

The Path of Milk

Cornel Bierens

At the earliest stage in most of our lives, the milk we knew followed an exceedingly short trajectory. We just needed to open our throats and the dripping nipple was propped into our still toothless mouths. Regardless of whether we were boys or girls, the satisfaction was so complete that we will never entirely be free of the notion that the world revolves around a woman's breast.

But things could not remain as they were, and it was not long before our mothers began to push us away with a gentle but determined hand. This was our first move in the direction of the wider world. For the provision of our milk, we became dependent on animals, and with this, for a time, we completely lost sight of its path.

Later, at school, with the help of posters on the wall, it was explained to us what that path more or less looked like. First, the milk magically emerged as the farmer milked his cow, then it followed the arrows in the pictures to arrive at the factory. There it moved farther along other arrows, through tanks and machines, to be creamed off, churned, homogenized, pasteurized and so on. Finally, it flowed out in liter bottles with silver caps, which were in turn put into metal crates and onto trucks, to be driven to the local milkman. He was the hero of the final picture. He personally delivered the milk to an ideally healthy family, all of whom preferably stood waiting for him at their front door.

It seemed to us then that this was a lengthy series of events, but from today's perspective the path sketched by those pictures at school was one of endearing simplicity. You could still be certain that the cow whose milk you drank grazed close to your own city or town and that the processing plant was not much farther away. Everything was within reach, within a circle of at most a few dozen kilometers. Yet with the march of history and a swelling economy, those few dozen kilometers

have become hundreds and even thousands. The path of that milk has grown so long that it no longer fits on the posters at school, since banished from the classroom forever.

But take a look: Art has decided to involve herself with the path of milk. It may be surprising, but it is not strange, given that art lives by the expansion of her sphere of influence, perpetually renewing her perspective. Once, art introduced a new vision of landscape through the act of painting it, or, in other words, seeing it through the frame of a painting, which was then new. Since then and precisely because of its success, what was an innovation in its day has now grown hunched and bent, burdened under a mountain of clichés.

In collaboration with researcher Ieva Auzina, this is reason enough for artist Esther Polak to step in, to use milk instead of paint. By charting the path of milk, they once again depict landscape in a new way, entirely different from that of paintings in centuries past. In a painting, the course of a road and the movements of its travelers were determined by the artist. In MILK, those who use the road mark it out themselves. These are the people who collect the milk and the drivers of the tanker trucks that transport it. With a turn of the steering wheel, they determine whether the art observer sees the path bend to the left or to the right. What has for years been their anonymous labor suddenly becomes a worldly affair, their routine actions grown profound and the product they transport assuming the weight of liquid gold. Each step they take is observed from the heavens, by satellite, recorded onto a hard drive and projected onto screens and monitors all over the world.

The nice thing is that the technological developments that had for so long made the path of milk so impossible to follow also provide the means of making it traceable and appealing again. In the form of the Global Positioning System, it



This and previous page:
Esther Polak, Ieva Auzina and RIXC –
Riga Centre for New Media Culture,
MILKprojekt, 2004/2005, mixed-
media installation, dimensions
variable, video stills, © the artists



serves a pivotal function in the *MILKproject*. This can be seen in two ways, either as a symbol of a Big Brother society and total political control or as a system that can bring personal control back to those who have come to miss it.

And there can be no doubt that a great many have indeed come to miss that sense of control. The problem is not that the control exists but that we ourselves cannot exercise it. In order to change this, we have to want to know, for knowledge remains the key to power – knowledge of the world, which is perpetually changing and always with far-reaching consequences.

When the production line for foodstuffs became longer, it immediately also meant a parallel production line of preservatives, anti-oxidants and emulsifiers. Whether we see all that as dangerous or perfectly innocent, we have to want to know about it, for as the philosophers would say, man is what he eats. Polak expresses it rather more imaginatively: "Eating meat cheaper by the kilo helps build a landscape full of hog farms."

Making connections like these, between the individual and society as a whole, is characteristic of her work. She carries out research that lies partly in the domain of scientists, journalists and

lawyers, but they would never conduct it or give it shape in quite the same way. Her investigation is considerably freer, for it is not bound by pre-conceived rules. Here she is both ahead of and behind the rule-bound researchers. She can be at once more naïve and wiser, but she is certainly no less effective.

In Polak, we recognize the old cartographer who in the seventeenth century, in the time of Willem III, counted his own paces along the streets with a chain around his legs to keep his steps consistent. We also recognize her fellow artist, Stanley Broun, who in the 1960s and 1970s built up a gigantic administrative archive with notes about his own footsteps. Thanks to her intensive collaboration with Auzina and the Riga Centre for New Media Culture, or RIXC, MILK has been able to expand on the work of those pioneers.

What MILK sets in motion is not only that we begin to think about the path that milk travels between Latvia and the Netherlands, but that en passant we also think about the whole trajectory that we each tread, as children of mankind, starting with our mother's breast.

Translated from the Dutch by Mari Shields

Milky Way

Viestarts Gailītis

The very first sight of the Milky Way glittering in the black darkness promises more than all the wishes and hopes put together. Its name naively mercantile, no more than a reverse attempt to see the whole of one's life in a palm. The galaxy in which we live has never corresponded to its cute nickname, unless you consider its amorphous flow to have the appearance of spilt milk when seen from the Earth. Throughout the ages milk has been identified with wonder and utopia – the land of milk and honey. Just like looking at the galaxy, the words "Milky Way" are a mirror of our longing.

The prosaic milky way is right here. The geography of man's nourishment – the churn by the roadside collected by the milkman, rounds of cheese in the market, the words, "Home, home, home, home," when the farmer's wife calls the cow home from pasture. These words multiply in time's hall of mirrors. They do not change. Her voice is heard in the pastoral landscape, which has been preserved since time immemorial in an archetype of thinking.

The view that on other occasions has turned to the skies stops by a hill or a bend in the road. The everyday is not much wider than the radius of one's vision. On the other hand, Ieva Auzina and Esther Polak's view into the Milky Way does not disappear behind a hill. It is an attempt to broaden the horizon, to allow country roads to run into the wide world. We see farther, from above, where this milk "flows". We are not given a gradually wider view of our small, dear world, as in the final sequence of Tarkovsky's *Solaris*. In the Global Positioning System projection, alongside the photographs and voices, we see those same people dissolved into the Milky Way of a dark galaxy of pixels. The view continues to move across an electronic map when it has already become lost behind a bend or a hill. The sky and the earth flow into each other.

The GPS projection used by the artists in depicting the Milky Way records traces; it is an attempt to deconstruct a geographically embracing economic process as well as to put oneself into a system of coordinates, that is, to understand oneself. Along with the electronic Milky Way there are also recordings of conversations and images. This mercantile process is personified through the people we meet in them. With GPS we only see them as microbes of impersonal lines and pixels. This is how the countryside, a market and the home meet – a microcosm, where the universe is measured with a socially mercantile view and virtual space. An economic, controlled observation?

Few things are as pleasant as a landscape in full view. But only the few have a full view of it. The landscape with the Milky Way of pixels speaks its own language and can only be understood by those who know the surroundings. They give meaning to this blind line, and we see it through them. Suddenly the dumb line becomes extremely personal. But as soon as it's spotted by a stranger, it becomes nothing more than a lifeless, boring landscape. You stare into the incomprehensible electronic blue of space.

Ancient cartography was discovery; ships ventured into the unknown, and fearsome creatures dwelt along the sea routes. It allowed one to fantasize and to feel false fear and victories. GPS only records movement and mathematical coordinates – facts. Of course GPS does give free rein to childish curiosity; it does not prevent us from interpreting these facts, from following ourselves and others. With GPS we can parody the omnipresent divine spirit as expressed in the romantic poetry of William Wordsworth. Observing our own movement, as usual, we understand less than we do when studying others. The subject becomes the object, and we are nothing more than our own remote control,

a mere imitation of our movements and actions.

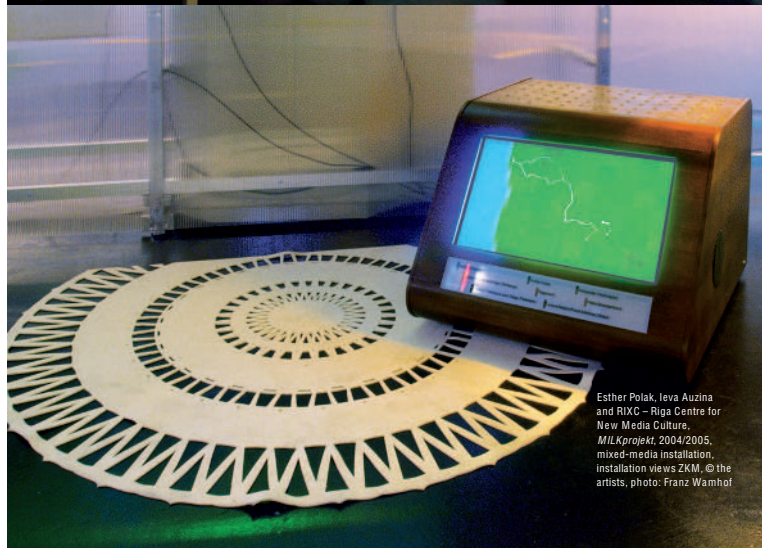
In *MILKproject* we may observe the most ordinary of the everyday – how milk production gets from Latvia to Holland. But this is our world, which we cannot look at with neutral feelings, without associations. The misty white line we see “from above” says very little about itself, but it has a long historical context. The agricultural identity has never been trivial; it is tens of thousands of years old and has fluctuated between ideals (its essence) and disappointment (its actual situation). The political aspect of today’s European agriculture – the EU Common Agricultural Policy, Brussels, documents and bureaucrats – is another universe. But there the overall view is lost again. It’s like when cows and sheep seen in childhood later transform into abstract “agriculture”. Politics is not touched upon in *MILKproject* although it’s hard not to think of politics when looking at this work. To this day almost a quarter of the Latvian population works in agriculture.

The *MILKproject* of Auzina and Polak is multimedia documentation. In it we can only see what is happening. But there is also something happening that we can’t see. An indication of this is given

by the people watching the digital projection of the Milky Way and commenting on it. And Virgil’s *Georgikas*¹ is not the only didactic poem on farming. It describes the prosaic conditions for man’s existence and ideals. *MILKproject* is about the vague boundary between the prosaic and the mythical, local and global scales, about the limits of one’s vision. It is also a didactic work; the romance of labor is unmistakable (the trinity of man, labor and the Milky Way). Thus it cannot be viewed only as virtual cartography, as a signal, because the signal has a context: it is transmitted by the path of agriculture. And thus Auzina and Polak’s work contains both the edible Milky Way and the digital Milky Way. But there has also been an attempt to capture something else. Already, with the birth of the digital world, a completely new universe has formed between the digital and the prosaic – the universe of longing and fantasy, where we can observe, play and model. Perhaps this is closer to the essence, because the significance of the *MILKproject* prevents its being given a worldly association. At times it may be virtual, at times prosaic, but it is always up there, imagined.

Translated from the Latvian by Andris Mellakauls

¹ The Roman poet (70-19 B.C.) Virgil’s *Georgikas* is a poem about growing olives and grapes, raising cattle and beekeeping. He worked on it for several years.



Esther Polak, Ieva Auzina and RIXC – Riga Centre for New Media Culture. *MILKproject*, 2004/2005, mixed-media installation, installation views ZKM. © the artists, photo: Franz Wamhof