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## Bees Making Art: Insect Aesthetics and the Ecological Moment

**Humans are drawn to bees.** Unlike most familiar, flying insects such as mosquitoes or houseflies — those pests we impulsively dodge or swat — bees are likely to give us pause. Their appearance, buzz, wax, honey, and the collective productivity of the colony itself, generates reverence and awe, even with the threat of a sting. It is not surprising that poets and visual artists are attracted to both the architecture of the hive and the aesthetics of their labor (Steiner; Brown). Honeybees are uncommon insects. Human interest in bees is documented across cultural contexts, from references in the Bible and Koran to images of bees in engravings, woodcuts, illustrations and other media. Even the first humans' visually depicted bees — representations of bees and ancient "honey hunters" can be found in numerous petroglyphs drawn on cave walls throughout Europe, Africa, Asia and Australia (Crane).<sup>1</sup>

Bees have been a part of visual culture since the prehistoric era, but current depictions are often framed by growing cultural concern surrounding the global threat of a "bee apocalypse" that has been widely publicized.<sup>2</sup> Colony Collapse Disorder or CCD, the elusive syndrome responsible for the mysterious disappearance and death of honeybee colonies has transformed the bee into a cause and a symbol of ecological frailty (Moore and Kosut). Although agricultural records substantiate that bee colonies have dwindled throughout the last century, professional beekeepers, entomologists, and government scientists, agree that the current behavior of bees is unique, alarming, and potentially catastrophic. As anthropologist and beekeeper Jake Kosek succinctly remarks, "the state of the honeybee is dismal" (650). According to a U.N. report, of the 100 crop species that supply 90% of the world's food, bees' pollinate more than 70%.<sup>3</sup> If honeybees became extinct the global diet would fundamentally change, as the bee is responsible for pollinating one third of food sources currently available. Given the political buzz around bees, these "social insects" are on the cultural radar.<sup>4</sup> Our enmeshment with and dependence upon bees has come more sharply into focus.

As bees continue to disappear from their local environments, they are ever-present in American popular culture. For example, there has been a surge of documentary films chronicling CCD, including *The Vanishing of the Bees* (2009), *Colony* (2009), *Queen of the Sun* (2011), and most recently, *More than Honey* (2013). They are now eco-political insects in a moment of ecological crises — a signifier of environmental awareness and

green consumerism. Bees' fragility is part of the collective consciousness in many human social worlds. As art historian and animal studies scholar Steve Baker writes, "Any understanding of the animal, and of what the animal means to us, will be transformed by and inseparable from our knowledge of its cultural representation" (4). Within this backdrop, beekeeping has emerged as an urban hobby, as novices in their 20s-30s, referred to by our more seasoned informants as "hipster beekeepers," are setting up hives on apartment rooftops and collective backyards in New York City and other major American metropolitan areas (Moore and Kosut). In Bushwick, Brooklyn, a gentrifying neighborhood filled with artist lofts and galleries, beekeeping has become linked with artist collectives and studios. In 2011, beehives were established on top of the venerable Whitney Museum of Art on Manhattan's Upper East Side.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, the recent popularity of beekeeping is not limited to the United States, or one particular demographic. In London, the number of hives has doubled within the past five years and there is concern over whether there are adequate pollination sources.<sup>6</sup> The threat of bee extinction via CCD, and human efforts to save the bee, have in some cases led to new problems for the health of bee colonies. Human anxieties and our attempts to assuage them through well-intentioned interventions can further stress ecosystems.

Bees have always been in the city and in the art world, but they were usually obscured or taken for granted in both realms. We argue that throughout the 20th century they have largely been an absent presence in art. In other words, their labor is used without credit and is largely obscured within individual artworks. For example, for centuries comb, wax, honey, pollen, body parts, and bees themselves (alive and dead) have been used as a raw material or medium in artistic practice. In the technique of encaustic painting, colored pigments are added to beeswax and applied to wood, canvas, and other materials. The encaustic method was used in 6th century Greek religious portraits, as well as by 20th century artists such as Jasper Johns and Diego Rivera, among many others. Significantly, instead of solely using bee-derived materials to make works, bees themselves are now being made into art. Artists are executing work with living bees in human/insect collaborations, transforming beehives into live site-specific art and bees into performance artists and sculptors. For example, in Spring 2012 the Storm King Art Center, an outdoor environmental sculpture park north of New York City, exhibited artist Peter Coffin's (b. 1972) *Untitled (Bees Making Honey)*, a seasonal site-specific sculpture consisting of a colony of bees tended by a professional beekeeper. [Figure 1] Works like *Untitled (Bees Making Honey)* speak to how animals are "made" in various cultural contexts (Berger; Baker, Picturing; Rothfels; Landes et al.).



Figure 1: Peter Coffin, *Untitled (Bees Making Honey)*, 2012, Beehives and honey bees, Dimensions variable, Installation at Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, NY. Courtesy the artist.

In this essay, we consider how bees, represented in art, are framed by broader human relationships with honeybees in the early 21st century. These interspecies exchanges reveal how animals are transformed within aesthetic-cultural fields and the bleed between animal/human boundaries. Looking at how the bee is engaged in art has the interdisciplinary advantage of connecting art history, animal studies, and the sociology of art to examine the postmodern animal as artistic collaborator. The bees' representation in art worlds demonstrates how certain animals are identified as valuable, and culturally and aesthetically significant.

Although we include a discourse analysis of reviews and exhibition statements, as sociologists our primary focus is not the intent of the artist or whether or not the works are critically lauded or accepted as art by gatekeepers. And even though we offer a bee-centered analysis, the question of whether bees are innately artistic is beyond the scope of this essay.<sup>7</sup> Rather, we explore what bees have made possible in art and how they are reckoned with through interspecies mingling in the wake of CCD and ecological crises. Examining art illuminates a very specific cultural field energized by the bee beyond the industrial exploitation of their labor.

Art history analyses emphasize the form and content of artworks, while sociological investigations of art have traditionally de-centered the art object itself to examine the

social context in which it is produced (Becker; Zolberg; Inglis and Hughson). As a relatively recent sub-discipline within sociology, the sociology of art has often distanced itself from art history and aesthetics, resulting in “blindness” to the actual art object (de la Fuente). Recent sociological studies of the arts champion the need to push the field further and towards a multi-disciplinary lens (Inglis and Hughson; Becker). A “new sociology of the arts” has emerged that is in dialogue with art history and cultural studies projects that “share the assumption that art is a social construct, and that its production and consumption are thoroughly social in character” (de la Fuente 423). Drawing from this frame, we examine the content of bee-centered art works themselves *and* the cultural and ecological contexts in which they are made and received.

This essay is not exhaustive of all works created with bees. Our primary concentration is on art made within the last five years, after the emergence of Colony Collapse Disorder in 2006, that consist of live bees (working in hives or in direct contact with humans) or sculptural work made by the purposeful channeling of bees’ creative labor such that the art object is co-created by the insects. In other words, the bee is the art, or is called on to make art in managed and obvious interspecies collaborations. These human/insect aesthetic collaborations emanate from within a cultural moment in which bee colonies are threatened. The bee crisis looms in the background as bees perform live, transforming objects and themselves into art.

This is a salient moment for bees. They are most vulnerable as a species, and at the same time, seemingly most valuable to human beings. After discussing metaphorical representations of bees, we explore the turn toward the “live” animal in art and works dependent upon the bees’ participation and embodied labor. The artists’ dependence on the bees to execute the work echoes human reliance upon bees as pollinators in agricultural production. In both cases, the bees’ labor is concealed by how we align ourselves with these insects. It is clear that even with the best intent, humans appropriate/collaborate with animals in highly stratified circumstances. We track the bees’ path across human art worlds, attentive to the complex ecological, agricultural, and cultural systems that they constitute. In many cultural fields, bees reveal themselves as a highly generative species; one that humans have become dependent on.

**Encountering Animals: Animal Studies, Ethics and Art.** The terms wild, feral, tame, exotic, and domesticated point to how we categorically construct nonhuman animals, and how we personally experience them. The interdisciplinary field of animal studies has broadened our understandings of the interactions and intersubjective exchanges between humans and animals in social worlds (Sanders, *Understanding Dogs*; Alger and

Alger; Arluke; Myers; Raffles; Taylor; DeMello). Much of the influential work in this area centers on pets like dogs and cats, domestic companion animals with which we are intimately connected (see Sanders; Haraway, *When Species Meet; Companion Species*). There is also interactional research on animals not traditionally defined as pets, such as Weider's analysis of laboratory chimps and the concept of mindedness/intersubjectivity, Whatmore's study on elephants and tourism networks, and Jerolmack's ethnography of pigeons in New York City. Animal studies scholarship confirms the extensive spectrum of animal/human relations, and the construction of the natural in its sundry forms.

Critical animal studies (CAS), a more overtly politicized sub-field, proposes that we become advocates for animals and set aside our human impulses (Best). This field is allied with animal liberation and activism, advocating the merger of theory and praxis. The question of whether artists can be trusted to act ethically and responsibly with animals is an important one. Baker contends that we must presume that artistic practice is guided by ethical guidelines, otherwise there is a risk that the artwork itself will not be taken seriously. Concern over the use of certain species in art is indicative of our uneven attachments to nonhuman animals and the inconsistencies in how we treat them (Herzog). If dogs or cats were placed inside an installation for the duration of a gallery exhibition, some animal rights activists would be concerned for their safety. But ultimately, these are domestic pets and we have created a world in which it is "normal" for them to be contained indoors (Haraway, *When Species Meet; Companion Species*) if treated humanely. Humans are less likely to be concerned for insects because of their othered status — and because we, personally, kill these pests every day by stepping, swatting, and spraying. Artist Phillip Johnson, whose 1934 installation at MOMA *America Can't Have Housing*, which included cockroaches, aptly notes that as pests they are "less ethically entangled than other animals" (Aloi 6). Certain species can be sacrificed with little fanfare, whether in the context of art worlds, systems of food production or everyday life.

The differences in the revulsion quotient that is experienced by the thought of accidentally killing 1,000 bees in the process of making art to killing 1,000 kittens is noteworthy. However, numbers may have played a role in ethically driven criticism of Damien Hirst's 2012 installation at the Tate Modern in London, which included two rooms of living butterflies. While critics lauded the exhibition, others outside of the art

world were outraged that 9,000 butterflies died during the staging of the work.<sup>8</sup> Butterflies, like bees, are among the insects that are culturally valued by humans. While butterflies are not interconnected with humans in food production or not typically viewed as integral to local urban ecologies, they are often portrayed as visually stunning creatures. In this way, they hold more aesthetic value rather than use-value to humans. Necropolitics, who is let to die, is a register of how much investment we have in members of our own species and those of others species (Mbembe). The necropolitical practices in art worlds demonstrate that the making of a work of art can sometimes trump the lives of certain nonhuman creatures, and in certain quantities.

The field of posthuman studies has developed out of questions surrounding the construction of the “human” — an increasingly more complex entity to define in light of technological advancements (i.e., prosthetic limbs), hybridization, and genetic manipulation. Posthumanism calls for “a deconstruction of symbolic, discursive, institutional, and material arrangements that produce the category of human as something unique, distinct, and at the center of the world” (Pedersen 67). The human is no longer conceived of as the locus of all thought and action. It has been suggested that art offers a new frame to think through the animal question, and that artists have something unique to offer in considering the concept of the post-human animal (Baker, *Artist/Animal*). Aloi asserts that art can contribute to the definition of innovative and multi-focal perspectives on nature and the animal in order to move beyond humanism to unlearn the animal as we know it through contemporary art. What can contemporary interspecies bee/human art projects tell us about our shifting relationship to “nature” and the “animal” in visual culture?

While it is bees that energize these collaborations, bees themselves may get lost through their entanglements with art worlds. Or at minimum, humans have a difficult time acknowledging their enmeshment with bees as subjects or co-producers of social realities. The process of co-collaborating with bees is on a continuum with animal husbandry, whereby humans believe they are improving, adding value, or assisting bees — domesticating them for better purposes or those more important than their own natural inclinations. However, our three years of ethnographic fieldwork with bees and beekeepers in New York City shows that the relationship between bees and humans is more complicated than a merely top down power dynamic (Moore and Kosut). Drawing from the perspective of science studies scholar Bruno Latour, we consider bees as a circulating reference. That is, bees are living material and cultural beings that do things by interacting and producing certain socio-cultural effects and affective facts. Using a bee-centered approach, we examine how humans use bees as

sculptors, in installations, and in interspecies performances, focusing on where human dominion is preeminent and inevitable. But we also suggest that interspecies mingling in art worlds may be part of the bees making, too (Moore and Kosut). We de-center the role of the human artist in order to bring the bee in as a co-collaborator, emphasizing the common worlds we share with other species (Kirksey; Raffles) and the generative nature of bees as “vibrant matter” (Bennett). Bennett’s concept of vibrant matter emphasizes the materiality and vitality of all objects (including nonhuman animals), and avoids “treating all objects and animals as if they are animated largely (solely) through human production (by being mixed with labor)” (Kosek 669). Our analysis seeks to wrangle bees as dynamic and multifaceted subjects/objects.

**Bee-based Art: From the Metaphorical to the Material.** A cross-genre corpus of work — painting, performance, video, sculpture, and installation — exists as a material testament to how bees affect artists, either through ideas (observations generated from bees’ lives) or the use of bee-made materials, like wax or honey, in the process of making art. Matthew Barney, Tom Sachs, Robert Gober, Lynda Benglis, Robert Rauschenberg, and Mark Thompson are a few of the numerous American artists who have created sculptural objects, paintings or installations that are made possible because of the bee. For example, Benglis’s “stroked” wall sculptures from the late 1960s and Gober’s sculptures of human body parts from the 1990s are primarily constructed from beeswax. Even though the works were made within different historical moments and represent disparate styles within the contemporary canon, they are materially linked through bees.

Arguably, one of the most important 20th century artists known for his work with bees and other animals is German born Joseph Beuys (1921-1986), who famously spent three days with a coyote in the 1974 performance piece *I Like America and America Likes Me*. Beuys’s obsession with bees was inspired by the writings of Austrian social reformer and spiritual philosopher Rudolf Steiner (1861-1925). He was intimately acquainted with Steiner’s work, and both men shared similar passions, a particular interest in honeybees, the spiritual world, and social theory.<sup>9</sup> Bees provided a way of theorizing the social and the supernatural, and offered a means to bring their ideas to practice, either through lectures, writings, and performances or the creation of material artifacts. Although Beuys made many artworks with beeswax as a central material, honey also became a medium and metaphor in his social sculptures.

Two of Beuys's most famous works included the literal and symbolic use of honey. The first took place in 1965 — a three-hour performance called *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* — in which the human artist was the central character. With his head masked with honey and gold leaf, he walked around the gallery with a dead hare in his arms silently explaining the significance of his art to the animal. Beuys used the honey to comment on human consciousness: "Using honey on my head I am naturally doing something that is concerned with thought. The human capacity is not to give honey, but to think — to give ideas ... Honey is doubtlessly a living substance. Human thought can also be living" (Adams 207). While Beuys employs honey symbolically, and as a medium (a type of adhesive and facial paint), he also uses it in a ritualistic performance where honey, the contents of bee digestion produced in the "honey stomach," mingles with human flesh. The interaction does not call bees to perform live, but uses the bees as metaphor and medium.

Almost a decade later, in 1977, Beuys unveiled the installation *Honey Pump at the Workplace*, which ran for a hundred days as part of a German exhibition. In this piece two ship engines pumped two tons of honey and 220 pounds of fat (margarine) through a labyrinth of clear plastic tubes above the exhibition space, which concurrently presented the Beuys initiated "Free International University for Creativity and Interdisciplinary Research" — a think tank of sorts. The honey and fat circulated and churned through a sculptural nervous system. According to art historian David Adams, *Honey Pump* was inspired by Steiner's bee lectures and his notion of the three psychological elements of the human being described in relation to parts of the body: "think with the nerve-sense system (head), feeling with the rhythmic system (chest), and willing with the metabolic-limb system (abdomen and limbs)" (Adams 209). Beuys made animals one of the main foci of his practice but in a "somewhat romanticized version of nature populated by symbols and poetic interpretations" (Aloi 10). Bees are not cast center stage as actors in his performances, that is, they are not called to be live participants or performers in interspecies collaborations. They are evoked, or implied — demonstrating the power of the bee even when it is not alive and physically present.

The bee as a living subject may be absent, but it does leave evidence of its work. Some visual artists harness the bees' productive capacities in making honeycomb. Through an anthropomorphic lens, there is much evidence to support the idea that bees are flexible and adaptable "natural sculptors." Even though beehives are typically cultivated in Langstroth hives, the white rectangular wooden frames most of us are familiar with that are used in industrial agriculture, bees create comb and thrive in non-geometric and



less structured dwellings. Bees do not innately build comb within square-shapes, even though they have been described as mathematical builders. They adjust to new surroundings very well<sup>10</sup> and can “sculpt” combs on different materials and objects – from wood armatures to synthetic molds of human bodies.

Canadian artist Aganetha Dyck (b. 1937), who has worked directly with bees for over two decades, has encouraged bees to build combs on banal and utilitarian objects like shoes, football helmets, and porcelain figurines, transforming the aesthetic value of common goods.

While Dyck describes her process as the altering of everyday objects through the work of bees, American artist Hilary Berseth’s (b. 1979) collaborations are much more intentional. In 2008, he exhibited two “programmed” hives at Eleven Rivington gallery on New York’s Lower East Side. By placing a pattern of foundation into the hive, he managed or “programmed” the bees so that the insects built honeycomb structures (sculptures). [Figure 2]



Figure 2: Hilary Berseth, Programmed Hive #6, 2008. Courtesy the artist.

Berseth, with the help of a local beekeeper, directed his collaborators by placing obstructions in the bees' path that forced them to build different shapes. These obstacles of human intervention effectively direct the bees to make the art, not add to or alter a ready-made object as in Dyck's sculptures. Natural honeycombs have no inherent currency in the art world [figure 3], and become valuable when built under the supervision of an artist. For example, according to this review the artists' ingenuity at bee manipulation is what makes the work significant, coupled with the fact that the sculpture was executed by bees rather than crafted by human hands:

The works are whimsical and intriguing and are made all the more interesting by the fact that they are bee-made. Berseth was able to manipulate an organic natural process — the bees' ability and need to form hives — to fit his artistic needs. He harnessed the natural construction talents of insects to create a sculpture that is unique and that represents a successful blending of the measured and the theoretically immeasurable.<sup>11</sup>

In this example the work is described as an assemblage of human/non-human collaboration that signals a symbiotic or idyllic relationship between species. It is presumed that bees will work through whatever physical challenges they are presented with or constraints placed upon them, whether it be foreign objects inserted into their hives or residencies in museums and galleries. The bees' preferences as living organisms may be neglected in this process of human/insect cultivation, wherein the material produced by the bee has more currency than the insects themselves. Directed to achieve a goal (cover a foreign object with honeycomb), bees easily become personified and anthropomorphized as willful co-collaborators and natural artists. Despite that the fact that the art is a result of both insect and artist, humans take credit for them, receive rewards, and professionally thrive because of the bees' industriousness. The rewards are not equally shared and bees are not directing humans to complete creative tasks.

Yet at the same time, they can sting, withhold their honey, fly away, or escape. Bee "agency" as it were (i.e., the bees' free will and ability to decide a course of action) is not entirely socially defined or relative to human contexts. For example, bees express preferences in pollination, travel with purpose, communicate directions, and sting predators, not because we demand it of them, but because they are a purposeful and relatively autonomous species as compared to traditionally domesticated animals (Moore and Kosut). Bees may be coaxed to make art objects through human direction

and manipulation, but they are not wholly entrapped in art contexts. Perhaps their unpredictability is another trait that attracts artists to collaborate with them.

In many of the most recent artworks made with bees it is important to acknowledge that humans are also working, too. Artists labor in the process of making the bees into insect artists collaborators, and installations — they set up hives, transport them into art spaces, work to keep them alive, theorize them, and produce aesthetic discourse about them. Humans, and in particular artists, are in some ways bound by their decades of fascination with bees. It is as if bees captured our imagination and energized our actions, in some way compelling us to work with and or for them. We cannot overlook the fact that these tiny creatures, whose life expectancy averages about three months, have been a primary focus and catalyst in art.



Figure 3: Natural Honeycomb, photo by author

**The Live Animal: Bees as Performers and the Hive as Sculpture.** In the Western canon artists have portrayed animals for centuries – from dogs and birds in Renaissance still life paintings, to stoic 18th century portraits of livestock, deer, and other animals in their natural habitats (Lippincott and Bluhm). There has been a shift of the representation of the animal from the classic through postmodern periods in which the

animal itself is presented as the art object (Aloi; Baker, *Artist/Animal; Postmodern*). The use of animal bodies — alive or taxidermy — has signaled a turn towards the “real” animal in art, rather than representations or depictions of animals.

In some cases, the animal body is perceived as any other material used to make art, a medium akin to pigments, gesso or graphite. For example, Richard Serra’s *Live Animal Habitat* (1966) exhibited in Rome was made with 22 live and stuffed animals, incorporating hamsters, hens, doves, and a pig. More recently, artists have purposefully anthropomorphized animals as in Catherine Chalmers’s *America Cockroach* (2003-2004) photo series. The cockroach — one of the most startling and revolting common insects — is literally taken out from dark corners and positioned in miniature domestic scenes, shown bathing, eating, playing cards and having sex. Chalmers’s photographs employ the animal to create “a strange household world where the roach and nature are disguised to look like half-human aesthetic creations” (Lin 25). In order to give the roaches an appearance of performing for the shots Chalmers kills them first or temporarily gasses them with carbon monoxide so that they can be carefully posed. Comparatively, bees are being used differently — in their live, unpredictable, natural state. They have performed together as a hive or in embodied bee-bearding performances with humans.

Bee bearding is an established practice usually executed by very experienced and seasoned beekeepers and entomologists. The act of bee bearding is rather spectacular and disarming, becoming a popular attraction in carnivals in the 1830s. It still remains a carnivalesque curiosity. American Mark Biancaniello, holds the 1998 world's record for wearing 87 pounds of bees. To create a bee beard, the queen bee is placed on the body so that the hive pursues her scent; where she goes the rest of the bees follow because all hive activities revolve around the presence of the queen. Bee bearding is the creation of an imitation swarm, as it were, as humans manipulate bees into the act of swarming. Swarming is a natural and non-aggressive event that typically happens in spring when a queen leaves a colony with a larger number of worker bees in search of a more suitable home. However, from a human perspective, ten thousand or more “loose” bees can be read as nature out of control, generating fear and anxiety. Bearding, especially upon the face and head looks perilous, as if the human might be subsumed by thousands of live, frenetically moving insects. The likelihood of receiving a few stings is inevitable, and even though only a small percentage of the population is deathly allergic, site-specific bee venom causes human flesh to heat, swell, itch and burn. In this social context, the bee is primarily cast as a naturally dangerous insect, not a social metaphor or industrious role model.

For his film *Springtime, 2010-11*, Dutch artist Jeroen Eisinga (b. 1966) had his upper torso and head covered by 150,000 honeybees (the record is 350,000). As written in Artforum, “The artist’s aim was simply to create a strong, “sublime” image. His intense, ritualistic, and technically impeccable black-and-white 35-mm film consists of a nearly twenty-minute-long frontal shot of a man, the artist himself, sitting behind a table, during which he and the wall behind him are gradually covered by a swirling mass of bees.”<sup>12</sup> [Figure 4] In this example of human/bee collaboration, nature is simultaneously wild, but also transcendent and mesmerizing, like a lightening storm viewed at a safe distance. In bee bearding, interspecies co-mingling conveys an underlying tension because the bees are not entirely predictable. As one review states, Eisinga is “self-indulgent and reckless, and probably happy to hear himself described that way.”<sup>13</sup> This plays into the notion of a “wild” or “feral” construction of nature. And importantly, it is also nature taken out of context at the hands of humans. The risk in bee bearding plays on the theme of man vs. nature, for human excitement, sport, and spectacle. According to a curator at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C., “Eisinga’s imagery draws on the legacy of saints and martyrs who were driven to extreme acts to prove their faith through endurance.”<sup>14</sup> In *Springtime*, it is the artist who endures his encounter with a possibly perilous species, but this encounter is not in the wild, it is meticulously planned, staged, performed, and documented for art world audiences. Much like other types of performances of “extreme culture” such as climbing at dangerous altitudes or swimming unprotected with sharks, bee bearding involves confronting spectacular nature for the sake of thrill, awe, or art (Kosut). In this regard, bees are likely to become temporarily othered as a nonhuman species — an insect pejoratively read as threat. Notably, in the context of the CCD global crises, it is bees that are in peril due in part to their encounters with human interventions in the natural landscape.



Figure 4: Jeroen Eisinga, *Springtime*, 2010-11. Courtesy the artist © Jeroen Eisinga.

As co-performers, the bees dictate the artist's behavior (he is literally outnumbered) and ability to execute the performance successfully. Performance art emerged after World War II in the U.S. and Europe, encompassing a vast range of styles, interpretations, and descriptions including live art, body art, Fluxus, actions, demonstrations, and rituals. As art historian Kristine Stiles explains, there was a common ideological underpinning to the genre, "artists who began to use their bodies as the material of visual art repeatedly expressed their goal to bring art practice closer to life in order to increase the experiential immediacy of their work" (Stiles and Selz 679). But how do we conceptualize the bees' subjective role in this example of interspecies performance? Again, as in the honeycomb sculptures, the bees' participation is triggered by a natural drive — following the queen. The bee appears to be performing itself, or arguably, a version of itself put into motion by human intention. Yet, as Derrida questions, the idea of the nonhuman animal as simply reacting to stimuli, as opposed to responding to it (in a measured, reflexive way indicative of humans), is an example of Cartesian thinking that undergirds human/animal binaries. The artist's engagement with bees is not exclusively on human terms, since bees do have drives, tendencies, wills, and preferences. The bees' performance or enactments both limit and make possible the artistic production.

As Berger offers, animals do not exist in their "real" form in contemporary consumer culture but have been replaced by symbols to be observed. That is, we watch them at the zoo or the dog park, and in documentaries and films — as zoo animals, pets, and other representations of particular kinds of nature constructed within, and defined by, human contexts.

The environmental movement — from eco-friendly consumerism to sustainability initiatives — has effectively set a stage for “green” nature. This relationship to the natural world centers on protection, preservation, and sometimes recovery, as in the idea of “greening the city” or “going green.” The rise of urban beekeeping across the United States is testament to the bees’ role in cultivating a more green and ecological city. There are certain nonhuman species that demand and receive more attention and are worthy of being saved. For example, since the 1970s, environmental groups have championed saving rhinos and tigers, two species most people have little contact with.<sup>15</sup> Within the ecological moment, bees have become a ready-made logo of all things green, a poster animal that we can rally around.

This contemporary backdrop of human/bee relations sheds light on artists who establish colonies as living art objects. As discussed in the introduction, artist Peter Coffin’s apiary at Storm King environmental sculpture park is presented as a natural artwork, albeit directed by human intent and couched within a very specific thematic exhibition on light. Storm King’s website emphasizes the legitimacy of Coffin’s hives as artwork, its function within the local ecology, and the interactive nature of the bees as highly performative:

Peter Coffin’s practice involves working with familiar things — here, the sun, bees, and honey — to see them anew. That these small colonies also rely on the sun is a reminder of the sun’s omnipotence. Tour participants will receive a gift of local honey: a proposed answer to the whimsical question, “What does light taste like?” ... The park typically shows oversized sculpture by artists past and present. Coffin’s innovative “Untitled (Bees Making Honey)” is not only an artwork, but also adds to the natural ecosystem of the park, which is set on 500 acres of landscaped fields, hills and woodlands. Coffin’s piece will interact with the art center, as his bees thrive on its plants and flowers.<sup>16</sup>

The significance of bees as a species is framed around the import of sunlight and a professional beekeeper leads weekly tours, “educating participants about honeybees and their dependence on the sun for communication and survival.” Coffin does not tend or cultivate the colony/installation per se, instead relying on experienced

beekeepers. Regardless, the living sculpture functions both discursively and materially, as the bees pollinate the park's plants and "interact" with visitors and other sculptures.

In an analogous ecological framework, Aganetha Dyck (discussed previously) has collaborated in what she calls "inter-species communication"<sup>17</sup> with honeybees. Akin to Joseph Beuys's relationship to bees, Dyck is a seasoned beekeeper who has worked closely with bees for 23 years. Her work derives from a working knowledge of tending bees and a more environmentally green location — Dyck has advocated for the importance of bees as a species before the emergence of CCD and the heightening of public concern across media platforms.

In 2011, Dyck exhibited "Guest Workers," in which a beehive was installed in the Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Prince Edward Island, Canada. This sculptural/performance piece included a vent so that the bees had access to the outside world, where they could fly and gather pollen in fresh air. A description of the installation emphasizes a bee-driven perspective, "Having live bees in the gallery creates complications, so the gallery is working with beekeeper Geoffrey Paynter to make the experience as comfortable as possible for the bees. At the same time they are providing the public with the opportunity to learn about these incredibly important insects, so essential to the cycles of growth in nature."<sup>18</sup> As in Coffin's piece, the bees are the art, and the exhibition is framed as an opportunity to learn about bees, not only revel in what they naturally do. Importantly, the reality that placing a beehive out of place may not be preferable to bees and may create "complications," is addressed in the making of the work.

Dyck's artistic use of bees falls under the rubric of "animal-endorsing" artwork (Baker). Animal-endorsing art emphasizes the existence of the animal itself, and is typically in conversation with animal ethics, liberation and advocacy. According to her own blog Dyck describes herself as an environmentalist and that her "recent research asks questions about the ramifications all living beings would experience should honeybees disappear from earth."<sup>19</sup> Dyck's approach stems from her own lifelong experiences tending bees, which many beekeepers describe as intimate and affective labor (Moore and Kosut). In her work there is an expression of ontological engagement with the bee, whereby the bee's being is considered as crucial to the creation of the world, as well as the art objects. This perspective is akin to the emergent field of "multispecies ethnography," a new genre and mode of anthropological research that seeks to bring species that are linked to human social worlds closer into focus as co-constitutive subjects (Kirksey). Multispecies ethnography resists the tradition of relegating



nonhuman organisms to food, symbols, or a part of the landscape. It is bees that have enabled and generated the creation of the physical production of artworks that would not otherwise exist. Just as they are responsible for pollinating much of our food supply, bees also have pollinated the arts both before and after the arrival of CCD.

### **Aesthetic Interspecies Exchanges.**



Figure 5: Bees Working, photo by author

We may take pleasure in insect poetics and visual representations that magnify their segmented bodies for the gaze of our human eyes [Figure 5], but we rarely see the innately captivating qualities of insects in the context of everyday encounters. And yet bees are different than other so-called bugs, we are enmeshed with them through the process of pollination, and we as a species rely on their direct labor — honey, propolis, pollen, and wax. It is easy to speculate why artists collaborate with these particular insects over other invertebrates that see us as food or parasitic hosts (mosquitoes) or more arcane and nocturnal bugs like beetles or silverfish. Bees naturally behave in ways

that are considered to be exemplary by cultural standards — they are said to have integrity, are committed, and will sacrifice themselves for the greater good of the hive and colony. They have been inscribed with the insect version of what sociologist Max Weber calls a “protestant ethic,” an ethos that drives them to work without question towards the goals of a greater social good. In this regard, bees are easily anthropomorphized and metaphorically convenient. Many artists have capitalized on bees as a subject matter or metaphor because they are a “model insect” (Moore and Kosut).

The aesthetic interspecies exchanges between humans and bees speak to our understanding of nature more broadly, and specifically, animals in art contexts. In the art projects discussed the bees do what they do instinctively, like following the queen to create a bee beard, or sustaining a colony through the process of making honey, building comb, laying eggs and tending larva. We employ them as natural and sometimes feral objects, and at the same time “culture” them by inviting them into artist studios, galleries and museums. But as the bees produce comb and maintain their hives, human interventions in the name of art may not be ideal for bees. Regardless of the aesthetic object that is produced — sculpture, film, performance, installation — bees have been disrupted.

In some respect bees have worked their own way into art worlds. That is, humans and bees co-constitute artworks that are made of multiple layers of coordination. In art, the bee as living nonhuman species has very little agency in the traditional ways we think of agency. Bees can't decide for instance to be placed in a box, or elect to “donate” their honey for larger purposes. But in other ways, some types of human/bee artwork reflect the bees' agency because their products, handiwork and lives are useful in theorizing and creating art. The slippage between nature/culture, animal/human, art/instinct, and subject/object are transgressed by the bees' contemporary presence in art worlds. This movement outside of dichotomous thinking energizes us and inspires new ways of seeing, knowing and being. The bees are the ultimate agent in that their ability to sting, and the arcology of the hive generates artistic projects. Arcology, a combination of the terms ecology and architecture, is a self-contained, high-density living environment that forms a fully functional agricultural and residential habitat with minimal waste. The respect shown for the egalitarian and efficient hive is an example of the natural world seemingly getting it right. In the wake of CCD, the bees' disappearance renders the species even more valuable and precious to humans through the jeopardy of the idea of potential extinction.

Humans cultivate bees for different purposes in a variety of environments — from industrial agriculture and scientific research labs, to rural backyards and urban rooftops. The art world is another site in which we are entangled with this species. As art historian Ron Broglio writes, “the wonder of (animal) art is found in the play of surfaces ... where exchanges take place. Art brings something back from this limit and horizon of the unknowable; it bears witness to encounters without falling into a language that assimilates or trivializes the world of the animal” (xxiii). Humans exhibit a degree of power through manipulations of the “animal kingdom,” but art can provide an opportunity to see the animal differently, so that we can contemplate the links between our vast aesthetic, cultural and ecological entanglements.

## Notes

1. According to entomologist Stephen Buchmann, Africa has the largest number of petroglyphs visualizing prehistoric bee/human intersections, many depicting the honeycomb in great detail (15).
2. In May 2013, an ominously titled article “Russia Warns Obama: Global War Over ‘Bee Apocalypse’ Coming Soon,” explained that Russian president Putin delayed a meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry due to his “extreme outrage” over President Obama’s protection of global bio-genetic seed manufactures Monsanto and Syngenta who use insecticides known as neonicotinoids that are believed to be responsible for the deaths of bees and other species. Available here: <http://www.eutimes.net/2013/05/russia-warns-obama-global-war-over-bee-apocalypse-coming-soon/>. Web. Accessed on July 10, 2013.
3. Beeguardian.org. Web. Accessed on May 5, 2013.
4. Sociobiologist Edward O. Wilson with his colleague Bert Holldobler, has dedicated much of his research to understanding the life of another social insect, the ant. Wilson famously likened ant behavior to a form of socialism where self-sacrifice for the good of the colony is commonly practiced.
5. [http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2012/03/12/120312ta\\_talk\\_tomkins](http://www.newyorker.com/talk/2012/03/12/120312ta_talk_tomkins) Web. Accessed on April 17, 2013.

6. Dan Charles, "Why Urban Beekeeping Can be Bad for Bees." <http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/2013/08/12/211413350/londons-urban-beekeepers-are-bad-for-bees-scientists-say>. Web. Accessed on November 1, 2013.
  
7. Aloi argues that the notion that animals do not make art is biased and human centric. Instead of focusing on 'art,' a loaded word, he proposes that "If we consider creativity as the universal originator of all art, then we find that animals are surely capable of that, at times in ways that border on the understanding of the creative in humans" (xviii). For a discussion of the visual aesthetics of bees, evolution and color see "Insects as Art Lovers: Bees for Van Gogh" in the insect themed issue of *Antennae* 3.2 (2007): 37-42.
  
8. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/culturenews/9606498/Damien-Hirst-condemned-for-killing-9000-butterflies-in-Tate-show.html>. Web. Accessed June 20, 2013.
  
9. In 1923 Steiner gave eight lectures on bees, highlighting the "unconscious wisdom" of the hive and what humans could learn from bees about themselves and the cosmos, asserting that we need to "study the life of bees from the standpoint of the soul."
  
10. Bees can live in tree trunks, underground, and in human constructed top-bar hives that allow them to create shapes that are non-linear. In our fieldwork, seasoned beekeepers described to us how bees live in mud and in abandoned foreclosed homes in Florida. Bees also adapt to different food supplies, even those that are not derived from local plants. For example, in spring 2010 in the Redhook section of Brooklyn, an increasingly gentrified neighborhood, bees' started glowing red from gorging on maraschino cherry juice made at a nearby factory. Their stomachs, and in turn their honey, was affected by the bright red dye alarming local beekeepers who were concerned that bees should be surviving on plants rather than sweetened syrup. Susan Dominus, "The Mystery of the Red Bees of Red Hook," *New York Times*, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/30/nyregion/30bigcity.html>. Web. Accessed December, 11, 2011.
  
11. <http://www.columbiaspectator.com/2008/11/05/columbia-graduates-bees-collaborate-art-show>. Web. Accessed April 15, 2011.
  
12. van der Kroef, Saskia. *Artforum* 50.9 (2012): 325-326.

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16. <http://inhabitat.com/nyc/storm-king-art-center-to-host-a-honey-bee-apiary-by-artist-peter-coffin/bees-theseanster93/>. Web. Accessed July 2, 2011.
17. <http://www.confederationcentre.com/en/news-read-more.php?news=115>. Web. Accessed July 14, 2011
18. <http://www.confederationcentre.com/en/news-read-more.php?news=115>. Web. Accessed July, 14, 2011.
19. <http://acidolatte.blogspot.com/2009/09/aganetha-dyck.html?zx=5d9a75cfff0e186>. Web. Accessed July 15, 2011.

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