

Whole Milk

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Exploring dairy farming as a system, *Whole Milk* investigates deep connections between humans, domesticated livestock and the land. It aims to provoke discussion about the future of the industry and encourages us to reflect upon on the nature and impact of our own role as consumers. *Whole Milk* is a new installation for Future Knowledge at **Modern Art Oxford**.



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2018

Dairy farming is a practice that dates back many thousands of years. It has shaped our country both literally, with grazing cattle sustain pasture and meadow habitats, and metaphorically, as dairy and beef products have become central to our way of life. Cattle graze the fields, vegetation and fungi are nourished by their manure, and wildlife thrives across pastures and in hedgerows. The cows give birth to calves and through this provide a continuous supply of milk, historically a vital and dependable source of nutrition for their human custodians.

The impression is often of an idyll, but consumer demand and commercial pressure to drive down costs has taken dairy farming far from its origins. In standard intensive systems, most cattle are kept indoors, fed cheap soya grown far away at great environmental cost, and the methane they produce contributes to climate change. In order for cattle to produce milk continually they must have calves every year. Female calves can be raised to enter the herd or sold on to other farmers, with average cow being profitable for 6 years. Male calves, however, are of no commercial value and are generally euthanised and incinerated within a few days of their birth.

Whole Milk has been produced in collaboration with Oxfordshire-based North Aston Dairy, a small-scale dairy farm who are pioneering alternative ways of working by bringing production, processing and distribution back in-house and reducing waste within the system. They have a small herd, who they know by name and keep in accordance with organic standards. The cattle graze on pasture unsuitable for arable farming, reducing the need to expend resources elsewhere

growing feed. Milk is pasteurised and bottled onsite in re-usable glass and crucially they combine meat and dairy production making all their animals dual purpose - when milking cows reach retirement between 12-16 years old they enter the food chain as mature beef while male calves are raised for rose veal, reared with care and compassion – free-range, and with a natural diet.

The installation of 144 milk bottles is a representation of their farming system, breaking it down into its different components. The land and the wider environment are represented by soil, water and air. Wild flowers, grass, feathers and insects are nourished directly or indirectly by manure. The farmers are present through feed supplements, veterinary tools and milking machine parts. Engine oil, power and network cables, and money show the connection to the consumer. Stage blood represents the cattle as a visceral embodiment of their purpose: to live and to die to feed us.

Producers like North Aston Dairy allow all of these components to work in harmony. The approaches of small-scale producers provide a potential blueprint for sustainable management of the land and food production, however, they can often struggle to gain mainstream support as indifference prevails across consumer markets. Whole Milk investigates deep connections between humans, domesticated livestock and the land. It aims to provoke discussion about the future of the industry and encourages us to reflect upon on the nature and impact of our own role as consumers. As the future becomes more uncertain, we must become active participants in the system, improving our understanding and changing our eating habits and attitudes to allow sustainable farming initiatives to grow and have an impact.

Exhibition: 22 September – 28 October 2018

Notes:

Whole Milk was shown as part of Future Knowledge, a thought-provoking exhibition exploring the role of visual culture in continuing to raise awareness of the effects of climate change. Future Knowledge ran from 22nd September – 28th October 2018 at Modern Art Oxford.

<https://www.modernartoxford.org.uk/event/future-knowledge-2/>

North Aston Dairy is an organic microdairy in North Oxfordshire producing milk, cream, veal and mature beef. The dairy was established in 2006 and sells produce via doorstep delivery in the local area and at East Oxford Farmers Market.

<http://northastondairy.blogspot.com/>

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