

Transcript

OU Economics seminar series: essential for what?

This is essential work

Michael Nahman:

So, I'm going to talk to you very, very briefly about our upcoming exhibition, This is Essential Work. So, I am coming at this as an anthropologist. I come from a medical and political anthropology background. And I also have an interest in visual social sciences. I've made a film, which I'll talk to you a bit about, which is about, again, the heatedness of gendered forms of labor.

But I'll start by telling you about how this exhibition came about. And I think it was probably about four years later that we actually got funding from the University of the West of England Vice Chancellor's Award to conduct this research into the privatized markets of fertility, specifically milk markets in India between India and Australia.

And we published one paper from that so far. It's called Nurture Commodified. And the link for it is on the screen. So, I'm just admitting a person here. So, we were looking at-- we were really interested in process of reproduction and the value of women's bodily substances.

I'm not going to talk to you too much about this article and the research. But basically, we went to India and with the incredible help of a colleague in India, we connected with different organizations and actors who were central to the privatized trade in breast milk. We've had a global market around women's breast milk for about 15 years in places like Brazil and the US.

There is an already existing longstanding market of extracting so-called excess milk from women's bodies and selling it at a highly marked up profit. In India, it's much newer. Only in the last few years has one company, Neo Lacto, opened up its business in Bengaluru in India.

And they're a really interesting case, because they're actually a company that began as a dairy producing business in Australia. They've taken the knowledge around pasteurization and the production of milk, and they've re-implanted, brought it back to India, and created quite high spec milk processing plant on the outskirts of the city and also sourcing milk from women, really, across the country.

And the women are told to think about their milk as being in excess. So, the milk that you have, you've got too much milk, and so we're going to use that, and that milk is, in fact, sold at approximately \$450 USD per liter online.

I had also made a documentary film called Atomised Mothers a few years ago, which was all about isolation and the politics of care and the hiddenness of women's labor, of parents' labor. And that was really a kind of attempt to interrupt the narratives around motherhood that tended in this country to center on white middle class women.

So, a lot of the literature and the visuality that we were exposed to were all about white middle-class women. And so, this informs the backdrop of our exhibition, which was an attempt to interrupt that narrative to bring in women from across the career spectrum, I want to say, stages, different stages of

their career, globally situated people, so people from the global south, especially, was really, really important.

We began to plan This is Essential Work an online open access intersectional feminist exhibition. Our call for artists returned a phenomenal over 700 pieces of art from around the world. On the jury are myself, and Susan, and an artist called Yuko Edwards, who you can find on Instagram, @yukoedwards, and also her website, www.yukoedwards.com.

And the implication, as the artists who are here today will know, was, what is the value of reproductive labor today, and how does it relate to other kinds of paid and unpaid work? So, what I'm going to do now is-- it's a treat for us all-- I'm going to show everyone a few images and one short video from the exhibition. I might turn this around. And some of the artists are here today. You can-- exactly-- do the next slide.

So, this piece is by Bea Melo, called Exhaustao. Bea's based in Brazil. She graduated in architecture and urbanism from the Federal University of-- I'm going to say it wrong-- Pernambuco. And she's been working as a visual artist since 2011. Currently she's been focusing on the threshold between the figurative and the abstract through bodily movements. And this was really such a powerful kind of image evoking both labor and what it does to the body.

Daniela Torrente's Victoria's Shadow-- Daniela Torrente was born in Sao Paulo in 1976. She lives and works there. She specialized in image and contemporary culture, has a BFA in visual arts from Santa Marcelina. Her research moves between her interest in constructions of female identity and the experience of being a descendant of Armenian refugees. So, she uses photography as a basis, but also uses other forms of art, like engraving, video, drawing, collage, and sculpture, expressing themes connected with belonging, memory, patterns of identity, the feminine, and everyday life.

This is a piece by Virginia Pinho, who was born in 1985. She's a visual artist and photographer, a teacher and researcher, with a master's in communication. She develops research on cinema and representations of the worlds of work, production, and circulation of images, the relationship between memory and the construction of urban space. Here we see an image of her mother, the image she has named Sewing Machine. So, we see the woman is the machine. And her mother began as a sewing machinist at the age of 10, I believe. And this is her much later in life.

We're very fortunate to have some of the artists here. I'm not going to say much about this next piece. Perhaps Shweta will come in a minute. I'm just checking that we've moved to the next slide. Yes, great, thank you. This is a piece by Shweta Bist called A Covid Family Portrait. We can come back to it, Shweta, if you'd like when you say a few words.

We've got another piece here by Helen Acklam, who is also we're very fortunate to have with us today. And the piece is called Strain. And Helen may or may not say a few words about that in a few minutes. I'm just going to check if we got Jess Baum with us as well, because I'm about to show her video.

[CRYING]

Does anyone pay me any notice?

Yes, I'm sorry.

[CLASSICAL MUSIC]

[WHISTLING]

I'm not going to say too much about that piece, other than I think it's really powerful in its polyvocality in kind of evoking such a universal experience. So that really brings me to the end of my little sharing around our exhibition. As I said, it's going to be launched, hopefully, at the end of this month. We're really nearing the end of a very long and exciting process, as I said, of whittling down over 700 pieces of art to just 20. And we're very, very fortunate to have some of the artists here.