

An Open-field

Grace Ryder

Alongside *Open-field* (2022), by Zoe Thompson-Moore at RM Gallery and Project Space

Where such a large group of patriotic women have come together to accomplish essential work to help win the war, is it, of course, necessary that they should have good meals, good sleep, good air, and live in a friendly, pleasant atmosphere, with recreation which really does recreate and give new energy and zest to life and work. From these windows can be seen beautiful views of the Hutt Valley hills and the hostel grounds, with lawns and shrubs and good Hutt Valley soil, providing ample scope for girls gifted with the 'green finger' and a love of gardening. With a sincere wish that these walls, together with the other high building, may protect all who come within from harm as well as from cold winds and storms, and that they may provide a cheerful and friendly atmosphere, where mutual trust and good fellowship prevail, I have much pleasure in declaring open the Woburn Hostels for war workers.

Evening Post 10 April 1943¹

Lady Olive Tennyson Newall opened a hostel for women war workers in 1943. The Hutt Valley was inundated with workers to support the essential services during WWII, they joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAACs), and Women's Airforce Auxiliary (WAAFs), or worked in factories or on farms, making clothes, food and munitions.

Some 77 years after this speech was made, it's here that I meet Zoe, in what is now her family's house. Having followed *The Making of Bread, etc.* at Enjoy Contemporary Art Space, I came to ask Zoe if she would be interested in hearing me out about an exhibition, planned for The Dowse Art Museum a few months later. She shows me the bits she has kept in the cupboard under the stairs, "some of which will end up on the compost heap, others which will be burnt", if not before gracing the walls of an exhibition space. There are potato sacks, the boldly coloured ones which found their way into *From the Ground Up*, bits of yarn which would go on to be french knitted into a long, colourful line at *Idle Hands*, plastic bread bags as seen piled into a chain link fence at RM in *Open-field*. The remaining string, paper and fabrics will, no doubt, slip into future exhibitions before they slip into Zoe's compost or fire. She agrees to my proposal on the condition that we'll go slow. A new understanding of energy, zest to life and work prevailed within this house, as Lady Newall so aptly predicted it would. I've been on a go-slow ever since.

¹ Evening Post, Volume Cxxxv, Issue 85, 10 April 1943, Page 6

Open-field is a gentle and beckoning adaptation of Zoe's house, garden and life within this space. In the cupboard sits this idle waste, offering a multitude of material possibilities for the future, where they are reformed carefully and tenderly into plied, smocked and twisted forms. Not simply as recreation, but as thinking via the hand, Zoe gleaned sacks from the neighbourhood coffee roasters, collected and recreated into wavy, voluminous planks. While decorative in nature, smocking is practical in intent — it helps shape garments, giving flex and strength across the shoulders, chest and wrists making it a common addition to agricultural workers' clothing in 18th and 19th-century rural England. The jute forms, laying dormant as haphazard stepping stones across a bog or garden, grace the shiny concrete floors of RM, softening and easing the space, much like the smocking on clothing does. The Nature's Fresh bread bags are shredded and twisted into a glistening twine, then plied together to form a typical chain link fence, to approximately the same dimensions as Zoe's back gate. This back gate offers a link to a common space, shared among her neighbours, where children run wild and resources flow freely.

Since this initial visit, we've discussed 'work' a lot. More accurately; not working, anti-work and wherever possible, avoiding work. 'Work' is described as, 'activity involving mental or physical effort done to achieve a purpose or result.' At a time when 'quiet-quitting' is an international buzzword, and the numbers of those doing 'bullshit jobs'² reaches a tipping point, it seems we are collectively grappling with our exertions as they relate to a meaningful purpose—where do the limits of work end and recreation start? Zoe and I agree not to call any art forms in the exhibition *artworks*—while there have been mental and physical efforts to achieve an outcome, that is not the point. *Open-field*, and Zoe's practice as a whole, pay careful attention to the process as an end in itself. See the forgotten potato, remembered, the palings from the back fence offered as a stool for an alternative perspective, or the rotted sack exhumed from the neighbourhood compost heap. These forms, as representative objects of food, shelter, community and care, poetically describe the meandering cyclical processes of everyday, subsistence work and caring economies, untethered from capitalist conceptions of results and purpose.

Open-field is ripe with the fruits of her labour. Previous exhibitions utilised sourdough and potatoes, and here, kale is everywhere in the form of dried seed pods, softening the architectural necessities of the exhibition space, a large stick, rendering useless Zoe's favourite garden fork. Another large stick of kale, broken into smaller pieces threaded onto her neighbour's washing line like an oversized necklace. Fodder crop for farm animals yet a 'super food' for humans, the Kale here is all but gone, fed to her family and friends, and its remnants kept out of curiosity and material admiration. The wonky gardening fork, fragile

² David Graeber, "On the Phenomenon of Bullshit Jobs," *Atlas of Places*, 2013, Published April 2018, <https://www.atlasofplaces.com/essays/on-the-phenomenon-of-bullshit-jobs/>

where it should be strong, and bent where it should be straight, offers no optimisation of the working condition. Thinking of this fork in relation to the women who came in droves to the valley that Zoe calls home, where the good Hutt Valley soil is no longer abundant as it once was, where this fragile, funny fork might once have gently lifted loose, rich and abundant soil easily. Instead of supporting any war efforts, this land, house and space continue to protect all who come within from harm as well as from cold winds and storms, with curiosity and care, for the materials that are cultivated, saved and shared within it. As was their purpose when built, the home, and by extension exhibition, offer a reprieve from the imperatives of capitalist waged work, a place of abundance and nourishment, curiosity and friendship, commonality and sharing - an open-field.

A Reading List

Since meeting in 2020, Zoe and I have shared countless reading recommendations — some already on one or both of our lists, others are favourites having been revisited multiple times and as always, there are those yet to be read. The concise list below has nonetheless influenced our conversations, shared interests, the exhibition and the above text. At times, these texts gave either permission, comfort or confidence relative to our work, our personal lives, or our perspective on place and place-making. We welcome others' interest and perspectives on these publications and any further conversations, or recommendations, that may arise from them.

Matthias Schmelzer & Andrea Vetter & Aaron Vansintjan, *The Future Is Degrowth: A Guide to a World Beyond Capitalism*. (Verso, June 28, 2022).

Marilyn Waring, *Still Counting: Wellbeing, Women's Work and Policy-making* (Bridget Williams Books, 2018).

Josh Lepawsky & Max Liboiron, *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power* (MIT Press 2022), <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001>

Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Duke University Press, 2011), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1131fj6>.

Jesse Goldstein, *Terra Economica: Waste and the Production of Enclosed Nature* (Antipode, 2013), <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2012.01003.x>