Over the last five years or more there has been an impulse towards collaboration in contemporary art discourse. From political and economic globalisation to relational aesthetics, the methods and tactics of collective activity provide a fertile platform for creative practice. Much of the work from recent feminist art surveys such as *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* reflects collaborative and/or collective effort – often effacing and transforming questions of authorship.

A crucial strategy for the feminist movement, collaboration has also been one of its greatest myths. For Donna Haraway, 'It has become difficult to name one's feminism by a single adjective. … With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race and class cannot provide the basis for belief in "essential" unity.' That is, race, economics and sexuality cannot be divisive lines that shape feminism. As Haraway sees it, a successful feminist coalition is locked around affinities of otherness, difference, and specificity, rather than identity. Affinity is collective sympathetic diversity.

Taking the temperature of feminism right now, it seems to make sense that we look for collectives based on shared qualities or sympathetic interests. A notion re-affirmed by writer Jenni Sorkin who failed to get an interview with Tracey Emin for an essay about feminism: 'bind an artist to gender *only*, and she is bound to be unhappy'. Affinity clearly raises as many problems as it does solutions. So what are the historical lessons of feminism about the limits and possibilities of collaborative practices for women working in the fields of craft and design? It was Buckminster Fuller who envisioned that reshaping the structures of everyday design and solving problems inherent to the production of artifacts was a much better solution to improving the human condition than sweeping social reforms. Perhaps then, collaboration based on affinities has particular relevance for practices that might be drawn under the craft and design umbrella because these areas are formally defined by a connection to skill in the name of function in order to meet need. Interactive, relational craft and design practice redefines the relationship between making and social networks. These are open-ended, semi-functional works that emphasize use *and* meditation on ideas.

Arguably, today's feminist art projects barely look like art, let alone feminist art. An audience member at a recent public forum on feminism, staged by a contemporary art gallery in Melbourne, made an interesting, if uneasy point. She suggested that today women artists aren't making work advocating for women's rights specifically but are seeking change more generally, by making connections with 'those even further down the agency food chain' such as the poor and disenfranchised. An example of this claim is Dutch group Women on Waves, who work within international maritime waters to provide abortions and contraception to women denied access to such services in their home towns, via a ship customized with a clinic. Not content to simply reposition women in the world, women artists today are repositioning the world in relation to themselves. All of which is grafted onto the legacy of a self-consciously activist feminist ethic.

While younger artists are today frequently inspired by feminist practice and theory, and many would call themselves feminists, it seems that only a minority would describe their work as driven by feminism. Likewise, as a curator I notice that very few craft and design exhibitions or exhibition proposals mention the word. Perhaps today if we find it hard to describe a work or a practice as feminist, it might make more sense to talk about women artists making work that seeks a change in culture, by going beyond it. In this way, feminism might have simply grown into a term that can be pushed and pulled to fit a world slowly (but surely) down-grading the patriarchy. This flexibility might be an expansive trait, making feminism as much a way to address ethical issues as to redraw new imaginative margins.

Wietske Maas and Annie Wu

Wietske Maas, who was born in the Netherlands and grew up in Australia, has been based in Amsterdam since 2005. Exploring urban food systems, ecologies and archaic preservation methods, her aim is to hunt out the edible food sources within cityscapes. Together with others, she makes collective interventions, performances, formal public dinners and more casual gatherings that offer new possibilities and engagements for life in contemporary and future urban zones.

A significant part of Maas' practice is the development of relationships in order to create these social occasions. Frequently her research involves local animal keepers, historians, ecologists, biologists, universities, cooks, government departments and councils as well as local clubs and interest groups as an introduction to the edible possibilities of a given city zone. Introductions are made through newsletters, telephone calls, emails, tip offs. Often a call for assistance will attract support and specialist knowledge with many relishing the opportunity to use their skills (and increasingly, a shared urban food philosophy) to work with Maas in an artistic context. Thus, the making of Maas' work involves the formation of a temporary autonomous collective. Here the artist is a producer of difference from the dominant culture that harnesses our imagination. While *urbanibalism* (as the artist calls it) is a kind of political anarchy, she likes its inherent ambivalence: the status of being both inside and outside formal structures. Ultimately says Maas, the work is about developing relations

with others from different corners of local and global city life: from schools, to local communities to CEOs of corporations.

For the exhibition at the VCA Gallery, Maas has fermented horse milk together with honey to brew a milk champagne. The champagne is based on kumis which was drunk largely in the soviet sanatoriums to improve immunity and aid against consumption. Researching the champagne production took the artist to the Collingwood Children's Farm, The Victorian Apiarists Association and Russian Ethnic Representative Council of Victoria, amongst a range of other sources. Staged as a milk bar within the gallery, Maas also plots a typology of relations leading to the work. The horse milk has been procured locally and the honey from an urban beekeeper who keeps a network of hives dotted across Melbourne in a ten-kilometre radius of the city centre. Visitors can try the results and follow the artist's processes and whereabouts of collection and preparation. In drinking the lactic fizz we capture both the work's celebratory quality and its exclusively female properties as we mark one hundred years of women's franchise in Victoria.

Annie Wu is a Melbourne-based artist, writer and fashion designer. She was born in Shanghai and spent the first seven years of her life there before moving to Australia. She is interested in the communicative aspects of art that promote and harbour the exchange of knowledge which draws on her interest in conceptual design, wearable art and fashion as vehicles for the instigation of change. She employs art as a way of re-evaluating and re-thinking our immediate surroundings, and her interest in collective practice extends to the organisation of events, contributions to blogs and other online image-based communities.

Wu tests the idea of the publication as an art tool; for her it represents 'the perfect example of a consistent whole that is continually evolving, collecting and distributing'. For the exhibition, she has created posters and publications, all available in the 'resource centre/shop' positioned within the VCA Gallery. Here visitors can pick up a copy, become involved in future publications or negotiate a series of instructions for the creation of clothes. For Wu, personal adornment can be used to address social awareness when used as a critical visual device; and she writes, 'clothing has the ability to create dissidence and promote a restructuring of the accepted wearable norm. It is often the case that complex ideologies become more accessible when delivered via functional means, in the form of useful objects that surround us'.

Wu offers a 'toolbox' of ideas and elides the gallery space with the store, library or workshop to create a total environment. Within the gallery rests specially-constructed furniture and plants that fit out the space as a living area; a reference section with books a range of self-made and peer-made publications, and easy-to-manipulate guides for making clothes. Each clothing ensemble is accompanied by instructions so that participants may leap from Wu's directions to create their own clothes, distorting the authorship of the finished works and creating new, uncontrollable contexts. These free resources are also the basis for the development of new, potentially ongoing, relationships as the works themselves rejoin the cycle to become possible future content. This cyclical mode of information = distribution = information is informed by Wu's interest in the seminal publication *Whole Earth Catalog* (published from 1968 to 1972 and irregularly until 1998), a guide that Apple founder Steve Jobs has described as a proto Google-like paperback. With the by-line 'access to tools', *Whole Earth Catalog* provided the means for self instruction, education, living and inspiration to shape the environment and to share this knowledge with whoever was interested. Wu is involved in making work that contributes to this notion of autonomous living for local communities able to distribute 'recipes' for the construction of basic needs.

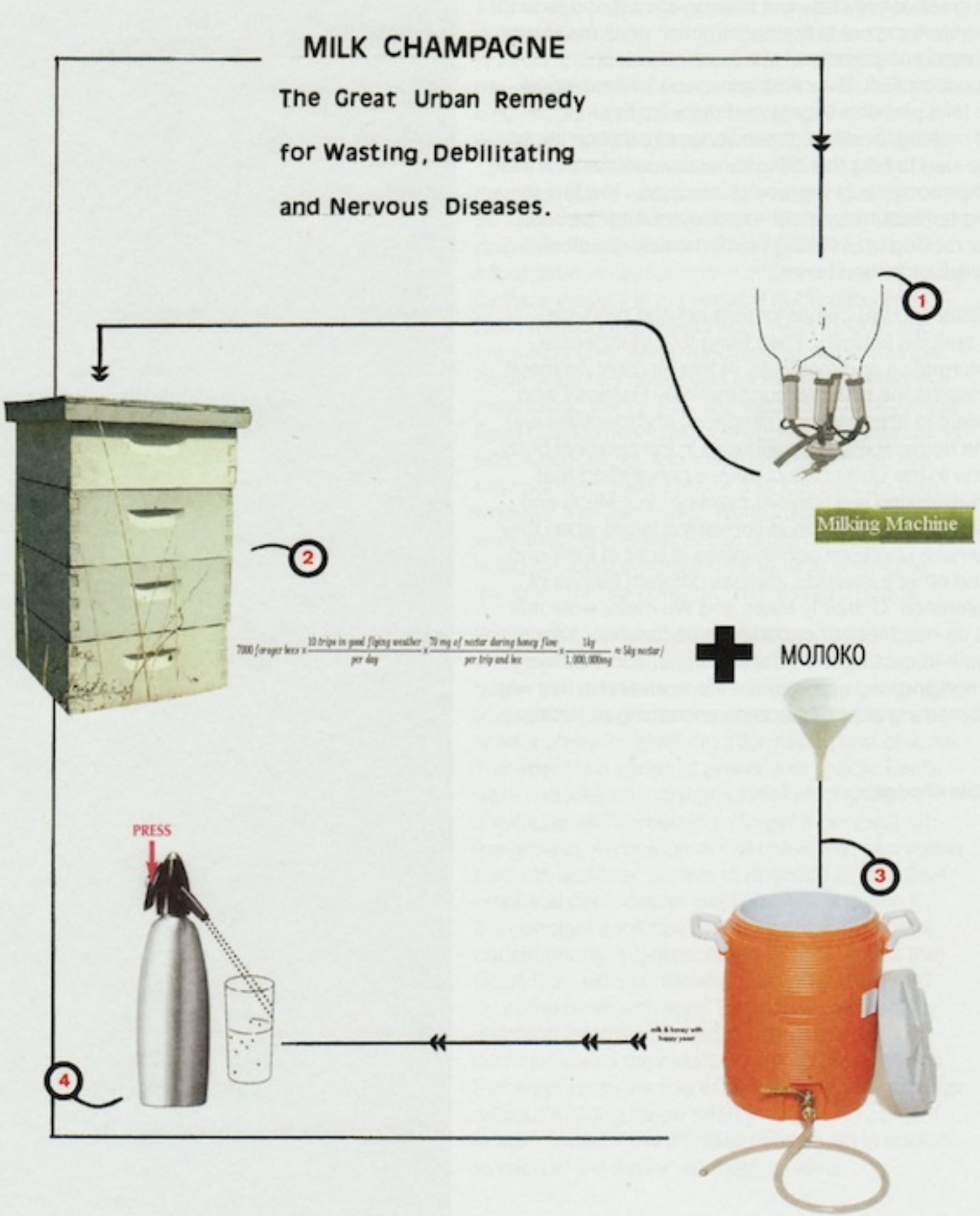
Reciprocity is central to both Maas' and Wu's working methods. Each gives for others to take but, in the construction of scenarios as a presentation framework, each develops yet another level of relationships for gleaning information and objects. The effect is a series of provisional guilds. Each work requires an initial groundswell of affinities – a sympathetic immersion – to get a concept off the ground. An outcome, not unlike that of a voting core, or, as Maas prefers to describe it, 'a radical empirical democracy'. Similarly, Wu is driven by the constant evolution and fluid nature of social constructions, interactions and interventions that result from using unfamiliar artistic devices and by doing more with less. Each artist, rather than leeching information and resources, carefully communicates their ideas to set up relationships that emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation without making these relationships into content in itself. Instead, the affinities created act in addition to each of the works' conceptual aims.

If women were once on the outside of art practice in terms of magazine coverage, commercial representation and institutional acknowledgment – as they were of the vote, of equal pay for equal work – then these practices make Maas and Wu the pivotal point for not only opening up the structures of creative franchise but making all of those around the work critical to the construction of its meaning. There is no privatised space of individual consumption. They *arrange* space for their works to take place as events and disclose the mechanics of making. In effect, these styles of practice might be said to take the disenfranchisement and the lack of proximity and the lack of inclusion – the fuel for the feminist movement – and invert it as the basis for making art, making women artists directors, conductors and hosts.

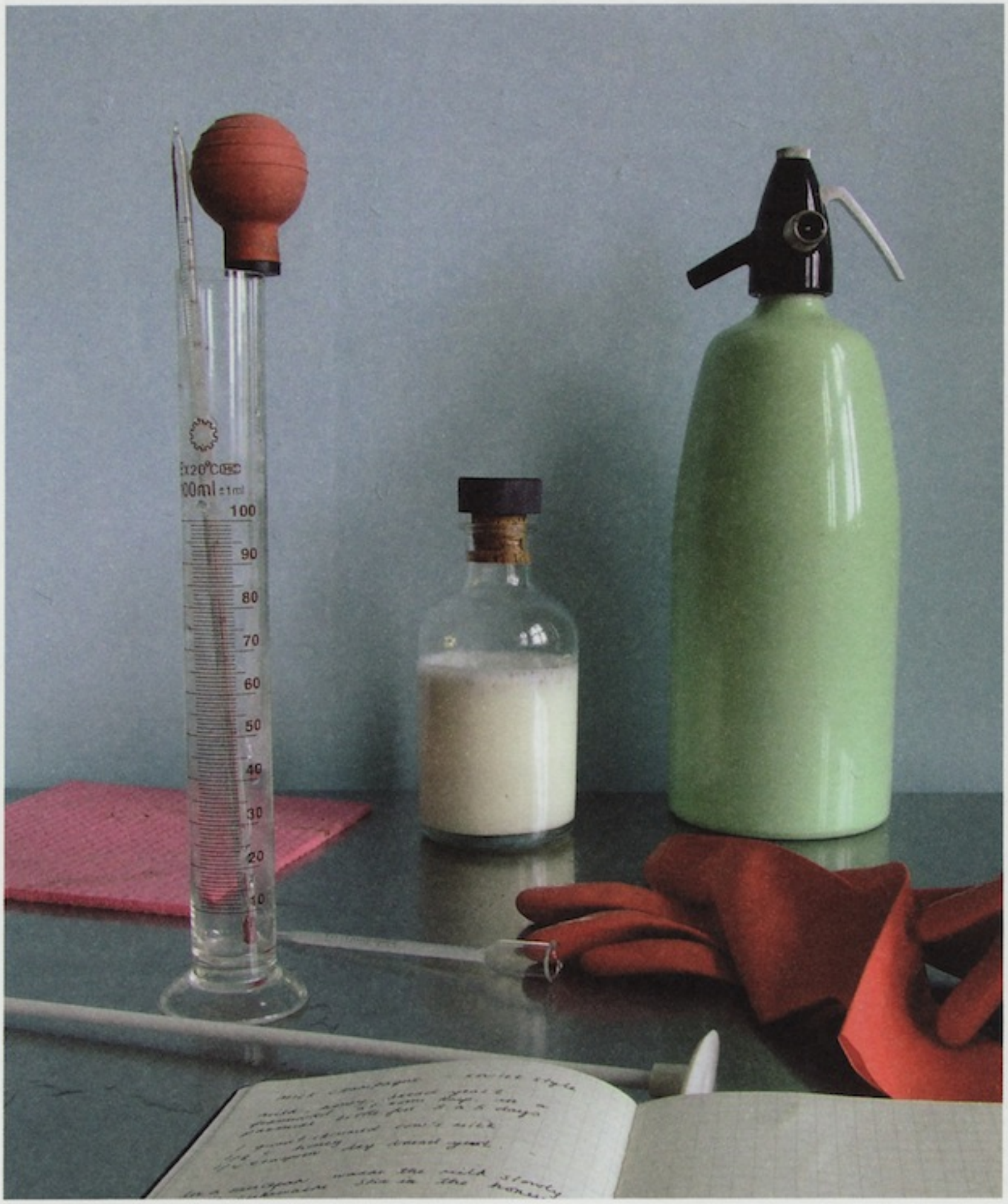
Maas and Wu gather for their art and produce a specific sociality. They bring together people, information and materials. At this moment we move towards the affinities suggested by Haraway who refers to 'the profusion of spaces and identities and the permeability of boundaries in the personal body and in the body politic' before concluding that 'Networking is a feminist practice'. For Maas and Wu these links probe at something larger when they remake unofficial communities in light of their own and other's interests, despite different frames of reference. Certainly Maas and Wu make work that is as much about experience as function. Like a walk-in catalogue: meaning is made in the doing, engaging and activation of the work and in this way something poetic becomes something political.

Kate Rhodes

1 Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century," in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 155.
2 Jenni Sorkin, 'Social Construction', *Frieze*, March 2007, p. 36.
3 Correspondence with the artist.
4 Correspondence with the artist.
5 Correspondence with the artist.
6 Correspondence with the artist.
7 Haraway, p.170.



Wietske Maas
Milk Champagne Flow Chart
2008
Courtesy the artist



Wietske Maas
Milk test
2008
Courtesy the artist