



HARVEST is a free programme organised by Cat Rossi, Charles Holland and Steffi Klenz from UCA Canterbury School of Architecture, Art and Design. Timed to celebrate the end of the Folkestone Triennial 2025 and the changing seasons, it looks at the reconnection with growing and harvesting materials, with resources and seasonality, and with the earth amongst architects, artists, and designers. What do we gather, collect, and give thanks for today? The programme includes a salon conversation and artworks tour scheduled for Harvest Sunday (5th October 2025), and a poster series.

Strange Harvests

By JJ Charlesworth

Autumn comes around and the sun starts to set earlier. For generations before us it would have been the close of the harvest season, and in Britain and other countries, harvest festivals were celebrated, as part of the Christian year, marking the traditional period when the crops were in, ready for the colder, more barren months that would follow. Harvest festivals are still a part of Autumn calendar, but our relationship to such symbols has changed. Food is no longer something that comes from near where we live, and fewer of us are involved in agriculture because of industrialisation – because farming is mechanised, and because global trade allows food to be imported from around the world, whatever the season.

In the contemporary world, the idea of harvest has slipped from its usual associations, as our society's relationship to food and its production has become more distanced and separated. As that has happened, though, the idea of harvest has come to attach itself to stranger, more contemporary problems, to do with our attitudes towards exploitation – of resources, and of each other – and of what we produce and who we produce it for. It comes back to the relationship we have to technology, particularly now in the era of Big Tech, and particularly with the arrival of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as a significant technological innovation, which has big consequences for many areas of life, not least art and culture. Where, then, does 'harvest' turn up in the contemporary imagination? Science Fiction is often a good place to look.

In one of the most memorable scenes in the 1999 film *The Matrix*, Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, is released from the tyrannical virtual reality network into which humanity has been enslaved by the race of machines that has taken over the world. Once his physical brain has been unplugged from the Matrix, Neo is torn from the bleak but familiar simulation of late-twentieth century society he has always lived in, to awaken in the 'real' world. Finding himself naked in a pod filled with bionic goo, his body hooked up to implanted cables, he jolts up, panicked and baffled, to look around him for the first time: as the camera pans away from a stunned Neo, the film reveals to us that he is just one of thousands or millions of other humans, floating unconsciously in identical pods, each plugged into vast towers that rise up around him and stretch into the distance, all attended by the insect-like machines, as electrical energy arcs between the huge structures that rise beneath a cloud-filled, sunless sky. Later, the film's guru-like rebel leader, Morpheus, explains to Neo that, long ago, in humanity's war against artificial intelligence, in a desperate attempt to cut the machines off from the solar energy they relied on, humans 'scorched the sky' to blot out the sun. Yet in the end, the machines won, turning human beings into a resource, harvesting the electrical energy produced by the human body.

The zany, dystopian surrealism of *The Matrix* is a brilliant fantasy, even if its narrative gimmick – that sentient, electrically powered machines harvest humans as a power source – is silly. As fans debate online, why can't the machines just use nuclear power, or something? And yet the image still touches a nerve, playing on an anxiety that's already part of our culture: about how we see ourselves making use of resources, as opposed to ending up as a resource ourselves. The scenes in *The Matrix* deliberately emphasise the agricultural metaphor, as various

machines move about the pod-towers of humans as if they were tending to a crop.

Meanwhile in the 25 years since the film was made, we've seen the arrival of Big Tech and the profound influence that digital networks now wield on cultural and social life. And in the language of Big Tech, 'harvest' takes on new connotations in the form of 'data harvesting'. We're no longer in the world of human beings profiting from the product of their labour and the bounty of nature, but human beings becoming the things which gets harvested. What's harvested isn't food produced by human effort, but data produced by humans, that can be exploited for profit. With the arrival of AI, the range of what human beings make that can now be processed and exploited by machines extends into art and the mass media.

There's quite a distance from the old world of growing crops and this new and more troubling world of technology in which harvesting has become both a technology and a metaphor for our relationship to it. It's worth going back a little, to the history of how harvest is depicted in our culture, and how its meaning has changed over time. Harvest, after all, has long been a subject in Western art, and in an odd way the vision of humans-as-harvest offered by sci-fi fantasies like *The Matrix* is a contribution to that theme. Harvest has been a popular subject for painters throughout the centuries, going back to works such as Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Harvesters* (1565). In the foreground of Bruegel's remarkable painting, peasants are harvesting the field of wheat that fills the lower half of the image. Most of them, however, have stopped for lunch, which is milk and bread, butter, perhaps cheese, with pears collected from the trees nearby. Beyond them and the wheatfield, stretching to the horizon and the sea, we see a microcosm of sixteenth-century rural life – cottages, churches, people playing a game on the grass of a common, cows grazing, sail ships anchored off the shore.

What is striking about *The Harvesters* is its gentle, matter-of-fact depiction of the work of rural life, of a world of ordinary people getting on with a livelihood which sustains them. But the honesty of Bruegel's depictions isn't naïve – it depicts, with subtle simplicity, something about the economy of an agricultural society. The peasants' work to bring in a harvest that they also consume for themselves; there's the bread from the wheat they've grown, and the dairy produce that comes from the cows grazing in the distance. But there's also a bigger world out there, in which trade is involved. Perhaps those ships are taking grain to other markets far away from this little world. It already tells us something about people and how they work, and the way what they produce is for their own consumption, but also for exchange with others, through travel and commerce.

Bruegel's depiction of his peasants, and their connections to the world that surrounds them, is an image that tells you how the world works. But in the following centuries, the relationships of work and exchange in the world of the countryside and harvest gets sidelined, or else romanticised. The pastoral genre that became popular in eighteenth-century painting tended to picture peasant life as bucolic idyl, a fantasy which projected the aristocracy's ideas about the perfect social order – in which the lower classes knew their place and were happy with it. There are odd exceptions, though, paintings where an idea of how a society works at a given time appears in the image.

One such painting is George Stubbs's painting *The Reapers* (1785). There, a group of farm workers are busy cutting wheat and bundling it into sheaves, while the owner, on horseback, oversees the work. (There is a further moral subtext going on in the picture, as the landowner and the farm girl in the middle exchange glances, while an older farmhand, perhaps her father, looks on with consternation.)

A century on after Stubbs, modernist painters like Claude Monet and Vincent Van Gogh were turning to the rural world for inspiration, but this time as a place of escape from the rapidly industrialising world of the big cities and capitalist industry. In Monet's case, he painted haystacks in every kind of evening, morning and daylight (the *Haystacks* paintings were mostly painted between 1888 and 1891). They're like strange monuments, sitting quietly in the scenery of fields and woods, which hint at being manmade, yet never show who has made them. Van Gogh, by contrast, while he often painted the countryside as a place of intense, almost mythical vitality, was also closely attentive to rural people and the everyday rhythms of agricultural life, such as in the calm, sunny fields, crisscrossed by cottages, hedgerows and farmers on carts, of *The Harvest* (1888).

The history of the harvest as it's represented in art is extensive. But what one sees as the twentieth century goes by is that, progressively, artists find it hard to come to terms with how the countryside is being transformed by industrialisation. Search the catalogue of Art UK, the catalogue of artworks in British public collections, and you can find paintings, mostly made during the 1950s and 60s, which represent combine harvesters at work. During the 1940s, British painters had depicted the harvest as a part of the war effort, depicted as an activity both humble and heroic, a crucial element in the survival of the nation. But in those paintings of the postwar years of reconstruction, as agriculture was being further mechanised, people in the fields are replaced by the imposing form of the harvesting machine, often operated by a single, diminutive human. The old image of people working and living on the land, whether it was an idealised picture of life or one critical of social inequalities, could no longer say much about a society where the countryside had become more like a factory.

Today in Britain the majority of working people don't grow or make things. In 2025, of the almost 34 million people employed, only 272,000 of those people work in agriculture, fisheries and farming. 24.5m work in the service sector, including 8.4 million people who work in education and healthcare combined. And, of course, there are thirty million more people, children, young people, students, the economically inactive and retired people, who do not work.

We've come a long way from the world of Bruegel's peasants. We live in what many have termed a 'post-industrial society', where few of us have much to do with producing the material things we, as a society, consume. According to government figures, just over 2.6m people in Britain are employed in the creative industries, in computing, film, broadcast media, music, art, architecture, publishing, design and so on – work which doesn't so much produce things as much as it produces experiences, events, ideas, forms and sensations. But while the creative industries have been held up as an important part of how post-industrial society is developing – partly because they are supposed to produce things that it's hard to automate and mechanise – we might not be so sure now.

Creative work was supposed to be the most human kind of work, because only humans could be truly creative. Works of literature, of visual art, design, music and moving image, could only be produced by creative people with talent, skill and insight. But with AI making spectacular advances in how it can generate media – images, texts, moving image, music, literature, design – the worry is that when it comes to making cultural things, the machines will eventually be able to replace the humans who make them. People working in the creative industries are not happy about this: the last couple of years have seen Hollywood screenwriters go on strike over how AI might impact their jobs, while musicians and visual artists have campaigned to constrain how AI companies are able to use their copyrighted artworks and compositions to train the AI 'models'. The greatest fear is that very soon such technology will be able to produce artworks without the need for artists.

But to get there we end up back where we started, with Neo and the machines harvesting humans. For sure, it's still a zany, dystopian metaphor, but a bit of it is at work in the current controversies over AI and creativity, as increasingly powerful computer systems go about absorbing everything that humans have created and put into digital form – all the music, the films, the novels, paintings, photographs and so on, everything that a machine can read, analyse and synthesise. It's not so much humans as the human capacity for creativity which is being harvested. This, along with the older techniques of data harvesting on which the Big Tech platforms' business models are based, are converging, putting even more power and control over the way creative content is produced into their hands.

Of course, it's not the machines that are in control, but an elite group of people – now very rich and increasingly powerful – who control the platforms that provide us with more and more of what we consume: the platforms that are able to deliver to us an infinite catalogue of consumer goods to our doorstep, and an infinite catalogue of entertainment to our screens, who monitor our every interaction and response in order to calculate what we might want next, even before we realise what it is ourselves.

There's one aspect of the old idea of harvest that, maybe, has come round again. In the feudal period, in medieval Europe and elsewhere, and for many centuries even before Bruegel's own peasants, serfs would work the land to produce enough for themselves, while the rest would be taken by whichever local landowning noble those peasants were sworn to. Today there are some critics, such as the Greek economist Yanis Varoufakis among others, who see in the expansion of Big Tech a new era of 'techno feudalism'. The theory goes that since the big tech corporations effectively own the digital 'land' in which we all live, instead of selling us products like old-fashioned capitalists used to, they now extract rents from us – in the form of fees and subscriptions – to allow us to use their platforms.

Perhaps such theories wildly exaggerate the power of the platforms. What they do point to, however, is the feeling that we no longer have much control over the work we do, or over the things we produce, or an economic system that was supposed to offers us prosperity and security but in which good work is now increasingly difficult to find. How do we find our way, without going back to the old age of the local and the small-scale, to a world in which we can claim the fruit of our labour?

The Rose Queens This image is from a book of collages titled *The Rose Queens* which celebrates a LGBTQ+ South London community. The group began meeting in the rose garden of a public park in Southwark as Covid-19 lockdown rules lifted in 2020 and continues to each week. 'The Roses' began as a group of 5K Parkrunners who met their friends after each run for coffee and cake. Now the elaborate cake makers are in the majority, the runners still there but dwindling. Stories unfold each week in episodes added to by dropped buns, birthday celebrations, shared allotment produce, visiting dogs, shrieking parakeets and friends passing through town. The community network expands and contracts, queer and non-queer alike, as do the populations of the nearby pond and trees. The series of collages are made from group social media posts combined with found images of gardens in Ireland. The series also reflects on what a photo album might be for the LGBTQ+ community who often build family in friendships rather than through bloodlines. A collage technique is used to bring ingredients together in the construction of a self-sustaining community. To see or order a copy of the book visit www.nickycoutts.com

Nicky Coutts is an artist and writer working across photography, drawing, the moving image, print, sculpture, academic and experimental writing. Her work focuses on the pressures that humans place on species diversity and the environment, and the role of cross-species interactions in finding a way to better interact and live.

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