

# If cows didn't like mustard

Open Window  
Govett-Brewster Art Gallery | Len Lye Centre  
28 Feb - 19 Jul 2026



Mustard plants growing in our garden - first flower on Wednesday 10th Dec, 2025

The artists' inquiry emerges from an episode in the history of the Eastman Dry Plate Company (later known as Kodak). In 1882, the company was nearly brought to ruin by a batch of improperly sensitised silver-gelatine photographic plates which produced foggy, overexposed images. Only in 1925 did the company's researchers discover that the gelatine used to bind light-sensitive compounds into an emulsion was not a passive element "quietly clutching billions of bits of silver halide," but actively affecting the photosensitivity of the film.<sup>1</sup> They discovered that cows who had eaten a diet of mustard plants produced gelatine with a higher sulphur content, significantly increasing its sensitivity to light. The discovery led to the company establishing the Eastman Gelatine Company, to raise cows on a monitored diet, and tightly control the rendering of their bodies into gelatine. Dr. C. E. Kenneth Mees, a scientist at Kodak, would later reflect on the revelation, stating, "Twenty years ago, we found out that if cows didn't like mustard there wouldn't be any movies at all."<sup>2</sup>

In Lever and Meyle's moving image work, these events become a parable evidencing the folly of human attempts to abstract and isolate materials into constituent parts, and the wilful agency of other species to act in ways that exceed—and trouble—human attempts to put them to use.

The timespan of the film's production follows the growth and harvesting of the common *sinapis alba* yellow mustard plant—having taken place between Spring and late-Summer. In the film, the mustard plant comes into focus as subject and agent of images produced. While the titular cow is not imaged directly onscreen, the film's structure draws a poetic relationship between the bovine four-chamber stomach, and the setting of the photographic laboratory in which images are developed.

The resulting work unfolds as a metabolic chain of chemical transformation, electrical currents coursing through circuitry, animal and plant wilfulness, and human intent. Throughout this process, the film invites "impurities" within material, language and form to generate unexpected, though never unwelcome, outcomes.

things projected through other things  
↓  
particles, residues  
impurities

Stomachs of the cow  
—  
making and unmaking an image

chain of process  
digested into film

Film digesting mustard

Fossing

separating materials

particles suspended

casting shadow  
suspension

breaking plant down into components

digestion, metabolism

Fixing / unfixing

arriving, fading leaving

"clutching billions of silver particles"

1. "Gelatin is Simple Stuff", anonymous article, George Eastman Archives, University of Rochester Library, N.Y., 2.  
2. Quoted in Douglas Collins, *The Story of Kodak* (Harry N. Abrams: 1990), 200.



research // when the camera can't see what's close (in this case, spiders)



research // latent images



BTS // Taranaki cows (not eating mustard)



BTS // filming film through a microscope

Grain, pixel, particle, seed

Contact print / plate

Mustard seed as image maker

Mustard as entangled in the materiality of the film, along with the cow

'Sensible trace' (Nicole Shukin / *Animal Capital*)

Alchemical translations, inside plant and in processing of film

Chewing, digesting (camera replaces cow?)

Calibration, getting it 'right', and a 'refinement' of processes

Some materials moving further than others, having more reach

Lack / abundance of certain materials

Temperamentality and sensitivity of film

Ghost films inside the mustard seeds, plants, inside the cows

Screen as surface

Getting close versus stepping back to see more

Soundtrack: analog synthesizer, frequency generator, autoharp, alto saxophone, four track tape recorder, trumpet, field recordings

16mm Kodak film: Vision 3 200T 7213; Ektachrome 7294 (cross-processed ECN-2 and E6); Double-X 7222

Unruliness of materials, growing without control

Things starting to be understood, things receding from view

Crush/chew, developing/digesting, focus/unfocus

Ziggy Lever and Lucy Meyle, *If cows didn't like mustard* screens alongside *Pause, act, void, event*, curated by Simon Gennard and Taarati Taiaroa.

Ngā mihi nui to Ian Powell who processed, scanned, and advised on *If cows didn't like mustard*.

The development of this work has been supported in part by Te Kura Toi a Hoahoa (School of Art and Design), Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau (Auckland University of Technology).