

TAKE

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ecology

W o o d R o b e r t e a u

a withdrawing vital material

Amy Shelton, *Florilegium Honey Flow III [autumn]*, pressed botanical plant samples, linen herbarium tape, glassine envelopes, LED light-box, 2014. Photo credit: Wellcome Collection, image courtesy: the artist.





Wood Roberdeau is a lecturer in Visual Cultures at Goldsmiths, University of London. His work focusses on art theory and practice within the wider environmental humanities. Past research has investigated the tenets of the American and European neo-avant-gardes and explored contemporary art's remobilisation of everyday poetics by locating corresponding tensions within sociology, phenomenology and metaphysics. Questions concerning human subjectivity and agency, as well as the ontology of objects and materiality, have since led to a focus on Geopoetics, ecology, and the activation of visual art within philosophical post-humanism.

For some time now, our scientists and journalists have been reporting on the increasingly tangible ecological crisis that is the imminent threat to the longevity of the world's honeybee population. About three years ago, two environmental sociologists posted an article to a London newspaper's website that gave me pause to consider the role cultural practitioners might take to contribute to this mainstream, but somehow abstract, discourse. By 'abstract,' I mean to suggest this specific ecological problem has often been communicated at the macro-level and that it could be helpful to reset that parameter. Put simply, the article questioned our tendency to speculate based on scientific hypotheses that do not begin right on the ground. It also questioned the overreaching 'non-solutions' at which such hypotheses sometimes arrive.

For example, the abolition of certain pesticides in the U.S. was not carried out due to the hegemony of the market and its reluctance to let go of a product without definitive proof of its likely culpability. The authors argue that rather than addressing this growing threat from a misconstrued outside that often justifies 'false negatives,' it would serve to locate 'more genuinely participatory research that brings beekeepers' (immediate) knowledge and scientists' (broader) knowledge into a 'creative' and egalitarian dialogue toward a fuller understanding of why honey bees are dying (my emphasis).¹ The phrase 'fuller understanding' is what piqued my interest and has led me to what I believe are some significant questions for art history and theories of contemporary art practice; for one, could 'cultural' knowledge be added to this equation?

In a 2006 lecture on art and ecology, Suzi Gablik stated that "the fundamental problem in the West today is the illusion of autonomy".² Her call was for artists to reconsider their relationship to capital that comes at the expense of social purpose or a "rigid separation between aesthetics and ethics".³ It could be said there is a parallel between her characterisation of the art market as that

which is opposed to interventional or 'eco-ventional' art and the market of agribusiness that hinders creativity at the level of the eco-tone. My project here is to assess selected artworks that have directly and indirectly explored our relationship with bees and their organic productions. By so doing, I aim to test whether a reorientation can be established for the art historian that promotes a functional model of ecological post-humanism within what has been a primarily anthropocentric field.

One might begin to decentre the discipline by rethinking its scale or place within a wider visual culture. Timothy Clark has claimed that the humanities have been 'forms of ideological containment' and that these forms have been sequestered on a small scale from the larger scale of everyday life or the environment-as-totality. Consequently, it is assumed that the smaller 'human' scale conceptualises and determines the larger through negation. A 'scale effect' occurs when the microcosmic and the macrocosmic are shown to be interconnected and not disconnected; moreover, it is crucial that we de-territorialise our scales so as to re-territorialise our politics. Though he is writing of our capacity to grasp the effects of global climate change, we might substitute the bees' Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) to note such a phenomenon[s]:

"...most prominent effect is of a derangement of scales that is also an implosion of intellectual competences. It is far easier for critics to stay inside the professionally familiar circle of cultural representations, ideas, ideals and prejudices, than to engage with long-term relations of physical cause and effect, or the environmental costs of an infrastructure, questions that involve non-human agency and which engage modes of expertise that may lie outside the humanities as currently constituted".⁴

Again, a dialogue is required that has so far been neglected and that also resonates with Félix Guattari's notion of 'heterogenesis,' one that refers to "processes of continuous resingularisation" or decentring that welcomes localisable altercations; what we might call ecologies of everyday life.⁵ Accordingly, one of the themes I want to address is a shift from artistic representation to one of 'inhabitation'. Significantly, an aporia will emerge surrounding the need but also the impossibility to relinquish the human subject or figure of the artist when concerned with such 'scale effects'.

In her foundational work on 'vital materiality,' Jane Bennett discovers a loophole in the realisation that anthropomorphism, in fact, "works 'against' anthropocentrism [my emphasis]".⁶ If this is the case, it is not surprising that from the late 20th century to the present, artists have turned to the emblematic honeybee

Piero di Cosimo, *The Discovery of Honey by Bacchus*, ca. 1510.

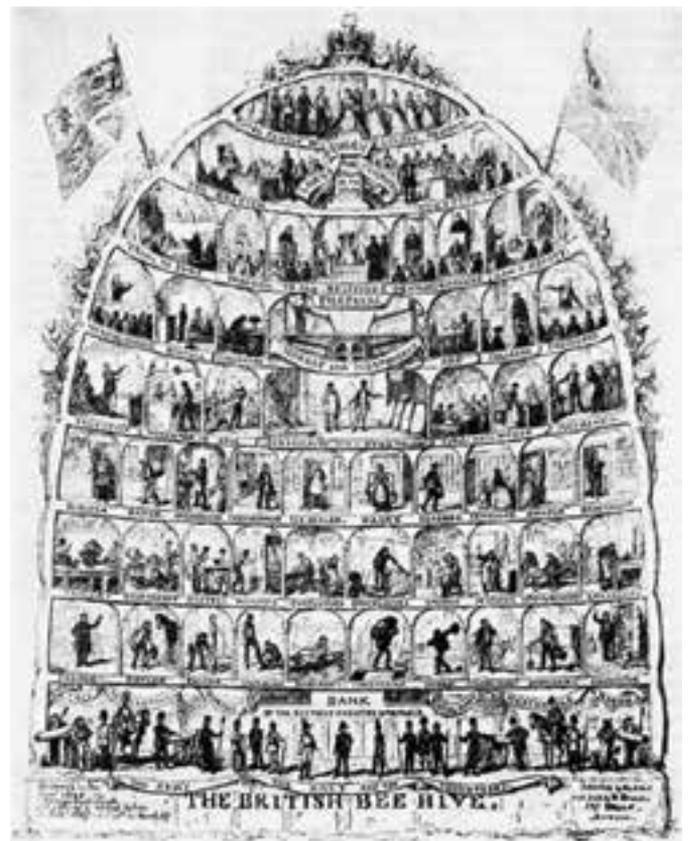
to navigate ecological scales of different sizes. As Mary Kosut and Lisa Jean Moore have recently observed, “[t]he slippage between nature/culture, animal/human, art/instinct, and subject/object are transgressed by the bees’ contemporary presence in art worlds”.⁷ Yet rather than examine the plight of the honeybee through artworks that ‘idyllically’ posit the insect-as-artist as Kosut and Moore do in their article “Bees Making Art”, I would like to extend their discussion to focus on an ‘unavoidable’ inversion of anthropomorphism — zoomorphism — and how metaphor has operated at different historical registers and within potential sites of ‘vital materiality,’ as defended by Bennett and informed by others.

Somewhat ironically, I would assert, beginning from the perspective of the human critiques, symbiosis at a closer proximity than beginning from a position that exacerbates the honeybee crisis, as a crisis of ‘otherness’. Demonstrating a failure to achieve in art exactly what it is that the insect or hive achieves in nature is perhaps more useful to identifying critical environments than orchestrating or framing ‘entelechy’ (or unconscious self-direction) as spectacle. The first task is to look at cases that have arguably secured a humanist legibility — one that supports epistemological anthropocentrism (after Kant and Hegel) instead of challenging it.

In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder surmised that “among all these species, the chief place belongs to the bees, and thus rightly is the species chiefly admired, because they alone of this genus have been created for the sake of man”.⁸ For ancient Romans, these insects were unlike any other in their rationality, which man could turn to as analogous of his social sphere. In the 16th century, Piero di Cosimo painted *The Discovery of Honey by Bacchus* (ca. 1510), an allegorical ‘secular painting’ that denotes what art historian Sharon Fermor argues is indeed a divine episode, but one intentionally presented at the human register of the quotidian.⁹ She cites Erwin

Panofsky, who determined the central tree containing the bees and their honey divides the panel in two; in the background, those with honey on the left find themselves before an ordered and sunlit city whilst those without, on the right, are left in the darkness and uncertainty of forest and ruin. Honey is therefore a ‘civilising force’ that unites the realm of unbridled nature with that of mankind.¹⁰ This conclusion lends the painting its art historical weight as symptomatic of Enlightenment thinking and confirms a place for it in a culture that exists outside of nature. Adam Smith’s 18th century concept that self-understanding depends upon the type of work citizens contribute to the greater good informed a similar visual textuality in George Cruickshank’s illustration of *The British Beehive* (1840, 1867), which depicts Victorian society’s varied occupational strata centring on the Queen and supported by the Bank and Armed Forces below. Here, the beehive is indicative of an industrious and profitable realm that clearly grasps the importance of individual types or classes that know their own path. It is not so much a coded text as a theoretical blueprint for an oncoming modernity that would solidly taxonomise social roles in the sense that worker bees are distinct from drones.

Identification of the human through the animal once again segregates two sides of an ecological zone. These depictions support a model of mankind *like* the enigmatic honeybee as opposed to a postulation of mankind as bee-

George Cruickshank, *The British Beehive*, 1840, 1867.

kind. At this stage, I would suggest two trajectories for the sake of argument. On the one hand, as Juan Antonio Ramírez has stipulated, the metaphor of the beehive went on to inspire the great architects from Gaudí to Le Corbusier.¹¹ For my purposes, this perpetuates the Hegelian nature/culture divide on through to mid-20th century modernism, isolating the artist as creative genius with utopian visions derived from an adapted but equally romanticised view of the animal kingdom and its ability to inspire but remain foreign to human progress. On the other hand, thanks to a postmodernism defined through a revival of a pre-modern investment in allegory, as put forward by Craig Owens in 1980, some visual artists and their followers were able to experiment with those localisable altercations informed by Guattari's three ecological registers within 'Integrated World Capitalism'; namely the environmental, the social, and the mental.¹² The second task of this article, then, is to explore the ways in which the recurring metaphor of the industrious honeybee, evolving alongside the discipline of art history, has served to cross-pollinate that field with changing views of what the 'ecological' actually is or can be in our own time.

One aspect of the 'allegorical impulse' pertained to the site-specific, ephemeral, and photographically documentable artwork that contained 'psychological resonances.'¹³ For *Honey Pump in the Workplace*, performed over one hundred days at Documenta 6 in 1977, Joseph Beuys's decisive but unrestricted zoomorphism invoked the bee in its wax cell; the pump itself comprises parts that form a symbol of the human circulatory system. Replacing the biological purpose of blood, honey was pumped under each participant's seat and towards one central depository or 'heart' while the 'Free International University,' as a hive-like collective body, engaged in open seminar discussion about the state of the world. For the artist-as-facilitator, thinking, feeling, movement, and the power of the will all came together within this 'social sculpture' resulting in a 'parallel process' of the artwork. As a veering corollary to Marx and Engels's elevation of pure human imagination through their famous analogy of the bee versus the architect, Beuys declared that "if you *enter into* the bee it is...easier to enter into 'the whole group being'".¹⁴ Artistic labour, in theory, exemplified human labour in general.¹⁵ In Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology, the 'machinic' potential of art could be unlocked and rhizomatic networks affirmed; multiplicity rendered comprehensible thanks not only to the metaphor of the honeybee, but also the materiality of honey itself in its visceral unification of organisms and mechanisms.

It is interesting to note that five years before in 1972, Jonathan Benthall had argued that the gap between

the physical (or natural) and the cultural (or manmade) could be bridged by redefining the artist; no longer an outsider, the eco-political artist would take advantage of social presumptions to become a postmodern shamanic conduit of sorts.¹⁶ At the time, this was of course a step in the right direction; retrospectively, however, it situates this figure within a framework of 'historical vitalism', in which matter (such as honey) is spiritualised to the extent that its 'material vitalism' is pushed aside.¹⁷ Here it is worth mentioning Rudolf Steiner's nine bee lectures of 1923, in which he insists comprehension of the life of the hive requires "the faculty of spiritual perception".¹⁸ In the 1970s, neo-conservatism informed a notion of artistic redemption after modernism without having arrived at a fully effective political ecology. Lending spirit to matter in this way affects what Bennett calls our 'earth-destroying fantasies'; it confirms humanity's power over an objectified world of non-human agents, and here it is worth mentioning that Karl von Frisch won the Nobel Prize in 1973 for interpreting the 'language' of bees.

By contrast, Bennett's model of 'material vitalism' levels the playing field to include those non-human agents ecologically; as we can no longer think of ourselves as environmentalists living 'on' earth, we become materialists living 'as' earth.¹⁹ Ann Hamilton's project *Privation and Excesses* (Capp Street Project, San Francisco, 1989), installed two years before Fredric Jameson's seminal writings on the cultural logic of late capitalism would be published, took a less optimistic view than *Honey Pump in the Workplace*. Familiarly, there are several elements here to be deciphered, but what is more apparent is the materiality of these elements from which the artist "elicits references to boundaries, language, thought, and to labour, worth, gifts, and exchange".²⁰ *Privation* suggests alienation and was palpable as a result of two co-dependent sheep locked away to one side. Economic excesses took the form of 750,000 pennies arranged on the floor over an expanse of honey, the odour of which mixed with the barnyard smells and permeated the space. Two mechanised mortars and pestles were found in an adjoining alcove; one crushing sheep's teeth (animal economy), the other more copper pennies.²¹ Hamilton herself could be found sat with her back to the animals, wringing her hands in honey contained in a felt hat and staring at the materialised sea of *human* economy (a Beuysian reference and a day to day durational exercise). The organic, durational world of bees and agriculture was deliberately juxtaposed with the artificiality of late capital and its reliance on presupposed subject-object systems. Bennett writes:

"A touch of anthropomorphism, then, can catalyse a sensibility that finds a world filled not with ontologically distinct categories of beings (subjects and objects)



Ann Hamilton, *Privation and Excesses*, Capp Street Project | San Francisco, CA, 1989. Photo credit: Ben Blackwell, Image courtesy: Ann Hamilton Studio

but with variously composed materialities that form confederations. In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in “nature” and those in “culture,” anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms”.²²

Thusly, by confusing the anthropomorphic with the zoomorphic and staking a claim for postmodern ‘anxiety’, what Jameson refers to as the ‘hysterical sublime’, Hamilton denied the mystification of the primordial and the otherness of animality, communicating a ‘post-human’ understanding of vital materialism.

Not unrelated to Hamilton’s experimental site of embodiment is Wolfgang Laib’s *Wax Room* (Phillips Collection, Washington D. C. , 2013), which involved the harvesting of pollen and its reconstitution or redistribution, resulting in a beeswax dwelling’s synesthetic alignment with the principles of Zen Buddhism and that same environmentalism that insists upon ethical action over complacent passivity. And yet, it is this idea of action that Timothy Morton confronts in his writing on ‘ecology without nature’ and, more recently, on the theme of ‘hyperobjects.’ Recalling Clark’s question of scale, Morton notes that anthropocentric human space — where inter-subjectivity is believed to occur — detracts from accepting the inter-objectivity that hyperobjects disclose.²³ This is not to say that encounters

and exchanges among cognizant subjects are irrelevant, but that they are included within the wider net of material things which affect those encounters and exchanges. Consequently, solipsistic agency is confiscated from humans and replaced by a non-hierarchical eco-tone: “Mind” emerges [not from programmatic *Monadology* (Leibnitz, 1714) but] from interactions between neurons and other objects precisely because those interactions themselves are always-already aesthetic-causal...Objects do not occur “in” time and space, but rather emit spacetime.²⁴ Moving beyond a notion of ‘inhabitation’, Morton’s post-humanist position allows sensual experience to be thought as a ‘cohabitation’ of entities, for good or ill, evidenced by hyper-objectivity. In other words, the current mediation of the bee crisis (CCD) I mentioned by way of introduction misguides us because it has taken the form of a foreign problem and not one to which we, together with the bees, must address and adjust. In this sense, Laib is not simply reflecting upon the mysteries of apiculture or meditating upon nature-as-other through art’s ability to approximate the everyday life of non-humans; Morton’s ‘ecology after the end of the world’ implies there is no distance between subjects and objects to reduce any longer, which, in turn, means that a productive distance remains intact and allows for the acceptance of ‘mutual disorder.’ This reading could be said to develop Ülf Kuster’s earlier analysis of the

artist's idiosyncratic choice of media that demonstrated the honeycomb of bees, suggests a "primordial shelter" and "the pollen granules can be taken as gauges for the [entire] history of vegetation on earth".²⁵ Further, choosing to emphasize interobjectivity or vital materialism expands the jurisdiction of the art historian beyond the limitations of formalism; what might look like Laib's naturist response to minimalist sculpture or cold colour field painting derives from the major, canonical language of the art world. Yet, like the modern is for the postmodern and the human is for the posthuman, that major language can indeed be referenced to subvert our expectation that 'culture' demands a 'nature' apart.

With this in mind, and recalling Cruickshank's *British Beehive*, Paul Etienne Lincoln's proposal to a 1983 competition to repurpose Sir Giles Gilbert Scott's Battersea power station in London provides a hypothesis for intervening within the practical but unrelated fields of visual art and urban planning. *Battersea Bee Station* explores



Wolfgang Laib, *Wax Room: Wohin bist Du gegangen – wohin gehst Du?* (*Where have you gone – where are you going?*), beeswax, light bulb, 2013. Image courtesy: The Phillips Collection, Washington DC. The Laib Wax Room is supported by The Phillips Collection Dreier Fund for Acquisitions; gifts in memory of trustee Caroline Macomber; Brian Dailey and Paula Ballo Dailey; a community of online contributors; and a partial gift of the artist. Wax donated by Sperone Westwater, New York.

the role of honey as a "metaphor for cultural wealth". Its main objective was to create a fertilisation plan for crop-bearing and flowering plants within the city. The station's 14 generator chambers were to be reconfigured as individual hives; the bees of each hive would then pollinate central and south London's parks and green spaces. Lincoln also proposed a new government tax allowance that would encourage local residents to plant their home gardens in support of the overall project. The giant prism (or *Fool's Paradise*), would refract the colour spectrum so as to correspond to the individual hives. Thanks to the waggle dance of bees explained by Karl von Frisch or the way in which they use the position of the sun to determine their pollination routes, the concept was that the colour coding of chambers would inform the direction to and return from specific locations, organising the honey produced by London area. In addition, the station would house shops selling related products, a library dedicated to the history of apiculture, and a restaurant serving only hive-sourced products to the human employees; that is, the bee station would become the world's largest centre devoted to a specific ecological system and our place within it.²⁶

While this grand enterprise was, of course, never realised, as a proposal it does speak to an art form that explores the ecological from a desire to 'inhabit' so as to confirm shared habits; as noted, older forms of environmentalism support the metaphor of the beehive as an extension to the sociological. Conversely, and despite ethical issues that could be raised concerning animal farming, Lincoln's design attempts to push the envelope towards a more direct and 'vital' material paradigm. In this sense, it resonates with Bruno Latour's definition of 'political ecology' and, more concisely, his usage of the term 'collective'. In *Politics of Nature*, he writes:

"Within the collective, there is now a blend of entities, voices, and actors, such that it would have been impossible to deal with either through ecology alone or through politics alone. The first would have naturalised all the entities: the second would have socialised them all...we have discovered the work common to politics and to the sciences alike: stirring the entities of the collective together in order to... 'make them speak'".²⁷

Not only does this non-scientific view of nature and non-political view of society recalibrate our sense of agency, it also corroborates Guattari's view of 'heterogenesis' and does so by highlighting attentiveness to ecologies of everyday life. Jane Bennett also summarises this point by stating we should '[g]ive up the futile attempt to disentangle the human from the non-human...[that we should] seek instead to engage more civilly, strategically, and subtly with the non-humans in the assemblages in

which [we], too, participate.²⁸ Art history/theory, as an assemblage that considers visual artists and honeybees as everyday ‘actants’ (along with the assemblages of biotechnology, engineering, design, and political science) might now offer up what Latour calls ‘propositions’: those components that ‘insist on the dynamics of the collective in search of good articulation, the good cosmos.’²⁹

Taking its name from ancient Egyptian beekeepers, Amy Shelton’s recent *Honeyscribe* (2006-ongoing) project could be seen to operate in this way. In her words, the goal is to enhance:

“communication, diversity, and collaboration, deploying a deep-felt sensitivity for place and community and the shared environments of the insect, animal, and human. The beehive reflects the flora, the temperature, and the pesticides present in the environment within which it is situated, amalgamating these things into one vastly complicated self-regulating organism”.³⁰

Florilegium Honeyslow (2014), as one aspect of the work, displays those local plants that are necessary to maintain for the honeybee’s survival and prosperity from early spring to late autumn. It is an archival inhabitation that draws attention, at the micro-level, to the ‘hyperobject’ of CCD and our cohabitation with non-humans. The collection of preserved flowers acts as a calendar of sorts and is accompanied by a lexicon that instructs viewers on how to locate and appreciate them. On the roof of the building in which the light boxes are found, functional beehives have been placed. Though not as grandiose or fantastical as Lincoln’s *Battersea Bee Station* with regards to the ‘civilising force’ of honey, Shelton’s project nevertheless incites an ‘eco-vention’ for individuals; one that would perhaps not be legible without the recognisable framework of the cultural institution and histories of exhibition strategy; the anthropocentrism of natural history and art history is questioned through reference to its visual language.

To summarise what has been somewhat of a curatorial exercise, I would suggest that to look at particular artworks beyond their periodisation is not to condone an Aristotelean model of creativity; that is, one that casts the artist as the vessel through which mimesis of an absolute is expressed for the betterment of all, no matter what socio-political context. Rather, it is to investigate whether the ties that bind art practices from the histories written of those practices might be loosened so that their value might be increased when read in conjunction with other fields. For this special issue of TAKE, that other field is ecology — I hope to have demonstrated that while art history may not be able to solve the Anglo-American crisis of CCD, it can certainly concretise the animal/

human, nature/culture dialectic in such a way as to confirm our everyday involvement without fully relying on representation or allegory. Thanks to ‘vital materiality’, this interconnectedness is not identifiable by the exposure of an ‘other’, but by embedded and repetitive ecological affinities; performative metamorphoses in art can indeed effectively complicate and enrich our understanding of the Anthropocene and those things we have forced into hiding.

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- 3 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 4 Timothy Clark, “Scale: Derangements of Scale,” in *Telemorphosis*, ed. Tom Cohen. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2012, 164.
- 5 Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies*, trans. by Ian Pindar and Paul Sutton. London: Athlone, 2000, 69.
- 6 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. London: Duke University Press, 2010, 120.
- 7 Mary Kosut and Lisa Jean Moore, “Bees Making Art: Insect Aesthetics and the Ecological Moment”, *Humanimalia*, vol. 5, no. 2 (Spring 2014), <http://www.depauw.edu/humanimalia/issue10/kosut.html> [Accessed 20 February 2014]
- 8 Pliny the Elder (AD 77-79), *Natural History: Books VIII-XI*, trans. H. Rackham. London: Harvard University Press, 1997, 439.
- 9 Sharon Farmor, *Piero di Cosimo: Fiction, Invention, and Fantasia*. London: Reaktion Books, 1993, 83.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 86.
- 11 Juan Antonio Ramírez, *The Beehive Metaphor: From Gaudi to Le Corbusier*. London: Reaktion Books, 2000.
- 12 Jane Bennett, *op. cit.*, 113.
- 13 Craig Owens (1980), “The Allegorical Impulse: Towards a Theory of Postmodernism,” in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Donald Preziosi. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 318-319.
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- 15 Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1993, 14-15.
- 16 Jonathan Benthall, *Science and Technology in Art Today*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1972, 140-141.
- 17 Jane Bennett, *op. cit.*, 81.
- 18 Rudolf Steiner (1923), *Nine Bee Lectures*, trans. Marna Pease and Carl Alexander Mier, <http://www.biobees.com/library/biodynamics/SteinerBeeLectures.pdf> [Accessed 30 March 2014].
- 19 Jane Bennett, *op. cit.*, ix, 111.
- 20 Joan Simon, *Ann Hamilton*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2002, 73.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 72.
- 22 Jane Bennett, *op. cit.*, 99.
- 23 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013, 81-82.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 89-90.
- 25 Ulf Küster, “Outside of Time: Remarks on Forms and Materials in Wolfgang Laib’s Art,” in *Wolfgang Laib*. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Verlag/Fondation Beyeler, 2005, 106-107.
- 26 Paul Etienne Lincoln, “An Observatory of Collected Cicerones,” *Journal of the London Institute of Pataphysics*, no. 2, gidouille 138. London: Atlas Press and bookartbookshop, 2011, 59-71.
- 27 Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. London: Harvard University Press, 89.
- 28 Jane Bennett, *op. cit.*, 115-116.
- 29 Bruno Latour, *op. cit.*, 247-248.
- 30 Amy Shelton, *Honeyscribe*, http://www.amyshelton.co.uk/art_works/ [Accessed 30 March 2014].