

# Nectar: War upon the Bees

Curated by  
Berta Sichel of Bureau  
Phi Art Projects

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Historically, bees have had a great reputation. For centuries they have been associated with superior moral qualities and have held very positive symbolisms—things like hard work, diligence, wisdom, spirituality, humility, communication, and physical and spiritual cleanliness. Until recently, that is. Today, bees (and, to some extent, birds and other less vital pollinators) are held in considerably less esteem. Now, they are more likely to be associated with all sorts of problems—environmental destruction, the mismanagement of agriculture, the ravages of greed. In fact, even as this essay is going to print, *The Guardian*, an English daily, reports that seven types of bee species once abundant in Hawaii have become the first bees to be added to the U.S. federal list of endangered and threatened species.<sup>1</sup>

*Nectar: War upon the Bees*<sup>2</sup> is a visual essay on the mortality of pollinators as a consequence of the faster-bigger-cheaper approach to food production that is steadily draining our planet's resources, and that could ultimately provoke the collapse of our civilization. The wisdom of cultures across the globe has long told us that nature is full of extraordinary connections. Therefore, our exhibition will also reflect on the interconnectedness of bees with current world events—many of which are urgent to our survival. However, be forewarned: The threat to our food sovereignty triggered by patent-protected genetically modified seeds may be difficult to face, and probably more difficult to control, given the \$66 billion merger of Bayer and Monsanto, dubbed by some critical press the "merger of two evils," just a few months ago.

The projects of the nine artists selected for *Nectar* are unequivocally committed to the theme, yet their scope is expansive and their nuanced associations and references converge into a compilation of images rich in social awareness and engagement. As an overview of the current situation, the works are incisive, insightful, and endowed with the flair of a special kind of art: one that directs our eyes and thoughts to what is happening around us.<sup>3</sup>

It was around 2005, during a lengthy stay in Berlin, that I first heard the expression *art and sustainability*.<sup>8</sup> Coined by Edward Goldsmith and Robert Allen in a 1972 paper entitled *A Blueprint for Survival*, it filled an entire issue of journal *The Ecologist* before appearing that same year in book format. Their analysis of the available information led them to a grim prediction: the "inevitable breakdown of society

and the irreversible disruption of the life-support systems on this planet if current trends are allowed to persist." These trends not only persisted, but, as Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond wrote 10 years ago, "our society is presently on a non-sustainable course."<sup>9</sup>

At the same time, I found that sustainable art was not related to, or should not be equated with, land and environmental art from the 1960s. Sustainable art's key principles include ecology, social justice, non-violence, and a grassroots democracy.<sup>10</sup> According to art historians critical of certain positions taken by some key practitioners of classic land art, these artists showed little concern for the environmental consequences and treated the landscape like a giant canvas. Nevertheless, land art, environmental art, and conceptual art have paved the way for important work since the 1980s, and their ground-breaking ideas about the very nature of representation exert a palpable influence on almost all the artists included in *Nectar*. Robert Smithson, with his concepts of non-site and entropy, has been cited as a central figure in the development of these artists' work.

While several artists here acknowledge these 1960s movements as major influences, others look beyond Western art to explore such divergent inspirations as Buddhist Thangka painting. Others look even further into the past to Renaissance Italian sculptor Bernini, who sculpted bees on all of his magnificent fountains in Rome, thus honoring Pope Urban VIII and his Tuscan family's coat of arms. The scope here is broad and yet highly relevant to our current way of life. Architecture, feminist art, bio art, language, and the relation between art and science are some of the liminal yet potent spaces these artists use in an attempt to construct new expressive associations and possibilities.

Colombian artist Luis Fernando Ramirez Celis is stimulated by the prolific field of contemporary architecture: His *Walden 13* (2013) is a synthetic honeycomb structure based on the geometry of the housing complex *Walden 7*, built by Ricardo Bofill in San Just Descern, near Barcelona. The name alludes to the science fiction novel *Walden 2* by B.F. Skinner, which depicts a utopian community.

Influenced in his youth by Joseph Beuys<sup>11</sup>—whose fascination with bees informed his work throughout his life—and today working with language and translation, Spanish artist Carlos Schwartz depicts the movements honeybees perform called the "waggle dance"<sup>12</sup> in *La Danza* (2016). This "dance" informs other worker bees

Sustainability is the way in which humankind interacts with the environment. It is a governing stewardship between all living things with the notion that future generations will have access to life's resources. To sustain is to look towards the future, a form of conservation protecting nature's quarry. In our symbiotic relationship with all living things, we are all connected by our hereditary material. Now, as evolutionary principles are analyzed through DNA sequencing, Darwin's "tangled bank" of wondrous forms is being altered through technology. What are the consequences of such technological interventions?  
—Suzanne Anker<sup>4</sup>

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I understand “sustainability” as a developmental model different from the actual one that consumes without thinking of the future, and without consideration for people’s or even the general ecosystem’s needs. Sustainability is driven by a desire to live in harmony with the environment, bearing in mind that people need to use natural resources as well. It aims to create a more inclusive society in which participants have equal opportunities.  
—Lucia Madriz<sup>4</sup>

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of the exact location of a food source, often several kilometers from the hive. Bees have two variations to communicate direction and distance. The first is the “waggle” proper; the second is a return to the starting point alternating left and right, to form a figure eight. When one group of bees ends their performance, another group repeats the dance so the flow of information is not interrupted. The two drawings representing the two waggle dance variations were printed over a photograph of the ceiling lights of a department store in Madrid, whose hexagonal shapes are reminiscent of the cells of hives.

Brazilian artist Beth Moysés points to Eva Hesse and Louise Bourgeois as being among the artists who shaped her own work, which is mostly focused on gender and violence. In *Purgo/Ex-Purgo* (2011), she uses honey and its ancestral healing powers in the treatment of wounds as a metaphor for the medication of an unbalanced natural world, as well as for the differences and frictions in human nature—her own definition of the current crisis of sustainability.<sup>13</sup> Though employed by Beuys in a mythological context as a “spiritual substance,”<sup>14</sup> for Moysés honey is more strongly related to emotion and strong feeling. Working in continuous collaboration with groups of battered women around the world and creating performative parades for social change, she compares her involvement with these collectives to the organization of a beehive—one in which the ultimate product is the transformation of lives.

One of the pioneers in the broader field of art, science, and technology, Suzanne Anker follows a trajectory of late Romanticism, examining the primacy of the irregular and the subjective in the domain of bio art, where “wetware” practices are coupled with cultural imagery. Fears of nature transformed are expressed in an iconography bordering on science fiction. Computer programs attempt to foretell the future.

The new version of Anker’s *Twilight* (2016), created for *Nectar*, includes an array of pollinators, botanical specimens, and foodstuffs which point to the colony collapse of bees and the alterations of genomes produced through bio-engineering. The “politics of taste” encompass social, economic, and political variants of the world’s resources. How these resources are propagated and transformed becomes the matrix of Anker’s practice.

Spanish artist Juan del Junco likewise explores the relationship between art and science and each field’s respective methods and systems of representation, taking on an “ornithologist’s

dream”: a technically impeccable inventory of the photographic collection of stuffed birds housed in the Biological Station of Doñana, in Andalusia. As with the bees, industrial agriculture disturbs the habitats of grassland birds and exposes them to pesticides. Recent reports from government, university, and environmental agencies have listed 86 species of birds threatened by falling numbers and climate change. In *El sueño del ornitólogo II* (2008), birds appear rigorously framed on a white background with conspicuous nametags around their legs, creating what the artist named a “photographic-scientific file.” Del Junco arranges a montage of the images, sorting them according to a subjective evaluation and classification linked to his own existential experience of living in the area among 200 species of birds.

*Nectar* comes almost 10 years after my introduction to the concept of sustainable art. I have worked with some of the present artists, Marine Hugonnier and Lucia Madriz included, on earlier projects, where the thematic scope was broader and the ideas around sustainability were part of a much larger picture.<sup>15</sup>

French-born Hugonnier’s *Apicula Enigma* (2013) is a film essay stunningly shot in the mountains of Carinthia, Austria. Influenced by her background in anthropology and philosophy, this work takes the form of a wildlife documentary that seeks to convey nature as accurately as possible. Focusing as it does on the natural habitat of bees, the film begins with the sound of buzzing as the camera pans over a spring field. A voice whispers, “nature doesn’t tell stories” in prelude to a series of images of bees flying around a hive. *Apicula Enigma* means “Mystery of the Bees.” This work seeks the proper distance for capturing them on film, without letting proximity destroy the enigma of their way of life.

Much of the work of Costa Rican-born Madriz attempts to communicate awareness of the natural and human worlds. Here she contributes *Money Talks* (2003), a floor piece resembling a carpet made with rice and beans—staple foods in Latin America—alongside a video from 2007 showing the destruction of the piece. Laid over a square of white rice, the words “Money Talks” are written in black beans in calligraphic style, an act that effectively points to the shameful distribution of wealth and resources. As Madriz says: “It is about gambling with our food, our health, and the environment.”

The subjects of greed, alimentary manipulation, and speculation reappear in *Spent Flower*,

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“Sustainability” means a holistic and maintainable balance between the inhabitants of our planet and Earth herself. The Anthropocene Era is a historic transition: the first time that scientists have determined a geological time period defined by the impact of one species, Homo Sapiens. Our activity characterizes our planet’s current identity. It goes without saying that humans have an enormous responsibility in the future of planet Earth and our survival.  
—Kelly Heaton<sup>6</sup>

a large sculpture made of rope and dollar bills by American multi-media artist, electrical engineer, and beekeeper Kelly Heaton. All four pieces shown here are from the *Pollination Project* (2014–2015), a large body of work that includes pieces in virtually all media. To create *Spent Flowers* (in which the monetary bills represent petals) Heaton employs the ancient technique of “enfleurage,” which involves laying petals onto a chassis of purified lard to absorb their scent. “After months and thousands of dollars, I washed this scent-infused lard with perfumer’s alcohol to extract the fragrance of money.” *Smell Like Money (Hungry Spirits)* is made with those scents whose sources, the artist says, “are none other than humans, greedy and craving as we so often are.” Another scented and complex work is *Weeds*. Its perfume, *The Queen of Hungry Spirits*, represents the queen of a hive who, due to scarce and chemically-contaminated forage, is hungry for natural sustenance. If weeds are defined as plants in the wrong place, the nature of such vegetation gives it an advantage over more profitable crops: weeds often mature and reproduce quickly; their seeds may persist in the soil for years, or they may have short lifespans with multiple generations in the same growing season.

A “soil seed bank” is the natural storage of seeds, often dormant, within the soil of most ecosystems.<sup>16</sup> Seeds are the protagonists of the *Next Epoch Seed Library (NESL)*, a work by American artists Ellie Irons and Anne Percoco, based in Brooklyn and New Jersey respectively. NESL is an artist-run seed saving project focused on the toughest, most adaptable flora. Founded in January 2015, the project involves multiple collaborators in the gathering, storage, and sharing of seeds from plants that thrive in cities or areas heavily impacted by human activity.

Most recently, Irons and Percoco had access to the Nature Lab’s scanning electron microscope, which revealed the unique and surprising structure of seeds ranging from common milkweed to Asiatic dayflower. Taking such apparently drab, humble objects and imaging them in detail, these stunning, large-format SEM images celebrate elements of nature that usually go unseen, if not trampled, underfoot.

Inspired by the vision and tenacity of the artists listed above, *Nectar: War upon the Bees* isn’t an exhibition-project that simply points fingers at a difficult subject and then asks “what now?” It celebrates bees in particular, but also those amazing aspects of nature that are wiser than any inquiry we humans can make into the

depth and complexity of their workings. Embattled as they are, bees were also created by nature to be vigorous. Today more than ever, they will have to overcome extremely tough situations to ensure not only the survival of their own species, but ours as well. Nature and the very act of nourishment hang in the balance. Will our small heroes triumph? It is our sincere hope that they will win the “War.”

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Berta Sichel is a contemporary art curator, art historian, and theorist with extensive knowledge of international artists and art institutions.

She began her career in New York City where she curated exhibitions for the Sao Paulo International Biennial, the Aperto for the Venice Biennale and for North American museums. She has taught at the Media Studies Department at The New School for Social Research.

In 2000 she moved to Spain, where she was appointed the Director of the Department of Media Arts, as well as the Chief Curator for Media Arts, at the Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, where she was responsible for the establishment of a historical video collection, and curating the media exhibitions and public programs, including commissions and production of performances and concerts by: Pamela Z, Ben Patterson, Christian Marclay, Ryoji Ikeda, Joan Jonas, Alva Noto, and Suzanne Lacy.

Sichel left the Reina Sofia in 2011 to pursue her own projects, while remaining Curator at Large until March 2013. Since then she has curated exhibitions in Spain, New York and Brazil, and in 2014 was the artistic director for the First Bienal Internacional de Arte Contemporáneo Cartagena de Indias, Colombia. Since 2014 she has been co-directing Bureau Phi, an art agency working internationally to produce exhibitions, public, and editorial projects.

Bureau Phi’s world experience encourages collaborations and exchanges of ideas across borders with dynamic effects. Besides *Nectar*, in 2016, Bureau Phi has organized exhibitions of the first European solo of Lorraine O’Grady (Centro Andaluz of Contemporary Art, Seville, Spain) and Janet Biggs, for Haze 29 in Osnabruck, Germany. In 2017, it will present in La Tabacalera, Madrid, a comprehensive presentation of the media-based work by Leandro Katz. Among other projects, Bureau Phi is currently working with Peter Campus in an all-inclusive exhibition project.

The meaning of sustainability has been in flux for me over the years. In its many facets, it has long been something I’ve considered in relation to my work. From the simple act of considering the impact of the materials I use, to promoting the concept that we humans are dependent upon and connected with many of other forms of life, I’ve focused on the idea of slowing growth and using less.  
—Ellie Irons<sup>7</sup>

- 1 [www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/01](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2016/oct/01)
- 2 In the Sioux and Lakota cultures, young boys play a game called "War upon the Bees," designed to induct them into manhood.
- 3 [www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=684](http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=684)
- 4 Written interview with the artist. September 2012
- 5 Written interview with the artist. September 2016.
- 6 Written interview with the artist. September 2016.
- 7 Written interview with the artist. September 2016.
- 8 Since the early 2000s, European art historians, educators and philosophers have discussed the relationship of contemporary art to notions of sustainability. One of the turning points of their agenda was the conference of the German Society for Political Culture (Instituts für Kulturpolitik der Kulturpolitischen Gesellschaft e.V.), in January 2002 at the Art Academy of Berlin.
- 9 Jared Diamond. *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. (Penguin Books, New York, 2005), 498.
- 10 Key texts in the emerging field of sustainable art include "Kultur - Kunst - Nachhaltigkeit" (2002) by Hildegard Kurt and Bernd Wagner, [10] "The Principles of Sustainability in Contemporary Art" (2006) by Maja and Reuben Fowkes [11] and "Art and Sustainability" (2011) by Sacha Kagan. [12] A collection of interdisciplinary analyses is available in *Sustainability: a new frontier for the arts and cultures* (2008) edited by Sacha Kagan and Volker Kirchberg.
- 11 While at art school, Beuys produced a series of drawings called "Queen Bees," but his interest may have begun after reading Rudolf Steiner's 1923 lecture on bees in which the philosopher compared the functioning of a beehive to human society. Beuys saw bees as a symbol of socialism, due to the way in which they live and work together; he was also fascinated by the production of honey.
- 12 <http://www.hiveand-honeyapiary.com>
- 13 Written interview with the artist. September, 2016.
- 14 Joseph Beuys. In *Bees. Lectures by Rudolf Steiner*. (Anthroposophic Press, New York, 1998), 205.
- 15 #1 Cartagena. First International Biennial of Contemporary Art. Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, 2004.
- 16 The study of soil seed banks started in 1859 when Charles Darwin observed the emergence of seedlings using soil samples from the bottom of a lake.



Suzanne Anker, *Twilight*, 2016, flowers, nuts, bees, butterflies, beetles, found objects, Petri dishes and rapid prototypes sculptures, 30 x 36 x 96 inches. Photograph by Raul Valverde. Courtesy of the artist



Luis Fernando Ramirez Celis, *Walden 13*, 2013, plastic hexagonal tubes, honey, and beeswax, 13.75 x 23 x 14 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Kelly Heaton, *Spent Flower*, 2015, USA one-dollar bills, rope, acrylic, 6.25 x 18 x 18 inches. Photograph by Casey Dorobek. Courtesy of Ronald Feldman Fine Arts, New York



Marine Hugonnier, *Apicula Enigma*, 2013, 35mm or blu-ray, color, sound, 26 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and NoguerrasBlanchard, Barcelona/Madrid





Ellie Irons & Anne Percoco, installation view of *The Next Epoch Seed Library*, 2016, on view at William Paterson University's Court Gallery as part of *Living Together*, curated by Kristen Evangelista. Courtesy of the artists.

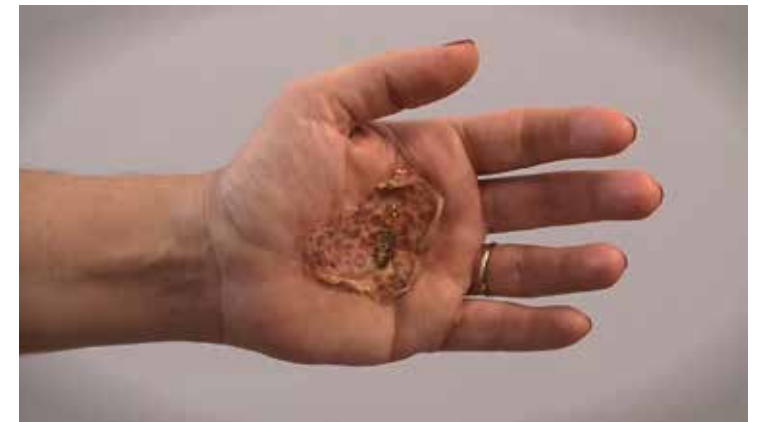


Juan del Junco, *Abubilla (Hoopoe)* from *The Ornithologist Dream II*, 2008, lightjet print. Courtesy of the artist.

Lucía Madriz, *Money Talks*, 2003, installation made of rice and beans, 11.5 x 11.5 feet. Courtesy of the artist.



Beth Moysés, *Ex-Purgo/Purge*, 2011, video, 3:12 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Fernando Pradilla Gallery, Madrid.



Carlos Schwartz, *The Dance 2*, 2016, acrylic and digital print on paper, various dimensions. Courtesy of the artist.





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