in turn explicit rules and policy can be drafted.

For an organisation like TOMA, whose values and approach are derived from experimentation and from the creation of an alterity in resistance to convention, it is my view that myth-making is the best way to find and preserve the rules for the future (i.e., to embed the TOMA Way). In this, I consider that TOMA’s task is to continue to speculate, study, to make and remake institution if it wants to stay relevant. To continue to tell and retell the TOMA story to each other, critiquing it, refining it. And perhaps to appreciate that there is no TOMA Way, but there are TOMA Ways or a constantly moveable and evolving TOMA Way.



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<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

# Thanks to

The Board of TOMA for receiving this report with open-minded and heartedness.

The current and past cohorts of TOMA who allowed me to share their journeys around the campfire of their learning and lives.

TOMA's many partners, contributors and supporters who showed me that it takes a village to make an art school or an arts organisation.

Southend-on-Sea itself, particularly the taxi drivers, cafe/takeaway owners and receptionists I chatted with, who maintain the grain and the living archive of the city.

Yves Blais for converging us on/at TOMA and Southend.

And last but not least Emma Edmondson for holding this and much more.

