

**Tessa Zettel & Sumugan Sivanesan**

**PLAN BIENEN: SHARING (IN)  
THE MORE-THAN-HUMAN  
CITY**

**APRJA Volume 5, Issue 1, 2016  
ISSN 2245-7755**

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This text circulates in and around a series of honey trades, conducted by the authors as a form of artistic research outside (or in excess of) academic structures. They took place over a summer in residence at Berlin's ZK/U – Zentrum für Kunst und Urbanistik, alongside performance-lectures, publications, discursive brunches, focus groups, a durational high frequency stock exchange and various other relational exercises; one part of an ongoing project investigating real and speculative relationships between parallel crises in bee ecologies and economic systems.[1]

In times being darkly named the Anthropocene, the Capitalocene and the Sixth Great Extinction, *Plan Bienen* plays with overlaying its two objects of study, both more or less lurching towards a kind of collapse, as a means of finding new insights and perspectives. What is instantiated as crisis here is bound up in a denial of so-called 'natural' limits, characterised by increasing tension between the expansionary logic of free-market capitalism and the scale of reductions in emissions and consumption (throughput) needed to avert widespread irreversible ecological breakdowns. Bees act as a micro-political entry point into these broader dynamics – as a species particularly sensitive to ecological change, their perceived demise points towards a critical failure in systems that we are intimately entangled in. With Berlin as a locus, we thus began tracing other ways of being in relation at work in the multispecies city, practices perhaps more responsive to systemic capacity, supporting different modes of generating, measuring and exchanging value.

Our honey trades unfolded as an informal network of beekeepers willing to exchange the honey produced by their bees for non-monetary things – translation services, singing lessons, and assistant labour in its extraction. We read them as a pilot for future

actions, but also as a set of encounters that help us think through the limits of dominant and defuturing (in that they take futures away, our own and other species) modes of exchange, towards what might lie beyond (Fry).[2] Here we share some of our findings at the edges of research around labour, value and interspecies relations.



Figure 1: Plan Bienen, Open Haus, ZK/U, 2014. credit: Laura Fiorio

## Labour

Sociologists Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut, in their study of urban beekeeping in New York, note that “only when bees vanish do they tangibly appear to us” (517). The phenomenon of Colony Collapse Disorder, in which an entire hive of worker honeybees simply disappears, swept through the US pollination industry some years ago, prompting fears worldwide that this sudden threat to *Apis Mellifera* would in turn jeopardise the future of many essential food crops (and by extension of the human). An indicator of systemic breakdown that still evades neat explanation in human scientific terms, the vanishing was eventually attributed to a convergence of new types of insecticides (neonicotinoids) with factors like Varroa mite and Nosema, constant moving of hives, lack of biodiversity, effects of climate change such as ‘season creep’ and immune systems

weakened over generations by the replacement of sugar syrup for extracted honey. Suddenly centre stage were the living and working conditions of this little co-habitant of the worlds-within-a-world that we humans have constructed (Fry). Though bees have long been cast as model capitalist (or even collective communist) producers, the logic of maximum yield underlying modern beekeeping had apparently found the limits of the labouring insect body.

For Viennese philosopher Fahim Amir, today's newly visible urban bees are the quintessential "emblem of green capitalism" (personal communication). At a seminar on multiple modes of dwelling in Berlin's Tiergarten,[3] he gestures towards the rooftop beehives on the iconic Haus der Kulturen der Welt (HKW) to show how 'naturecultures' are put to work in the neoliberal city. Here bees produce honey to be sold in the gift shop as a boutique locavore product in the service of eco-friendly public relations. Just as their pollinating activities produce conditions desirable for us to live in, their presence on prominent skylines performs a kind of symbolic labour, assisting the city in re-branding from urban playground and post-communist social experiment to green 'lifestyle capital', attracting investment capital and facilitating the march of gentrification. Elsewhere this dynamic plays out a little differently, as in Oliver Rudzick's Schrebergarten in the leafy neighbourhood of Wilmersdorf. Oliver, who recently traded in a career in physics for apiary, is the first beekeeper to participate in our honey exchange, offering three jars (plus plums plucked from the trees above and homemade cake), to Luci in return for an hour or so of her translation corrections to a scientific paper. Selling jars of honey intermittently over the hedge to passers-by, he considers his bees to be doing valuable public relations work, playing a (political) role in the fight to save this particular Gartenkolonie

from a rumoured sale to developers. The Kolonie is in a quiet street on the edge of the centre, now desirable real estate in a city where land speculation is not yet taken as completely natural.



Figure 2: Luci, Pearl and Oliver, 2014. credit: Sumugan Sivanesan

Such ambivalence is familiar to those of us in the business of making art that attempts a critique of the encroachment of capital on all spheres of life. Occupying a privileged position in that our labour is 'surplus' to more overtly utilitarian exertions, our self-determining capacity to spend time in the field and in rather open-ended research mode is by intent channelled towards the production of 'neighbourly' (though not necessarily smooth) relations that build resilience and shared knowledge. In this case, project participants made connections with bees as creatures and with their situation more broadly, and got to know beekeepers living in their local area. Our activities in anti-disciplinary speculation were based in Moabit, where ZK/U was established less than five years ago and where not coincidentally prices are already on the cusp of skyrocketing in line with the rest of Berlin. There we worked closely with the Moabees, a feminist beekeeping collective from the Kiez who manage hives together in a number of locations (including atop a container in the ZK/U compound), sharing honey as a common resource and skills and know-how through free workshops in

the community. Nevertheless the ease with which this kind of (unpaid, precarious) artistic labour can be instrumentalised in processes of 'place-making', gentrification and the creation of cultural capital, means that it is also messily implicated in the forces it tries to revoke.



Figure 3: Moabees, ZK/U, 2014. credit: Sumugan Sivanesan

Stretching Amir's provocation (with our remit of speculative work), we could understand city bees as an 'insect working class' whose labours are both utilitarian and abstract. It is tempting then to imagine the disappearance of bees from industrialised hives as a kind of workers' strike, or as Amir has put it, a 'zoooperatism', [4] a declaration of insolvency or refusal in the form of strategic political action undertaken by worker bees to sabotage the human-centred mechanisms of expansionary global agribusiness production in which they are deployed. [5]

## Value

One beekeeper tells us that beekeeping in Berlin reached a peak during the DDR, when honey could be either traded for desired commodities on the black market or sold back to the State at a fixed price, constituting a rare personal income supplement. Today there are around 900 urban beekeepers (still only one quarter of those in the 1950s), with

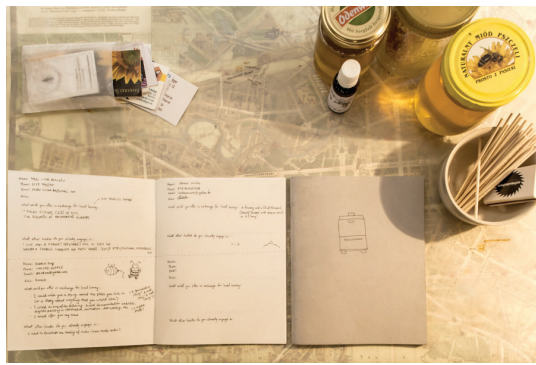
hives sprouting in every neighbourhood – across school gardens, rooftops, empty lots and cemeteries. In post-industrial cities like Detroit and Berlin, an impoverished state unable to afford city maintenance leaves many public areas to grow wild, resulting in more biodiversity of food (and less pesticides) for local bees than in rural areas dominated by monocultures. Incidentally these are also often the scenarios in which artists find themselves able to afford living and working space, on the fringes of land (temporarily) forgotten by the imperatives of profitability and comfortable homogeneity.



Figure 4: Moabees, Park am Gleisdreieck, 2015. credit: Tessa Zettel

At Berlin's Stadt Honig Fest in Prinzessinnengarten, a lively annual gathering of the city's expanding apiary community, we meet Heinz Risse and Rainer Kaufmann, who run immensely popular courses here and practice beekeeping in ways that allow for the bees to be as industrious (or not) as they choose. Heinz and Rainer collect only minimal amounts of honey after winter when it is no longer required by the brood, and don't offer sugar syrup to sweeten the deal. Rainer chooses the path of polite refusal in declining to join our micro-honey exchange network; his abundant garden provides for all his needs and anyway his honey is too precious to trade. Beekeeping campaigner Erika Mayr is however enthusiastic – she already uses the honey from her rooftop bees to pay

for dentistry work and as wages for the DJs who play in her bar. 'Home-made' honey (if it can be so called), like jam, always circulates within a gift economy, which is not to say that there are no sticky multidirectional transactions involved.



**Figure 5: Plan Bienen Austausch logbook, 2014. credit: Laura Fiorio**

Here in Berlin, cultures of DIY economies and radical social formations evolved in post-reunification conditions of monetary scarcity. Times having clearly changed, such activities are now framed by the global 'sharing economy' which design philosopher Cameron Tonkinwise critiques as "overwhelmingly an antiregulatory, precariat-creating way of monetizing social interactions" (n.p.). At last year's annual OUIShare Summit, a sort of trade fair mix of 'platform capitalism' – commercial enterprises framed by social networks and (unpaid) user-generated content – and social innovation start-ups sat beside more community-led initiatives like a cargo bike-share programme and the free store/object library Leila. On one stand was the citizen-science project Open Source Beehives, a network of makers and beekeepers who design and build standardised plywood hives monitoring bee health and behaviour in different parts of the world, addressing limited scientific knowledge about pollinator species and the 'wild' ecologies that support agricultural landscapes.[6] Here we

also came across LebensmittelRetten, an organised food rescue operation that partners with organic supermarket chain BioCompany to collect and redistribute unsellable food, now managing a network of free public fridges across the city. The fridges fit into well-established networks of hausprojekts and community centres, enabling unofficial modes of circulation and exchange that are in a sense built on the material failures of an economic system driven by constant growth and 'wasted' surplus.



**Figure 6: Open Source Beehives, OUIShare Summit, 2014. credit: Tessa Zettel**

The new conditions and politics of a changing climate, bringing into focus the unevenness of global patterns of consumption and consequent impact, demand that 'we' reduce waste, find cleaner modes of production and radically lower our material intensity in developed economies. As Tonkinwise argues, sharing is really about the messy negotiation of access to goods, which in the interests of futuring necessarily become scarcer. As so-called 'share' economies become absorbed into capitalist methodologies, business opportunities arise for individuals to become service providers, participants in turn self-audit and police their behaviour to maintain profiles on sharing platforms. These emergent forms of 'platform capitalism' enable the privatisation of the means of consumption: "every space and product and even moment of time now has earning capacity" (Tonkinwise n.p.). The

one value that Tonkinwise finds in sharing systems today (that is to say, what potential they have for shifting values) lies in the friction caused by new socialities that are not defined by the familiar alienated service roles of work. In other words “capitalism is an alienated way of handling those negotiations; sharing forces you to negotiate with aliens” (Tonkinwise n.p.). In economic relations with ‘social thickness’, those in which resource flows are placed upfront in a novel social relation, value must be negotiated person-to-person, sometimes awkwardly. In our honey trades, the worth of a jar had to be determined outside of monetary equivalence, what it could be sold for in a supermarket never approaching the quantity of time, labour and attention that keeping bees requires. From the side of those offering, for example, a singing lesson or a hand with the work of beekeeping, such a value also had to be then weighted against an assessment of one’s own capacities to meet the needs of others – human and non-human – that we share our cities with.



Figure 7: April, Honey Stock Exchange, Gütermarkt, ZK/U, 2014. credit: Sumugan Sivanesan

Partly as a way of capturing the abundant artistic labour needed to facilitate an experience for only a tiny number of participants, each of our successful trades was commemorated in a specially designed ‘Notgeld’ (emergency bank note). Notgeld was a form of local currency popular in

Germany in the 1920s, when war reparations contributed to massive economic collapse and hyperinflation pushed the price of a loaf of bread up from 150 marks to 200 million in just a year or two. Many regional municipalities responded by producing their own Notgeld which had to be used locally and before the expiry date (spent not saved). Being pictorial histories of desire at such a time – there are rolling fields, cows, even beehives – as collectibles they accrued a different kind of symbolic value. Commodities like coal and butter also functioned then as informal currencies; unable to lose all their value overnight, they were inherently less unstable than money, which as economic historian Winfried Bogon points out, is only a system of trust that functions for as long as everyone believes in it.



Figure 8: Plan Bienen: Statements of Profit and Loss (detail: Notgeld), exhibition, Art Laboratory Berlin, 2015. credit: Tessa Zettel

Our Notgeld – micro-visual narratives of each exchange – were printed in editions of three, one for each (human) trader and one for the bees, all equally use-less in a non-art economy but functioning semiotically to ‘value’ the event (and the co-mingling of its participants). The B (bee)-side elevates the role of the particular colony of bees involved in the transaction; clearly they are responsible for the honey, but there are also other things that a beekeeper receives in exchange for the care and home that they provide. As

Bärbel, a beekeeper for more than twenty years, tells Valentina after they've finished centrifuging the honey out of its comb as part of the trade, beekeepers fall 'in love' with their bees, are somehow changed by them. The bees themselves are further engaged in their own exchanges, such as that of pollen for pollination with the city's flora, both wild and carefully planted.



Figure 9: Valentina and Bärbel centrifuging honey, 2014. credit: Sumugan Sivanesan

## Multispecies entanglements

Many of Berlin's most famous streets – *Unter den Linden*, *Kastanienallee*, *Birkenstrasse* – are named for the flowering trees that line them, trees that together provide food for bees throughout the year (and of course produce certain desirable honeys). This is an instance of more-than-human agency rooted in the ground itself, living traces of the once-powerful beekeeper lobby groups who, in the late nineteenth century, helped shape the ecologies of a rapidly expanding city to serve the interests of more than one species. In Germany today the activist association *Mellifera e.V.* works explicitly to “interfere politically on behalf of the bees,” recently managing to help secure a temporary ban on neonicotinoids in the EU that is soon to be followed in parts of the US.

Rainer and Heinz of *Prinzessinnengarten* are also directors of *Mellifera*; Heinz keeps more bees (50,000 give or take) on the rooftop of the *Abgeordnetenhaus* (House of Representatives), in order that they may directly influence the decision-making of the parliamentarians inside, part of the Berlin *Summt!* initiative responsible for the bees on top of *HKW* and much of Berlin's prominent skyline. In the city planning sphere, urban ecologist *Herbert Lohner* is currently preparing a 'white paper' recommending state 'green infrastructure' legislations, for example a minimum number of *Schrebergärten* (allotments) to be provided along with every newly built apartment. Such moves invoke the right to a certain kind of green space, a commons that involves interspecies sociality and provides a value not fully quantifiable in monetary terms.



Figure 10: Birkenstraße, Moabit, 2014. credit: Sumugan Sivanesan

Moore and Kosut write of our limited ability to 'know' bees using human senses, terms and concepts, advocating instead for “new modes of embodied attention and awareness” (520) – ways of standing back, *intra-acting* and 'being with' (534) – essentially following the bee through its social transactions with objects, humans and insects, apprehending it as operative within its own world of meaning. In this they recognise other kinds of agency that bees have in the formation of engaged alliances within urban

landscapes, through their embodied labour (pollination) even constituting us physically as a species. Bringing together “the idea of the bee, humans’ material relationship with the bees, including use of them, and the actual bee as its own thing,” Moore and Kosut describe “an ontological murk of relations” that replaces strict distinctions between species and their surroundings with a relationship that is intimately “enmeshed and porous” (525).

Amerindian perspectivism, as championed by anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, takes such intermingling further. Viveiros de Castro argues for this philosophy of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin, in which “everything and everyone can be human” or rather “nothing and no one is human in a clear and distinct fashion,” to be taken up as a potentially radical decolonial tool (70). According to perspectivism, all species see the world the same way, but the world that they see changes; for instance, a jaguar may see themselves as human, us as we would see wild pigs, and blood as we see beer, or a tapir would approach a mud-flat as we would a ceremonial house. Each referent then takes on multiple inflections, so that behind the taste of beer is blood and below the ceremonial house is mud. In this ‘transformational’ world, all things – human, animal, plant, spirit, earth – can variably occupy the prime subject position, and their habits and actions understood under the rubric of culture. Perhaps honey, consumed by us both, might be a substance through which our distinct perspectives intersect, a site of ontological undoing where interspecies translation and transformation could occur. The golden liquid at the centre of our trades may then even take on shamanic properties, as a figure that can metamorphose and (mis)communicate across species.

Massimo de Angelis argues that the present economic crisis is a capitalist crisis



Figure 11: A Gift from the Bees (detail: Honig Butter Kekse), performance, ZK/U, 2014. credit: Sumugan Sivanesan

of social instability, capitalism having effectively reached the limits of the various social and biophysical ecologies on which it depends (123). One way out of this crisis lies in the creation and maintenance of the commons, the practice of ‘commoning’, in which communities form around the shared use and governance of resources – for example, a community garden or a bicycle share network. For de Angelis, commoning now becomes an imperative of social production, as a process of “socialization, communication and the transformation of subjectivities and social relations”, such that the other is “no longer alien but a co-producer of life in commons” (140). Scholars of multispecies studies insist that we understand how ecologies – lifeworlds – are themselves co-produced by innumerable species and processes that are ‘more-than-human’. Such positions dismantle notions of the self and other by exposing varied and often invisible interspecies co-minglings, including those that comprise the human biome and attest that “we have never been human” after all, that rather it is “relationality all the way down” (Haraway, cited in Gane 141).

Drawing from the theories of physicist-philosopher Karen Barad, Moore and Kosut’s practice of ‘intra-species mindfulness’ has resonance in reconsidering how we organise together in urban communities (520). Instead





of attempting to figure another species out, they encourage us to figure the bee *in*, moving outside our human selves to understand 'human' and 'other' as cultural constructions. In this formulation intra-actions are the material-discursive exchanges that *co-constitute* entities and refute the idea of bounded 'entities in themselves'.

Our work as artists – in which 'production' is relational and co-constitutive – is brought together with that of the bees in an attempt to forge a common political ground. This is also a process of commoning that figures more-than-human entities into everyday social practices of exchange and reciprocity. Referencing in its title an imagined (or imaginary) 'exit strategy' to overstretched relations subsumed under capitalism, *Plan Bienen* consciously follows the trajectory of the bee towards ways of thinking and being that undo the human, reconfiguring our relationships with fellow species and each other, and the changing common lifeworlds that we co-produce and hold together.

Figure 12: *Rates of Exchange: A Discursive Sonntagsbrunch* (detail), discursive brunch and mapping exercise, Art Laboratory Berlin, 2015. credit: Tessa Zettel

## Notes

[1] See *Plan Bienen* project blog: <<http://planbienen.net>>.

[2] Tony Fry proposes defuturing (and its inverse, futuring), to describe that which takes futures away, our own and other species, in place of the now meaningless discourse of sustainability/unsustainability.

[3] *Tiergarten: Landscape of Transgression*, 2015. Haus der Kulturen der Welt, 4 July.

[4] Amir draws on the work of Sigfried Giedion, whose book *Mechanization Takes Command* from 1948 ascribes agency and accounts for the bodily resistance of animals in the slaughtering and meat packing industries of Chicago. Amir notes that Giedion's analysis resembles Italian Operaist theory which argues for the conceptual and political autonomy of living labour against the allegedly objective arguments of capitalist economic theory.

[5] This proposition was explored in more detail by the authors in an earlier version of this paper "Disappearing Bees", published in *un Magazine* (Zettel and Sivanesan).

[6] Open Source Beehives <<http://www.opensourcebeehives.net>>.

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