

An abstract graphic design on a light blue background. It features two yellow circles, one in the top right and one in the bottom left. Numerous yellow arrows of varying lengths and directions radiate from these circles, creating a sense of movement and connection. The arrows are thick and hand-drawn in style.

Mia Isabel Edelgart in conversation with Karin Bähler Lavér from Marabouparken about, amongst other things, her video piece *Hearts in Tiny Chests (PS) Pollination Services* which featured in the exhibition Community Services, May–August 2018

INTERVIEW WITH MIA ISABEL EDELGART

Karin Bähler Lavér

marabouparken

Mia Isabel Edelgart in conversation with Karin Bähler
Lavér from Marabouparken about, amongst other
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At the opening the exhibition *Community Services* in June you did a performative reading to the pollinators inhabiting Erik Sjödin's Bee shed in the park. Can you tell us more about this process (how did it come about, what is the intention, which texts do you read)?

– Yes, In Marabouparken I read snippets from various texts on bees to bees. Some of them I had from Erik's *Political Beekeeper Library* and others had been part of my earlier research. I did a cross reading between them, to accentuate the different approaches – different ways of relating to a kind of otherness, here in the form of an insect. In general many of the texts represent anthropomorphizing and anthropocentric attitudes, but they are nonetheless insightful attempts to get closer to other forms of life. A book I read from is **The Queen Must Die: And Other Affairs of Bees and Men** by William Longgood from 1985. Erik has it in the library too, and it is such a great introduction to bees. Besides writing about honey bees, Longgood writes about the honey industry, how the honey bees are kept, how they are sold by weight and imported/exported etc, but he also writes about other bee species, solitary bees and gregarious bees, which I appreciate. I say this because there is a big

difference in the amount of writings on the various species. The Western honeybees have been favored as a subject, due to their domestication and because of their rare social nature, speculatively seen as representing democracy, communism, kingdom etc. Whereas solitary species such as for example, mason bees, represent messy anarchists. These writings are entertaining examples of human projections onto bees, and as a result of this preoccupation with the honeybees, most people tend to think about the honeybee, when you say *bee*. But, all the different bees are important and some of the other species are even threatened by the immense production of honeybees. The honeybees are polylectic, meaning they can survive from a broad range of pollen, whereas other bee species depend on a specific crop or flower. Common for all of them however, is that they suffer due to capitalism.

Another book I read from was **The Sacred Bee** by Hilda Ransome from 1937. When I first read that book I became familiar with old rituals from different European cultures, where the beehives were considered parts of human families. The hives were spoken to, sung to and informed when something like marriage, birth or death happened. To me this corresponded well with trying to stage

questions about the relation between human-animals and non-human-animals, by addressing the bees directly, which is also what I do in my video work in the exhibition: *Hearts in Tiny Chests (PS) Pollination Services*.

Reading to animals is not new to me in my work. It springs from questions about the ingrained impossibilities of representation. In a previous work I addressed canary birds, re-telling them their own history: the naming of their species, the breeding of them and the use of them in coalmines etc. I am interested in the conflict in reading to something, what has been written about them. I guess it seems both dominating, but at the same time considerate to actually address the subjects directly. I also realised that addressing a non-human-animal with a *you*, created an ambiguity that I wanted to explore further (and still do). Language has obviously been pivotal when it comes to defining what is human. A central point within speciesism is that human domination is natural because of ideas about reason and language. In the 18th century, Descartes compared human anatomy to other mammals' anatomy and found a similarity in our organs and from that concluded that since there was no traceable organ for reason and language in the

human-animal, it was a god given gift and a proof of human superiority over other animals (who were thereby reduced to machines). This notion is still prevalent, disguised in more god-less principles, despite so much science showing other forms of language, intelligence and sensitivity within non-human-animals, and well yes, also in plants and fungi.

But even within human-relations there is a tendency to rely on and trust language too much for my taste. Nevertheless, when I do research I read a lot and reading always makes me curious as to what can actually become known through text. I guess it is a very general question for artists about how to mediate the research in a format that supports the questions at stake in the work. This is where I found the reading 'back-to' strategy useful. It withholds so many paradoxes to struggle with. Another aspect of the reading is that – besides the bees – the work deals with ideas of reproductive labour – so it felt connected to work alongside that notion, that every time you read something, you also reproduce it. You let it live.

In turn, how do the performances relate to your wish to explore the non-verbal as a form of communication?

– I wanted it to display the obvious: that the act of reading to someone is more than the semantic meaning of the words. For example, there is the materiality of the voice, vibrations of sound and the proximity as a kind of attempt to tenderness. This attempt is full of unknowables – like my way of showing tenderness – for example cuddling, wouldn't necessarily feel tender to an insect, but rather like a threat. As a child my grandmother choked a lamb from hugging it too hard and long, because she liked it so much – reading is hopefully more harmless – but it also becomes a question of what kind of care and for whose sake, which I guess is a tricky question as it is entangled in various kinds of relations. What is sure is that in the act of attempting care, you obviously also begin to care, so the reading somehow became a device for myself in relating to bees.

And then of course, there is a joking foolishness to the act. I mean we will never know what the bees actually perceive. I assume that bees do not understand the words, which makes it a bit silly to insist on trying to share with them, how they have been described in human language throughout history. But by this I hope to show how the texts do their best and work their way, but always have blind spots and are full of projections and speculations. The honeybee is without a doubt one of

the most studied animals, but it is still hard to grasp their form of intelligence. So despite the amount of books on them, they remain alien. The limit will always be the investigator's own intelligence, her idea of intelligence and her vocabulary.

An interesting case from early 20th century is the one with Clever Hans, a horse, who was believed to be able to solve arithmetic problems. Clever Hans would perform with its trainer, where he, the trainer, would pose questions and the horse would somehow give correct responses. But investigations of the case showed that even though Clever Hans was not able to subtract, divide etc; it simply read involuntary cues in the body language of its trainer and from that it knew what to do. This reevaluation led to disappointment about the intelligence of Clever Hans, but I rather like that version, because it shows how intelligence can be a relation. It can be something that happens between us and it can vary from context to context.

You return to the quote "always inside a fleshy world & never a brain in a vat". Where is this from and what is the radical potential in such a worldview?

– It is a Donna Haraway quote from the interview book **How Like a Leaf** by Thyrza

Nichols Goodeve. A brain in a vat is a very typical post-human image. The bodiless mind or a brain ripped from its body – like Krang from the Turtles. Where I live there is still a dominant paradigm of mind/body dualism, even though the idea is ancient. I grew up learning that intelligence was in the head – the brain, and everything that had to do with the rest of the body was more or less inferior (and a feminine obstruction to thinking). Of course living within a health-regime, there is a lot of focus on the body, but mainly produced by the obsession with beauty, meaning a fear of death. The radical potential within the quote consists of challenging that worldview and letting your flesh become brainy and vice versa and thereby respecting other forms of life – by understanding the fleshiness and the vulnerability– that we as creatures share. Honey bees are interesting in relation to this quote, since they, with the so called swarm intelligence, are as far from an isolated brain-entity, as you can get.

How did you come to draw a parallel between the nurturing of a small child and the human relationship to bees and other pollinators?

– I live in a small apartment and I have my working desk in our bedroom, where my

child sleeps, so inevitably he informs my work. To me he is like a mute messenger from potential futures, which is why I often have him with me in my work. Also – the sort of language-less relationship we had at that point also reminded me of being with other kinds of animals. I had no clue whatsoever of how his thoughts and feelings were structured without language. I mean even though he is my child, he is one of the most alien things I have ever come across. I recognised that as a kind of otherness and experienced how the production of this otherness always points back at an urge to define one self as an understandable, rational being, which we are not.

The days when I was filming the beekeepers and bees, I also filmed him sleeping. A child sleeping is a very generic image, but for me it also contains endless questions – since what you learn settles while sleeping and so much of my own search in this project has been about unlearning certain anthropocentric attitudes. I have just read a great passage in *The Cry of Nature* by Stephen Eisenman, where he reinterprets some of Freud's famous cases with clients suffering from neuroses involving animals; the rat man, the wolf man and little Hans (who is terrified by horses). Freud of course interprets the dreams, fears of, obsessions with

certain animals as transpositions for fear of masturbation, fathers, castration etc. but Eisenman suggests a less metaphoric reading, saying what if their fears actually do have to do with animals? These clients of Freud lived in a time where the torturing of animals was not concealed as it is here today: horses suffered from the hard work of transportation, the animals in the zoos lived under even sadder conditions, aristocratic women wore hats adorned with dead songbirds and not all animal slaughtering had been confined to industrialised closed slaughter houses. This visible reality of violent domination over other species, Eisenman suggests, might be at stake here, rather than a crumbled giraffe representing a mother's castration. I guess I subscribe to the idea that what inhabits our sub-consciousness and dreams, rather than representing a father's phallus, can also be tokens of pain surrounding us. And not only the pain of one's own species, but a broader suffering existing all around us. I was just curious to let the decreasing numbers of pollinators and a general eco-crisis slide into the sub-consciousness, onto the back of my son sleeping.

Another parallel between the child and the bees was pollination and reproductive work. The reports I read on the conditions of honeybees all stressed the economic benefit of the reproductive work they do

by pollinating. This emphasis upset me, because it revealed that to validate something, also in "nature", you must sell how productive it is. As if to make politicians and people in general understand how these creatures are "working" (for others), is the only way to gain protection for them. It also reminded me of the old (still relevant) feminist discussions on reproductive work – like wages for (and against) housework. Struggling for degraded positions to be acknowledged, by creating validity through capital, leaves an open paradox, like *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house**. And now save the honeybees echoes in all corners of facebook and other medias, but it is clear how the wild bees and other pollinators don't gain the same serious attention, because they are not as easily controllable as economic assets (since they are not as easily domesticated). Maybe this is a clumsy analogy, but it made me think of what lives matter and in extension discussions on migration.

The way bees organize their societies have often been used as a metaphor for the ideal way of constructing human societies (e.g. kingdom or democracy), and, as mentioned in your work, bees have got to represent chastity and harmony as well as hierarchy and power. Do you think it also possible to extract

a more utopian or visionary way of organising human life with non-humans, with the pollinators?

– Hmm first of all I am not very romantic about the honey bees – if their way of organising was translated to human society, it would be the ultimate utilitarian society, where everyone sacrificed herself for the survival of her own species, her own country or city. But as **Maurice Meaterlinck** writes in **Life of the Bees**, the ruler of the honeybees is not the queen, but the future, and I guess there might be something notable in that. If one could think of the hive as an earth system, rather than just one city, as it is often described as.

I think there are a lot of visionary or utopian ideas in this world. Humanity has never been a whole, and there are, and have been, plenty of people and cultures knowing how to organise life in unison

with pollinators. The problem as I see it is not the lack of ideas, but ruling ideologies in this part of the world rejecting other visions as utopian, primitive, anachronistic kill joys. That wasn't really an answer. Maybe I am a bit disillusioned – the heat of this summer has moved facts closer. I just came across Ann Kaplan's term pre-trauma, which makes a lot of sense for me, yet at the same time; I know that people in other places are already living with devastating climate changes – not in the pre, but as in now. Capitalist corporations appropriated the honeybee hive long ago as the perfect emblem in part of their green-washing – even as a child in the nineties, my first savings box was a plastic beehive and when I go to the webpage of my bank today, the background image in the site is of beekeepers in green environments.

* quote by Audre Lorde

LIST OF REFERENCES (FROM THE PERFORMANCE)

Life of the Bees by Maurice Meaterlinck 1901

The Humble-bee by F.W.L Sladen 1912

The Queen Must Die: And Other Affairs of Bees and Men by William Longgood 1985

The Sacred Bee by Hilda Ransome from 1937

Love of Worker Bees by Aleksandra Kollontaj 1923

Six Bee Poems by Joe Shapcott 2011

Bee by Claire Preston 2006

Bee Alliance by CA Conrad



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