



PROFILE - 12 MAR 2018

## On Milk: a Story of Regulation and Control

From creation myths to gender politics, artist Melanie Jackson and academic Esther Leslie investigate that most indispensable of substances

BY TOM EMERY

Expansive is the key word in describing artist Melanie Jackson and academic Esther Leslie's *Deeper in the Pyramid* (2018), with three years of research culminating in presentations across three UK arts organizations – Grand Union, Birmingham; Primary, Nottingham; and Banner Repeater, London – comprising an installation incorporating film developed by Jackson as well as a performance and a book they developed collaboratively. But more than the breadth of the project's delivery, it is the subject matter of milk, which proves expansive beyond expectations, allowing exploration of areas as diverse as biology, technology, myth, and far more, as Jackson says: 'if you took it to its logical conclusion, there isn't a part of life it wouldn't touch.'

The book's structure allows for this degree of expansiveness, as it's broken up into 31 short essays, giving Jackson and Leslie the opportunity to quickly switch from one subject to another, covering as much ground as possible. However, it is also clearly a work without a real end. Jackson and Leslie could probably have continued indefinitely and this is acknowledged by the flip in page orientation half-way through the book, creating the

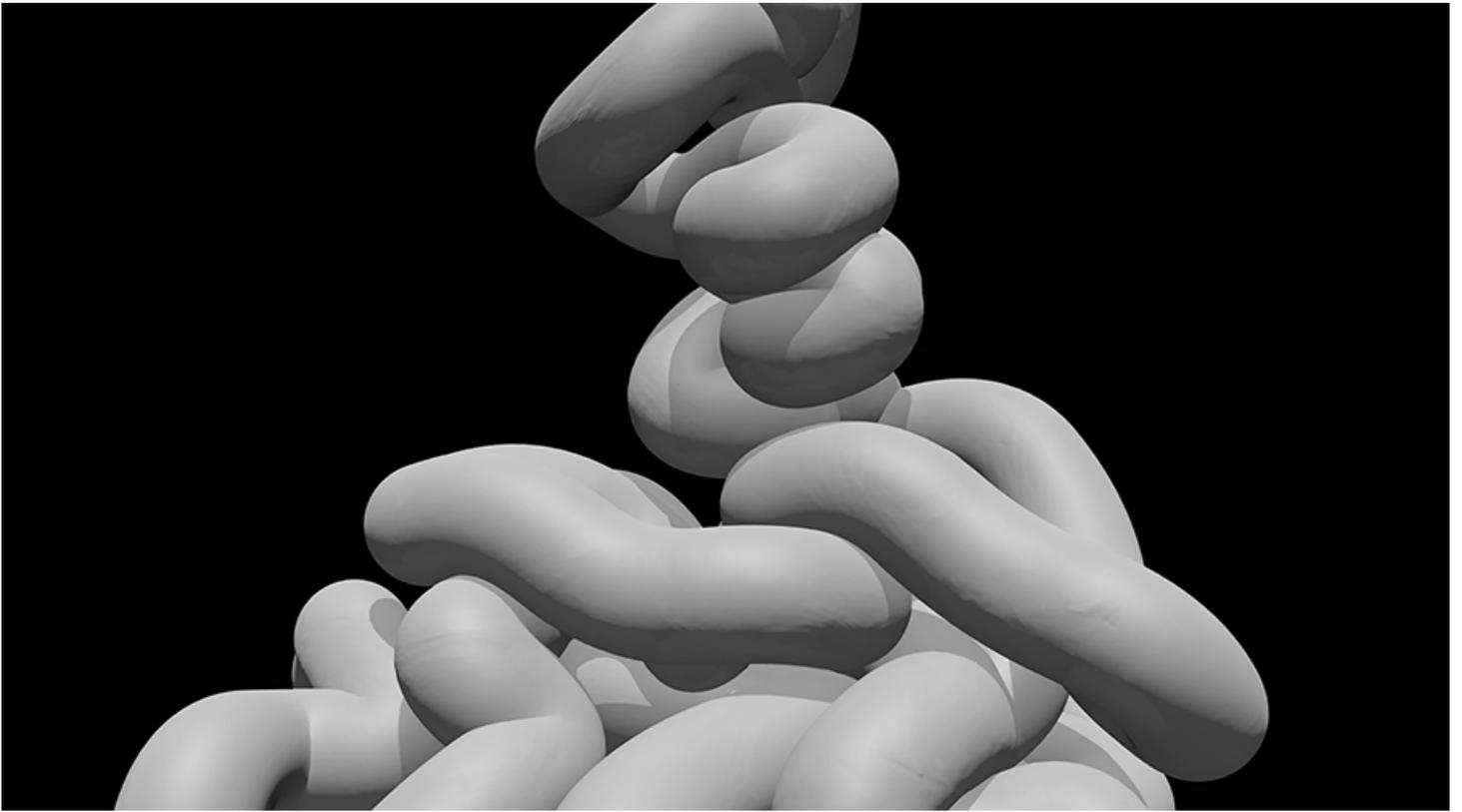
impression of a feedback loop, a publication literally without an ending. These essays, interrelated but fully functional as standalone pieces, give the reader the option of jumping in at whatever point they like, of reading as much as they like, whether that's five pages or a hundred, and as such, the authors have created a publication that is dense with information but one that doesn't feel overbearing.



Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie, *Deeper in the Pyramid*, 2018, production still. Courtesy: Melanie Jackson, Esther Leslie and Modern Activity

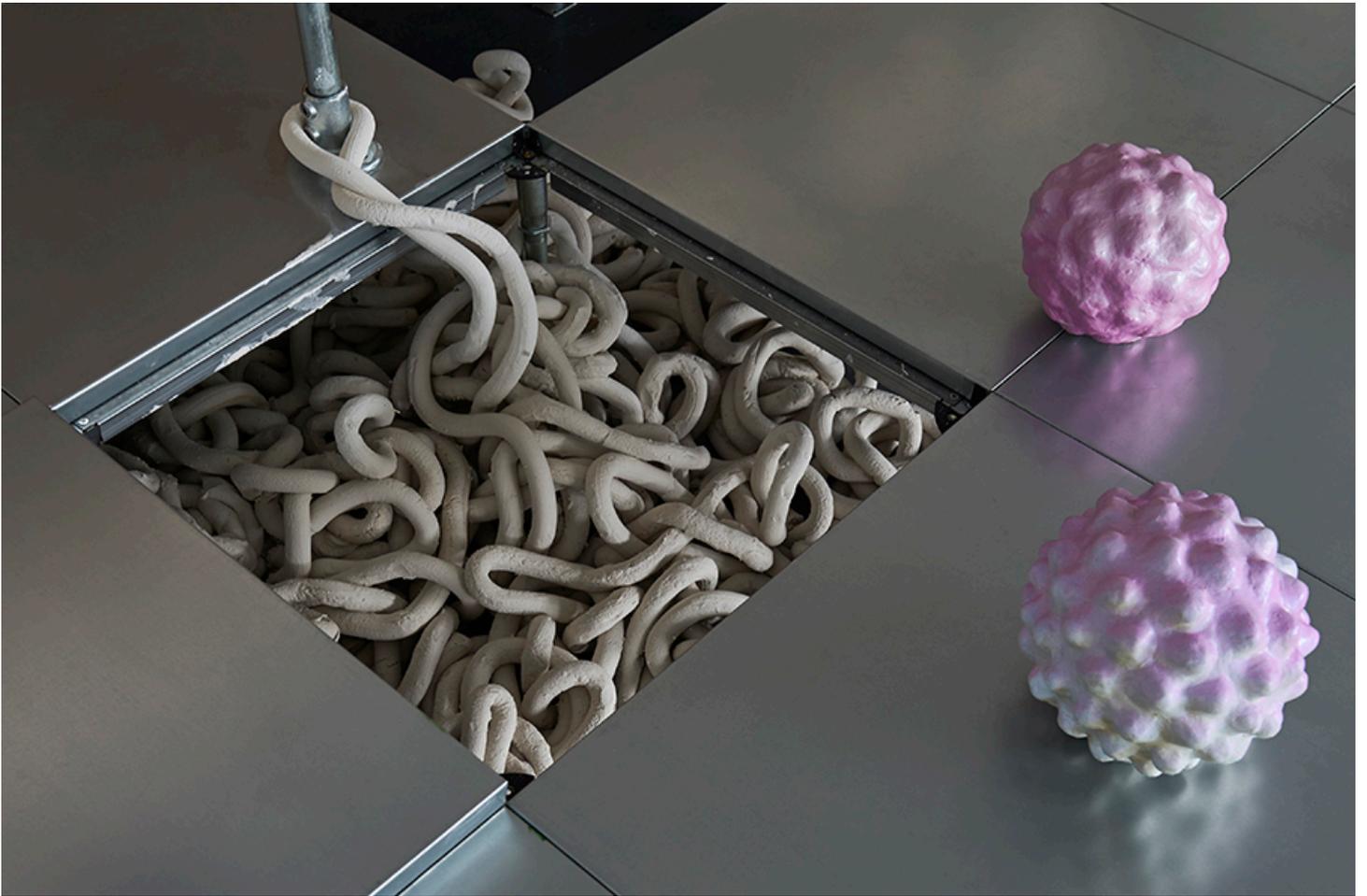
As for the book's subject matter, milk's presence in human life proves to be every bit as far-reaching as Jackson claims, from its presence in unexpected products such as paper coatings or leather finishes, to creation myths of the Ancient Egyptians, Romans and Greeks, involving milk, often breast milk, forming the cosmos. In the book's opening essay, Jackson and Leslie present milk as an almost elemental substance, capable of taking any form and limitless in its potential for application, pure and natural, banal and everyday, yet also relentlessly technologized, 'as technologized as oil' as Jackson states.

In the face of this near-incomprehensible expansiveness, with the project's other current incarnation as exhibition, in the fairly modest space of Birmingham's Grand Union, Jackson finds herself with the task of pulling something together from the book's disparate elements. Wisely, she does not try to force all of the book's contents into the show, acknowledging that 'we've seen modest exhibitions claim to be about everything, which they can't hold up that responsibility.' As such, the exhibition isn't concerned with acting as a straightforward deliverer of content (the book shoulders that responsibility) but instead takes a more abstract, poetic approach to some of the subject matter. In one instance, sound recorded from various research trips – to farms, processing units and other places involved in the industrial manufacture of cow milk for human consumption – is used to create not only the soundscape for one of Jackson's film pieces, but also the visuals, with elements of the imagery coded to respond to specific elements of the sound, creating a generative pattern that could go on indefinitely.



Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie, *Deeper in the Pyramid*, 2018, production still. Courtesy: Melanie Jackson, Esther Leslie and Modern Activity

In another short film animation, Jackson delivers her own creation myth: a female figure is digitally formed amongst a cosmic backdrop, with particular focus given to her breasts. The physics of digitally animating breasts proved another interesting thread of research, with Jackson ending up drawn into the YouTube community dedicated to examining videogame 'boob physics' in ludicrous detail. This predominantly male online community's sense of ownership of an essentially female trait, even in its digital form, ties into the wider research, as Jackson and Leslie discuss the aforementioned creation myths, where male Gods such as Zeus or Saturn aim to control or manipulate the distribution of the breast milk of their female counterparts, Hera and Opis. This thread is further examined elsewhere within discussions around breast milk and its artificial substitutes where we learn that while breast milk is a remarkable substance, capable of chemically responding to suit the specific needs of the infant at different stages of development, formula milk was nonetheless developed and continues to be popular. Ultimately, throughout both myth and history the story is the same: the external regulation and control of women's bodies.



Melanie Jackson, *Deeper in the Pyramid*, 2018, installation view, Grand Union, Birmingham. Courtesy: the artist and Grand Union, Birmingham

Milk's relationship with, and importance to the human body, is something revisited throughout the book and exhibition, from an abundance of angles. In an essay on the phenomenon of 'cheese dreams', Jackson and Leslie refer to research that links them to the amino acid tryptophan, typically ingested via dairy, that is responsible for the distribution of serotonin, one of the largest chemical contributors to mood. In the exhibition, this linking of dairy and digestion finds form in the shape of white tubing, pouring like intestinal soft ice cream in one of the exhibition's films, and spilling out in sculptural form onto the gallery floor.

More than anything, it's the extraordinariness of milk that is conveyed throughout Jackson and Leslie's output, its simplicity as this pure-white natural substance, yet its complexity as it contributes to neurological development, ties to gender politics and much more. Something that seems so inconsequential, so specific, provides a window to everything, and Jackson's bold claim seems undeniably true, that there isn't a part of life milk doesn't touch.

*Melanie Jackson's Deeper in the Pyramid is currently showing at **Grand Union** <<https://grand-union.org.uk/gallery/melanie-jackson-deeper-in-the-pyramid/>> , Birmingham, until 21 April. The project will continue with a performance lecture by Melanie Jackson and Esther Leslie on Thursday 12 April, 7pm at **Primary Nottingham** <<http://www.weareprimary.org/2018/02/melanie-jackson/>> , and a film screening from 13-21 April, and a book launch and exhibition will be held at **Banner Repeater** <<https://www.bannerrepeater.org/>> , London, in May 2018.*

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**TOM EMERY**

Tom Emery is a curator and writer based in Manchester.

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**London**

1 Montclare Street  
London  
E2 7EU, UK  
+44 (0)203 372 6111

**New York**

247 Centre St  
5th Floor  
New York, NY 10013  
+1 212 463 7488

**Berlin**

Zehdenicker Str. 28  
D-10119 Berlin  
Germany  
+49 30 2362 6506