

A new exhibition about the future of food lacks bite



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FOOD IS more than a question of taste. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that around 80% of agricultural land is devoted to rearing livestock, yet it yields only 18% of the world's calories. Cattle are the fifth-largest producers of methane, a greenhouse gas which affects the climate. Were the world's eaters to switch to vegetarianism, in 2050 agricultural emissions would be 29% lower—or 70% lower were people to opt for veganism.

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tableware. Though this is an interesting and innovative, the section rather resembles a sustainable design fair. One problem is being ignored: that of persuading people to consume less in the first place.



The best parts of the show try to take on these questions of scale. In “Trading”—which focuses on the buying, selling and transporting of food—“Banana Story”, a design project by Johanna Seelemann, points out the vast amounts of international travel hidden in “made in” labels. Her “banana passport” tracks a single banana’s 14-day journey from a tree in Ecuador to a supermarket in Iceland, covering 8,800km and passing through 33 pairs of hands. It succeeds because it attaches bigger questions to a small item: if you had to give that passport a stamp of approval every time you bought a banana in the supermarket, would you still buy it? Would you feel comfortable eating a banana every day once you had seen the energy and human labour required to deliver it to you?

On to “Farming”, and “Our Daily Bread”, a 13-minute film by Nikolaus Geyrhalter and Wolfgang Widerhofer, looks at industrial food production and high-tech farming. Bulls bred to provide sperm for artificial insemination file past the camera, pumped with so much testosterone that their muscles unnaturally bulge like bodybuilders’. In a lettuce field at night, kneeling workers inch forward in silence, following the picking-machine’s basket like dogs behind a bone. The slick processes show how detached and clinical food production has become, which is almost as troubling as scenes of animal slaughter. “Our Daily Bread” is partly screened off—presumably because some viewers or young children might find certain scenes upsetting—but it is one of the few things in the exhibition that fulfils its claim to “question values” or “make us reconsider”.

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as this are asking far more interesting questions. a tiny catalyst is not going to encourage people to think big, or make big changes.

“FOOD: *Bigger than the Plate*” continues at the V&A in London until October 20th

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