



## Food

Just before New York's major museums were closed by the Covid-19 pandemic, the exhibition *Countryside: The Future* opened in the Guggenheim Museum. Put together by Dutch architects Rem Koolhaas and Samir Bantal, it contended that the demands of today's city-dweller dictate expansion in the countryside. As a result, technological innovations often happen more actively in rural areas than in cities. Think of data storage, genetic engineering, artificial intelligence, robot automation, labour migration and the private purchase of land for ecological conservation. Koolhaas and Bantal suggest this could be called the abstraction and automation of the countryside.

This story of this abstraction and automation of the countryside was portrayed almost ten years ago by photographer Henk Wildschut in his book *Food* (Post Editions, 2013), which accompanied the exhibition *Document Netherlands: Our Daily Bread*. On commission from the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad and the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Wildschut spent two years photographing the production of meat, milk, vegetables,

fruit, milk and eggs in the Netherlands. He travelled to tomato greenhouses in the Wieringermeer, to fish farms in Enkhuizen and automated dairies in Maasdam.

Wildschut photographed high-tech, artificial, sterile environments that are completely free of bacteria. Environments in which technological progress is celebrated in a dispassionate, detached manner. The idyllic and romantic image of the pure, unspoilt countryside seen in many 18<sup>th</sup>-century paintings and still used by today's food industry in its advertising was drily and expertly smashed to smithereens by the photographer. No farmers in grimy blue overalls but people with hair nets standing at conveyor belts or sitting at desks, working at computers. With vaccination by machines, genetic modification, or LED lighting technology being used in a climate chamber to stimulate high-speed growth, the countryside, seen by so many as slow-moving and stable, is in fact more modern and dynamic than many a metropolis.

The Netherlands is currently the second largest exporter of agricultural products in the world — an astonishing

statistic when you consider that it's a small country measuring just 41,543 km<sup>2</sup> and home to almost eighteen million people, making it one of the most densely populated countries in Europe, with most of its land reclaimed from the sea and lying below sea level. In his photographs and the accompanying texts, Wildschut depicts the expansion of Dutch farming. Shortly after World War II, with the slogan 'Never Again Hunger', that expansion was triggered by the Minister of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food Supplies, Sicco Mansholt (1908–1995). With a plea for scaling up and modernisation, he succeeded in returning food production to the level required.

In the Afterword to *Food* (p. 147), Wildschut writes, 'After two years of research and photography, I realized that the discourse on food production can be infinitely refined and that this often places supposed advantages and disadvantages in a new light. Scaling-up can actually enhance animal welfare, for example, and organic production is not always better for the environment. An excessively one-sided approach to the subject of food is often a

barrier to real solutions. Food is simply too wide-ranging and complex a subject for one-liners, or to be described in terms of black and white'.

What does he think now, ten years later, about those increases in scale and his nuanced, neutral view of them? Now that the condition of the soil is declining rapidly and biodiversity shrinking at an alarming rate. Now that the climate crisis is becoming more and more urgent and the health risks for humans and animals are growing, with Covid-19 as the culmination of these dangers thus far. Now that ammonia emissions from urinating and defecating cows, pigs and chickens in the Netherlands are causing a nitrogen crisis that has set farmers and the government at loggerheads. He hopes to find the answer in a sequel to *Food*, as artist in residence for the coming two years at the Rabobank, originally a cooperative lending bank for farmers that grew out of the agrarian sector and has always been a strong advocate of increases in scale.

Innovation in Dutch agriculture might not have brought what Wildschut was hoping for. Some innovations turned out to work only to a limited degree. The idea that the Netherlands is doing good by producing efficiently and cheaply for parts of the world where food production is more difficult has proven an illusion. It turns out that it's no longer cost-effective to produce food there, and this has enormous economic consequences for local people. Furthermore, there's increasing tension between the production of sufficient food for an expanding world population and the quality of life for that same population. To cope with these immense problems, systemic change is needed, which is inevitably accompanied by chaos, unrest, uncertainty, clashes of opinion, and transformation of all kinds. It is this that Wildschut intends to reveal in his sequel, or perhaps revision, to *Food*. It takes courage to investigate your own images, thoughts and positions in a time when soundbites and those with the loudest voices seem so dominant.

— Text by Kim Knoppers

All images from the series *Food* © Henk Wildschut, courtesy of the artist

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(Bottom) K.I. Samen Grashoek, April 2013 | 14.1 Sperm
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(Bottom left) Ekro Apeldoorn, July 2012 | 8.1 Washing  
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HENK WILDSCHUT is a socially engaged photographer who studies and shares socio-political events in exhibition and book format. His projects are broadly about uprooting and alienation; about people who through misfortune or other inescapable circumstances find themselves forced to improvise in order to survive. Henk studied at the Royal Academy of Art in The Hague and lives and works in Amsterdam.

KIM KNOPPERS is an art historian working as a writer, independent curator and lecturer. Between 2011–2021 she was a curator at Foam, where she curated over seventy group and solo exhibitions at the intersection of photography and disciplines like sculpture, video and painting. She has contributed to magazines, catalogues and artist books including Foam Magazine, Unseen Magazine, Aperture and Camera Austria. She is a lecturer at the MA Photography at ECAL in Lausanne, where she initiated the course *Do Not Disturb — Curating in Progress*. Kim is currently working on curatorial projects in Albania (Marubi National Museum of Photography), Turkey and Greece (Makryammos Ephemeral Art Residency). She is based between Selçuk, Turkey and Amsterdam, the Netherlands.