

HONEYBEE COLLECTIVES

by

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B.A. Portland State University, 2008

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Master of Fine Arts Degree

College of Mass Communications and Media Arts
in the Graduate School
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THESIS APPROVAL

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial

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in the field of Mass Communications and Media Arts

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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

HONNA VEERKAMP, for the Master of Fine Arts degree in Mass Communications and Media Arts, presented on March 22nd, 2015, at the Hughes Gallery, Muphysboro, IL.

TITLE: HONEYBEE COLLECTIVES

MAJOR PROFESSOR: Cade Bursell

This paper contextualizes my MFA thesis exhibition *Honeybee Collectives*, exploring the themes of affective interspecies relationships, human community building, expanded cinema, and socially engaged art. *Honeybee Collectives* is a site-specific multimedia installation about honeybees and communities that includes documentation of my first year as a beekeeper, sculpture, food, and interactive performance. This paper interweaves details about the exhibition with facts about honeybee biology, behavior, and folklore and reflections about my personal background with anti-hierarchical feminist organizing and collaboration.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to expanding impulses toward collectivity and collaboration, especially within academia.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my thesis committee, Cade Bursell, Sarah Lewison, and Jay Needham, for your continued encouragement and support with this project; for trusting me, challenging me, collaborating with me, and embracing such an interdisciplinary proposal. So many people have supported this project and my work leading up to it, and I am grateful to everyone who helped me in so many different ways, including supporting my developing art and teaching practices, teaching me about bees, helping me build a hive, building giant paper mache honeycombs, and donating food, time, space, advice, and enthusiasm to this project. I recognize my friends and family who travelled for the exhibit: it meant a lot to me that you were here, and your creative contributions had a huge impact on the show. Special thanks to Alexa Natile, Stacy Calvert, Hassan Pitts, Sarah Mitchel, and Andrea McMurray for documenting this project and exhibition. Thank you to the General John A. Logan museum for letting me use the Hughes Gallery to develop and present *Honeybee Collectives*. Finally, thank you to the bees for all that you've taught me.

PREFACE

Artist Statement:

My art practice is grounded in a commitment to social justice, and I see my role as an artist to help expand cultural dialogs and build communities. Much of my work is based around personal stories, and I believe in their far-reaching resonance and ability to expand identification. I believe that subjectivity is one of art's super-powers, because it lets us create something real and fresh, but I recognize the responsibility of working with stories that aren't my own. I'm reflexive about my perspective, and I prioritize under-represented voices and do my best to ensure that my artistic choices respect my storytellers' intents by building collaborative relationships with them and reflecting my work back to these speakers.

My background in radio and painting influences my media work, which incorporates experimental and documentary styles and do-it-yourself sensibilities. I combine personal narratives and direct cinema, with drawings, collage, field recordings, and non-synchronous sound. Recently I have gravitated towards expanded cinema installations that incorporate projection, sound, sculpture, and interactive performance.

Honeybee Collectives is the culmination of a year-long project documenting my first year as a beekeeper and making art exploring bees, folklore, and creative speculation. In the past decade, honeybee populations worldwide have declined drastically, and I believe that studying bees from a creative, socially-engaged perspective can help raise awareness about them and deepen understanding of human communities. This exhibition invites visitors into the hive to contemplate life, death, sustenance, and cooperation. Playfulness in this work frees us to imagine what it would feel/ smell/ touch/ taste/ sound/ like to be a bee, exposing the absurdity of representation while, at the same time, expanding our compassion beyond ourselves.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

My mom likes to tell the story of my first birthday. There was a party of about 10 toddlers, and we painted the floor with ice cream and cake. When it came time for me to open presents, I went to my room and wrapped up my old toys so I could give them away to my friends. Growing up, I was the oldest of four kids in a family without a lot of money, and sharing was a foundational value. Our parents were hippies, and we grew up with an extended community of adults and kids, with potlucks, homeschooling, and building elaborate forts and towns in the woods. Throughout my life, I've sought out places of belonging in overlapping scenes and subcultures, most of them homes to misfits of one stripe or another, all of which reflected an aspect of my identity. Punks, queers, anarchists, artists, and weirdos, all of us, in some way, were finding community in rejecting mainstream values of materialism and individualism.

My professional and academic pursuits have always stemmed from a desire to engage my creativity and curiosity in service of positive change. This impulse has led me to explore several career paths, including radio journalism and cooperative business management, and to realize I am most effective as a media artist and educator. Collaboration has always been important to me. My experiences with worker-management, artist collectives, political activism, and do-it-yourself (DIY) subcultures have informed my creative work and are strong influences on my thesis, *Honeybee Collectives*.

I entered the MCMA MFA program with two primary creative practices in my background, abstract oil painting and audio documentary. Journalistic specificity was a strength of my documentary work, while I was able to access an intuitive expressiveness with painting.

These ways of working had always been quite separate, and one of my goals for graduate school was to synthesize some of the qualities of these distinct forms, as I have done with my thesis exhibition *Honeybee Collective*, which was held at the Hughes Gallery in Murphysboro, IL on the evening of March 21st, 2015.

Honeybee Collectives draws on social engagement, expanded media installation, and first-hand beekeeping experience, along with research about communities, consensus decision-making, feminism, folklore, and affective relationships between humans and bees. This was the first opportunity I have had to work on a project so intently for this long, and it was important to me to choose a broad and interesting subject that I could approach in many different ways. I made a series of artworks about bees and beekeeping over the past year, including audio documentary, sound art, digital storytelling, performance, and multimedia installation. Some were precursors to my thesis work, and some were isolated experiments. Links to many of these can be found on my website at my blog, “Bees!,” which is dedicated to this project (“Bees!”).

I started studying bees to help raise awareness about their importance. Bees’ health is contingent on having a variety of nectar sources, and at least a third of our food relies on their pollination (“Save the Bees,” “Fact Sheet...”). Factors contributing to a decline in honeybee populations include monoculture farming practices, systemic pesticide use, and a proliferation of parasites and diseases. Collectively, these may be responsible for the phenomenon of colony collapse disorder, first observed in 2006, which has resulted in the loss of nearly one third of hives in United States (“Save the Bees,” “The Plight of the Honeybee,” “Fact Sheet...”). As scientists study diseases and work to select genetic traits that will increase resistance to parasites, a renaissance of interest in beekeeping and a worldwide movement of professional and backyard

beekeepers is growing, including in Southern Illinois. As a part of this project, I built my own hive, developed relationships with bees and beekeepers, and documented my experiences.

As I reflect on this work, several themes emerge. In Chapter 2, *Gathering Nectar*, I write about my experiences as a beekeeper and the research and first-hand experiences that form the foundation for this project. Chapter 3, *Building the Hive*, focuses on my art-making processes, including community involvement and creative blending of documentary and fine arts aesthetics and techniques. In Chapter 4, *Swarming*, I write about community building, which was a fundamental part of this project from the initial research stages through learning about beekeeping and envisioning the exhibition. Finally, in *Conclusion: On the Ethics of Adaptability*, I bring these overlapping themes together, as I write about the importance of resourcefulness and adaptability to my practices of building communities and making art.

CHAPTER 2

GATHERING NECTAR

Making honey is a laborious process for bees that involves visiting millions flowers,¹ carrying the nectar in a special honey stomach without digesting it, regurgitating it one drop a time, and passing it to other bees who suck it up and store it in honeycomb cells. As the nectar passes between bees, their enzymes mix with it, breaking down complex sugars and transforming its chemical composition. Finally, the bees fan the nectar with their wings until more than 80 percent of its water content evaporates and it can finally be considered honey (Evans and Butler 118-119). Honeybees are alchemists. They take watery nectar from flowers into their body drop by drop, and they turn it into golden honey.

Art is alchemic too. Artists gather nectar from various sources in our lives—family backgrounds, cultural experiences, developed skills, research, and personal preferences. We take these ingredients into ourselves, pass them among our communities through projects and conversations, mix them with our own creative enzymes, putting them back out into the world as ideas. Finally, we do the work to reduce this juice to a potent, unique concentration of art.

Juan William Chavez, a St. Louis-based artist who works with bees, community and art, says, “Art is a way of thinking” (Chavez)². My research for this project was a part of my art and part of the nectar I took in. This project began with a casual interest in bees, and several serendipitous things happened as I was thinking about them and considering topics for my MFA thesis work. I found a short documentary about Southern Illinois beekeepers, who would later

¹ Elizabeth Capaldi Evans and Carol A. Butler estimate that it takes bees about 2 millions trips to flowers and that they have to fly about the distance to the moon and back to gather enough nectar to produce an 8-ounce jar of honey (117-118).

² I discuss Juan William Chavez’s work in more detail in Chapter 4.

become mentors (“Beekeeping in Southern Illinois”). This program mentioned a local beekeeping association, and, through it, I found out about a beginning workshop happening in St. Louis, which I attended a couple weeks later. My interest was piqued.

I wanted to study bees by keeping them, but I was not able to have them at my apartment. Professor Sarah Lewison offered to host the bees in her garden and partnered with me in learning to care for them. A friend helped me build a top-bar beehive³, and next it was time to get the bees from a local supplier. I wondered what a “package” would look like. It turned out to be a wooden, screened in box containing about 10,000 bees—including a queen, separated in a small cage. I knew that the bees were well contained, but the constant hum from the package in the back of my hatchback still raised my heartbeat on the half-hour drive back to the hive.

Getting the bees settled in took a couple of days. An experienced beekeeper helped me open the package, and I watched in amazement as she deftly stuck her bare hands into a mass of bees clustered around the queen cage to remove it. Our first queen, it turned out, was dead, and I had to go back to the supplier’s the next day to get a new one and install it myself. It was rainy and chilly, and the shop keeper handed me a small plastic cage containing the new queen and told me to put it in my pocket to keep her warm. Back at the hive a friend held a patio umbrella over the hive to block the rain while I struggled to get a smoker lit. Beekeepers use smokers that look kind of like a tin can with a funnel on top and bellows on the side to make the bees more docile while they work with them (see fig. 1). The smoke itself doesn’t calm the bees, as people

³ I chose to build a top-bar hive instead of the more common Langstroth hive primarily because it was much simpler and cheaper to build, since it does not use intricate frames. We were able to build one almost entirely for free from scrap wood. Langstroth hives are most popular with commercial beekeepers because they utilize reusable frames that allow higher honey yields. I read compelling arguments, however, that it is healthier for bees to produce new honeycomb, as top-bar hives require (Crowder 1-13, Hemenway 11-25). Honey production was not a primary concern] for me, so it made sense to go with the top-bar design.

sometimes suppose. It actually creates an artificial crisis. Thinking their house is on fire, the bees fill up on honey, trying to save as much of it as they can, and that is what subdues them. It's a mean trick, but one I've used to make myself more comfortable working with them.



Fig. 1. *Lighting the Smoker*, video still Honna Veerkamp, 2014

It takes a lot of practice to get the smoker lit and keep it going, and, that first day I tended the bees, I gave up on it. I had to use bare hands to extract the dead queen from the mass of bees still clinging to her and hang the new cage in the hive—the idea is to give the bees a chance to get used to their new home and accept their new queen before releasing her so they don't decide to kill her and fly away. I got my first sting that day, and I felt initiated. Later, after I put the new queen in the hive, I tried to get the rest of the bees out of the package by shaking it and then gently brushing them. As a huge cloud of bees swelled around me, I was afraid. Maybe I had gotten in over my head. My friend, who was not a beekeeper, told me, calmly, “You have a bee under your veil.” I almost panicked, but her calm voice kept me steady. “It's OK,” she said, “just keep calm. You can get it out.” I slowly backed away from the hive and managed to take off my veil, releasing three bees without getting stung. I found a few more bees that had made their way

under my three shirts. There was one right in my belly button, but I gently brushed them away, without repercussion (see fig. 2).



Fig. 2. *Stay Calm*, drawing Honna Veerkamp, 2014

There is so much to learn about working with bees, and, after a year, I am still a novice. During the summer, as the bees built their nest, I checked on them every week-to-10-days. This involved putting on a white veil and long-sleeved shirt. (It turns out that bees respond more aggressively to dark colors, which resemble natural predators, such as skunks and bears.) Often I would light the smoker and use a hive tool, which resembled a long, steel, paint scraper, to pry apart the bars of the hive that the bees had sealed with propolis, sap gathered from trees and sticky flowers (Evans 92). Local beekeepers were generous mentors, and I learned a lot of things by watching them. When you examine a sheet of honeycomb in a top-bar hive, for example, it is important to rotate it only on the axis of the bar. Since there is no supporting frame, the weight of the comb—especially if it is filled with brood or honey—will break it off of the bar if you just

flip it over. I learned to identify worker and drone brood and differentiate it from capped honey (the later has a smoother, whiter surface). I learned to spot the queen and tell her apart from the fat drones, and I learned that drones don't sting. I also learned that bees die when they sting, so they only do it when they are threatened. I noticed that I was less likely to get stung when I opened the hive during the day, when many of the bees were out gathering food, and when I was not in a hurry.

Developing an intimate relationship with bees was impactful to this project. My experiences as a novice beekeeper inspired respect, awe, fear, and ethical questions. Professor Lewison and I engaged in a number of discussions about our roles as beekeepers as we learned to be stewards for these creatures. How often should we check on them? What do they need? Is it right to try to keep them from swarming? Should we feed them sugar water? When is it OK to take their honey? Are we helping them or controlling them? Is this a reciprocal relationship? Killing bees was sometimes inevitable. The bars of the hive fit tightly together, and it was very difficult to close them without getting any bees stuck in between them. Working with gloves protects the beekeeper but limits dexterity, which also sometimes results in killing bees. I have felt a mix of emotions working with bees: fear and anxiety, grief, exhilaration, and amazement. These experiences led me to deeper research about affective relationships between bees and beekeepers and have influenced my art for *Honeybee Collectives*.

Kelly Green and Franklin Ginn, environmental scholars who describe one of their research interests as “more-than-human geographies” (1) write about a group of self-identified “natural beekeepers” on a biodynamic farm in Ashurstwood, England. Green and Ginn research this group of beekeepers in the context of colony collapse disorder (CCD), but the article ends up being more about inter-species relationship building than a case study in colony collapse

prevention. The authors and their subjects attempt to understand the perspective of bees, in order to bring more reciprocity into human-bee relationships. Green and Ginn frame the practices of the beekeepers they study, who use little-to-no protective gear when they tend their bees, as an example of an alternative, more ethical, framework for interspecies community-building. They say, “Becoming less uncomfortable with vulnerability and seeking to put ourselves at risk can be a productive ethical practice” (167). I have seen local beekeepers tending hives in nothing but T-shirts too. With these things in mind, I’ve tried to use the smoker less and bare hands more. It is startling how strong the air is from all those beating wings. My nervousness about my vulnerability keeps me in my veil though, and usually, still, in my gloves.

Green and Ginn link the Ashurtswood beekeepers’ philosophies about bees to Rudolf Steiner’s ideas, which are important to sustainability-minded beekeepers because they seem prescient. In 1923, he denounced commercial beekeeping and predicted that if it continued on its trajectory, we would start to see bees dying out in 75-100 years (75). This time frame eerily coincided with the onset of CCD, when whole colonies of bees abandoned their homes and died.

Many studies of CCD recognize it as a perfect storm of conditions. Green and Ginn say that the beekeepers they follow “see CCD less as a problem that arrives from the outside to be solved, and more as a situation that requires responses that re-make the bee and human relations with the bee” (151). This statement stands out to me, because it recognizes the relational aspects responsible for these conditions that are threatening to bees’ health. Feminist sociologists Lisa Jean Moore and Mary Kosut also talk about these themes in their book, *Buzz: Urban Beekeeping and the Power of the Bee* (85-122). Moore and Kosut write about interspecies intimacies between humans and bees. They discuss relational qualities such as love and stewardship and debate whether bees can be considered pets. You can’t cuddle a beehive, but many beekeepers

say that certain hives have distinct personalities. I’ve only gotten to know one so far, so I can’t compare it. Still, I notice “moods” even with this one hive—they might be affected by weather, the time of day, and my own demeanor. Moore and Kosut write about the fear and desire associated with beekeeping (85-86), “intra-actions” between bees and beekeepers (86) and the “affective labor” of working with bees (119). It may be hard to really get to know bees, but, when I slow down, I am absorbed. Watching them move together, I can see collective intelligence. Holding their comb to the light, everything is golden, their bodies, comb, and nectar translucent (see fig. 3). I can see why Steiner said they were “born of the sun” (14). I think my relationship with them is most reciprocal when I approach them from this place of respect and fascination.



Fig. 3. *Honna with the Bees*, photo Sarah Mitchell, 2014

Contemplating these aspects of beekeeping from an intellectual perspective as well as lived experience inspired some of my reflections on human communities that I discuss in more detail in Chapter 4. This also became part of the nectar that that I developed into *Honeybee*

Collectives. I documented my beekeeping experiences with video, photography, and audio recordings, and I interviewed other beekeepers, but the project morphed greatly in conception and expression, moving away from a primarily documentary focus. Expressive strategies were more suitable to convey these ideas experientially, as I discuss in more detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

BUILDING THE HIVE

Honeycombs in beehives are both pantries and nurseries. Young worker bees build this lattice of hexagonal cells with wax from their own bodies. To do this, they gorge on honey and rest for a day, letting the sugar metabolize. Then, extruding scales of wax through slits in their abdomens, they meticulously take one flake at a time, chew it, and place it on the honeycomb, smoothing and polishing it as they go. Bees must consume between four and 12 pounds of honey to produce a pound of beeswax, which is about 35,000 cells of honeycomb. Remarkably efficient, about 10,000 bees working together can accomplish this work in three days (Evans 91, 110-112).

For *Melissamorphic*, an installation that was part of *Honeybee Collectives*, four lobe-shaped, paper-mache honeycombs of various lengths hung from the ceiling, so that, for a human, moving into that room, it was like entering a gigantic beehive. With just enough room between the combs for a person to move, visitors were brought close to the smell and feel of the beeswax coating an even grid of hexagonal shaped cells, like the ones bees build to reproduce, stash pollen and store honey. Building the human-sized honeycombs for *Melissamorphic* was an incredibly labor-intensive process and a communal effort. Like honeybees, we worked together, building these structures from cardboard and pasting and smoothing folded newspaper into hexagons. Intuition and collaboration were important, and it was joyful and satisfying to work very physically, letting the vision unfold as we created it. A friend suggested the idea of building honeycombs as part of the show, and I went with it, trusting my instincts about combining sculpture with the sounds and projections of my previous work, but not fully envisioning the world it would create until it was done. Fifteen friends helped me build these honeycombs during

several work parties (See fig. 4). Like bees making wax, this communal effort was the result of many small contributions of resources, including time, materials, transportation, food, schedule coordination, and camaraderie.



Fig. 4. *Building the Hive*, photo Andrea McMurray 2015

Projections of archival footage of bees on the surface of these sculptural structures augmented the illusion of being inside a hive, as did an evolving buzzing soundtrack made by visitors lending their voices to the “superorganism” we became. This work was based on an earlier installation, *Honeybee Collective*, which I produced in 2014 for an invitational sound-art exhibit at Track One in Nashville, TN. I added the paper-mache honeycombs for *Melissamorphic*, which was significant because the scale and architectural quality made visitors’ bodies part of the sculpture (see fig. 5).



Fig. 5. *Melissamorphic*, photo Andrea McMurray, 2015

Honeybee Collectives was a coming together of disparate art practices—a blending of resources I have gathered over the years. In this work, I was able to bring my goal of integrating documentary and fine-art practices to fruition in various ways. The front room of the gallery served as a more-traditional exhibition space, where I displayed journals, beekeeping gear, and documentary photographs and video of our hive, *Mud Farm Bees* and the 2014 Carbondale All Species Puppet Parade, where I dressed up as a bee and passed out seed packets for pollinators. I showed these videos on matching monitors, indicating the clearly defined boundaries of the screens. This presentation contrasted *Melissamorphic* and other video installations deeper in the “hive” of the Hughes Gallery, where the images became part of the environment.

Film historian A.L. Reese traces expanded cinema to Stan Vanderbleek and Carolee Schneeman’s work in the 1960’s and *Village Voice* film reviewer Jonas Mekas’s writing about it.

Manifestations of expanded cinema include performance, projection as sculpture, multi-channel exhibitions, street protests and projections, guerilla television actions, site-specific installations, walls of TVs, club performances and collage, Internet-based projects, and much more (Reese et al 6-9). Critic Gene Youngblood's 1970 book *Expanded Cinema* describes widely divergent film and video works that subverted traditional, single-channel presentation, articulating a vision that Reese says "challenged existing notions of cinema as a commercialized regime of passive consumption and entertainment" (Reese et al 12).

Carolee Schneeman's video, performance, and multimedia work set important precedents in expanded media as well as feminist performance art and socially engaged art—the boundaries of which are blurred. She often projected film onto bodies, creating live collages and what she called "kinetic theater," usually collaborating with non-actors (Reese et al 89). In an interview about her early work with film historian Duncan White, Schneeman, who is also a painter, describes expanded cinema as "a moving aspect of painting" and as "sculptural space" (Reese et al 88).

Such projections of video, even the incorporation of documentary footage into the context of existing architecture, produces a more environmental and experiential impact, such as happened with my installation *Contemplations*. In a large, open room I projected two looping, durational videos. On the wall, there was a life-sized, five-minute long-take of our hive at Mud Farm, with bees flying in and out of the entrance. Another projection on the ceiling simulated a skylight with bees zipping across a blue sky or, perhaps, the view bees would see looking out from inside the hive. In contrast, *Mud Farm Bees*, presented inside the box of a monitor, holds viewers at a distance.

Social-engagement was also important in making and presenting *Honeybee Collectives*. In *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Artist and educator Pablo Helguera traces this movement to conceptual process art, relational aesthetics, public art, and participatory art (1-8). Shneeman aligns her media and performance work with “happenings” developed by Allan Kaprow and others in the late 60s (Reese et al 85). Influenced by earlier dada, avant-garde, and surrealist art movements, happenings were forbears to what was later called socially-engaged art. Suzanne Lacy, who has written about social engagement extensively and has often incorporated it into her own art, was a student of Kaprow’s and credits him with inspiring and encouraging feminist artists and activists. “His well-thought-out boundary blurring gave us permission for framing life—domestic life, political life, relational life, and public life—as art,” Lacy writes. “Allan’s ideas, meant originally to challenge the art establishment, were mined by activist artists to challenge public culture” (321).

This deliberate blurring of life and art and its potential to build communities and challenge hegemonies is at the heart of what is so compelling to me about socially-engaged art. I have often struggled to make overtly political art, although social justice concerns have always motivated my life and work. In a published conversation with artist Lucy Lippard, Lacy articulates thoughts about integrating art and politics that help me understand my art as inherently political and feminist, even though its message is sometimes more or less overt. Lacy says:

I have learned, finally, to trust that the politics—just based on the way I look at life—will inform the work. The problem with many artists’ conceptions of ‘political art’ is that they feel that somehow they are being called upon to use a different process in making their art, to start with rationality as opposed to intuition. It seems to me that what’s important

is to politicize yourself as a person and then learn to integrate those politics into everything you do. (152)

Intuition has always been an important part of my art making. To me, intuition is an instinctual way of working with the sum of various experiences and practices in my life. It is the culmination of the nectar I've gathered, processed with without striving with my own creative enzymes. It is a mode I've been able to access easily through painting. My journalistic work, on the other hand, has come from a more rational creative process. I have never aspired to be an unbiased journalist or documentary maker—I don't think this is possible anyway, and it has been a greater goal for me to make an impact by helping provide forums for lesser-heard stories and perspectives. Still, the stakes have felt higher, especially when dealing with political issues, to communicate the story as clearly as possible. In my recent work, I am beginning, as Lacy says, to trust that the politics will inform the work, even as it moves away from traditional documentary journalism. This frees me to incorporate more expressive and intuitive strategies back into my art making while also including rational, more explicit, elements when they are helpful. Not every art work will be suited to both of these styles, but I am able to make more nuanced choices in the strategies I use by drawing on all of the tools at my disposal, rather than keeping them as separate sets. Often, brining these together in different ratios allows me ways of expressing information and emotion more effectively than I could do with either style alone.

My experience creating my performance *Interview with the Bees* was an example of this kind of navigation. I felt liberated in much of my work for *Honeybee Collectives*, including *Melissamorphic*, to draw on expressive strategies that would communicate experientially, but I also wanted to convey specific information about bees and why they are important. My advisors encouraged me to imagine the voices and perspectives of bees, and I found this extremely

challenging. I have a critical censor that worries about presuming to embody experiences so far outside of my own, and, yet, I believe that imagination has great potential for creating affinities. One way I have been able to do this more comfortably is through the use of play.

In his article, “Play and the Avant-Garde: Aren’t We All a Little Dada?” Art historian Phillip Prager writes: “A basic characteristic of play is that it appears purposeless. It must necessarily appear so, because transformative ideas—whether in the arts or the sciences—are unpredictable, unscriptable, the result of chance encounters.” This quote gets at the element of uncertainty that is so important to creative work—and that can also make it seem like such a vulnerable prospect. Playfulness is one way of taking the risk of stretching one’s imagination and being able to use it to show something new. It is a way of acknowledging the responsibility of creation while, at the same time, not taking oneself too seriously. Environmental anthropologist Anna Tsing’s “Testimony of a Spore, or, Strathern Beyond the Human Fence” intersperses passages from the perspective of a matsutake spore with an essay untangling the complications of imagining the voices of others. Tsing begins with a quote from the anthropologist Marilyn Strathern that really gets at some of the mixed feelings I have had: “Comparison is [a] game in at once the most serious and the most playful sense—not to be given away, but to be played” (Marilyn Strathern in Tsing, 1). Like any critical art form, I think reflexivity is key to negotiating ethical representation and the unbounded potential of creative imagination.

Playfulness helped me navigate a balance with this in *Honeybee Collective* and *Melissamorphic*. The title of this piece is an inversion of anthropomorphic, which I coined because the idea of looking at bees through a human lens made me uncomfortable. Since I will never really know what bees experience, the responsibility of claiming identification with them by comparing them to people seems weighty. What would it be like, instead, to look at humans

from a bee's perspective, albeit imagined? "Melissa"—Greek for "honeybee"—substitutes for "anthro"—"human," meaning "applying bee-like characteristics to non-bee creatures." I invited people to imagine the experience of being bees in an almost cartoonish way that I pushed even further when I added giant honeycombs for people to move between. This exaggeration freed me from the pressure of presuming that I could really know what being a bee was like, which allowed me the freedom to imagine it, and to invite others to do so, with less worry about misrepresenting bees.

Lenore Malen, an artist who studies utopias and bees, also uses playful tactics in her art, and it was helpful to find her work as I considered representation⁴. The cover of the book from her show *I am the Animal* features a picture of the artist wearing compound eyes that seem to be made from small colanders. Her work incorporates expanded cinema, with a three-channel video installation referencing the bees' compound vision. She also inverts anthropomorphism, using the term "reverse anthropomorphism" to describe her work (2-3).

I struggled for a long time to create a performance piece that would speak for the bees and also include the beekeeper's perspective as well, showing the intermediary and interpretive role that we can play in showing bees' interests to the public. Besides my reservations about representation, performance is an unfamiliar mode of working for me, but the immediacy and engagement of live storytelling was compelling. Finally, I had an epiphany: I would be the beekeeper, in my beekeeping suit, but I would also play another role I know well: the reporter. This familiarity let me to loosen up with this piece in a way that allowed for the unpredictability of play and the crafting of editing. It was important to me to record the "bees'" answers in my own voice to acknowledge that they were the product of my imagination. I used digital

⁴ I discuss Lenore Malen's work in more detail in the next chapter.

manipulation to create a bigger, reverberant sound that was distinct from my unprocessed voice, and I performed my beekeeper/ reporter role live, playing back a recording of the bees while I stuck a microphone in the air, pretending to interview them (see fig. 6).



Fig. 6. *Interview With the Bees*, video still Stacy Calvert 2015

After this performance, I introduced *Honeybee Consensus Dance*, a collaboration with local dancers Alexis Kimbrell, Amber Blakeslee, and Faylin Jihan, based on biologist Tom Seeley's writing about how bees make consensus decisions using movement.⁵ For this piece, I produced a composition combining sounds of bees with piano, digital effects and the 1907 recording, *Dance of the Honeybees*, by Joseph Belmont, encouraging the dancers interpret this creatively. They worked collaboratively with each other, producing a three-act dance that was partially choreographed and partially improvised. The arc of their performance, built through repetitions of the soundtrack, ended with the dancers inviting visitors to swarm away with them.

Huelguera identifies four layers of community participation in socially engaged art: *nominal participation* involves reflective observation of a finished work, *directed participation*

⁵ I write about Tom Seeley and his book *Honeybee Democracy* in more detail in the next chapter.

describes completing a specified task, *creative participation* incorporates participatory content into a structure that an artist develops, and *collaborative content* refers to situations where participants work with artists to develop the structure and content of a work (14-15). *Honeybee Collectives* incorporated all of these layers of participation. Visitors to the show were, at minimum, nominal participants, but many of them also participated in directed ways, such as buzzing into the microphone for *Melissamorphic*. Friends and family offered great assistance with directed tasks as well as more creative ones, often taking care of small details that I didn't have time to attend to. I gave up artistic control in not doing all of these things myself, but, embracing creative and collaborative participation, such as with *Honeybee Consensus Dance*, made the exhibition richer than what I could have produced myself or than could have happened with just nominal or directed participation.

This was the case with the installation, *Telling the Bees/ Dream Generator*, which my siblings helped me set up as a memorial to our dad, who died last spring. In a small, inner room of the gallery that had built-in curios shelves, we created an altar with beeswax candles, photos, and mementos of our dad, illuminated by two video works I had produced to celebrate his life.

I began to study bees shortly after my dad was diagnosed with terminal cancer, and I learned about a folklore tradition of telling the bees when a family member dies. In various European countries, including Germany, France, England, and later in the Americas, people believed bees were connected to the spiritual world, and there was a superstition that they might fly away and accompany the departed to the afterlife if mourners did not tell them about the death and ask them to stay. (Ransome 171-172, 218-220). After my father died, I performed a ritual of telling the bees with my hive. Drawing from Ransome's descriptions of Wendish and English traditions, I draped it in black, knocking three times on the ground, and asking the bees

not to leave me in my sorrow. I recorded this process with video and developed it into a 2-minute looping installation that I presented at an artist residency at Artscape on Toronto Island and later at the Vergette gallery at SIU. The process of doing this ritual and then making the video about it gave me a creative outlet that helped me grieve. Creating this installation with my siblings nearly a year after our dad's death let us continue this grieving process as a celebration of our dad's life.

In this room, I also presented *Dream Generator*, a 10-minute personal documentary I made with my father after his diagnosis, in which he gives me a tour of his extensive collection of balls of all kinds. To emphasize the ephemeral qualities of light and moving image and to comment on the transitory nature of life, I projected this video onto a mirrored ball. My siblings and I worked together, moving the projector around until we found an effect that we liked with the images reflecting onto the corner walls in a symmetrical way our dad would have found pleasing. He seemed to be talking to us from beyond the veil, and he would have appreciated the humorous ways his body distorted like a fun-house mirror. His face and his colorful ball collection moved in and out of abstraction—he was there, but not there (see fig. 7).



Fig. 7. *Telling the Bees/ Dream Generator*, photo Andrea McMurray, 2015

A third projection cast images of dead bees taken from my hive, which appeared and retreated depending on the brightness of the light from the other videos. This expanded the story of our personal grief and loss to a larger context, inviting compassion for dying bees, but also, inadvertently exposing the ways that human lives can eclipse the lives and deaths of other animals.

Beekeepers sometimes kill bees accidentally, such as with my own experiences I related about squishing bees between the bars. Many beekeepers describe working with bees as a meditative process, and one of the natural beekeepers that Green and Ginn interviewed at Ashurtswood explains that this keeps both the bees and the beekeeper safe, saying, “It’s another consciousness ... always, with respect, and humility. You must be very, very calm, and very centered.” A panel on a podcast called *The Barefoot Beekeeper* described being “in the zone” when working with bees (Chandler). I have accessed this state of mind while tending my bees at times, when I was not in a hurry, and I recognize it as being akin to what feels like a channeled state I can sometimes reach through painting. This helps me to understand beekeeping not only as a learned skillset, but also an art. Intuition and focus are important in beekeeping and also in the process of transforming the nectar of experience into art. In October 2013, artist Diane Borsato, who is also a beekeeper, presented a performance at the Art Gallery of Toronto, where she invited over 100 beekeepers to tap into this state and participate in a group meditation sending intentions of healing for bees (“Diane Borsato: Your Weather, My Temper”). Borsato’s socially-engaged work underscores the importance of community, which has also been a central concern of *Honeybee Collectives*, and which I discuss further in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4

SWARMING

While about 85 percent of bee species are solitary, living independently or in small, temporary groups, honeybees live in huge, permanent communities (Evans 2). In *The Buzz About Bees: Biology of a Superorganism*, biologist Jürgen Tautz describes them as “an indivisible whole, a single integrated living organism” (3). Their labor is divided, with 10-50,000 individual bees taking care of specific tasks (Evans 84). The queen is not the ruler, but the reproductive engine of the group. At the beginning of her lifecycle, she mates with 10-20 male bees from surrounding areas, storing sperm in her body for later fertilization. She can lay more than 1,500 eggs a day, and about 95% of these are fertilized, becoming female worker bees, who are responsible for most of the upkeep of the hive, including building honeycomb, gathering and preserving food, caring for young, cleaning, and removing dead bees. Male bees, or drones account for only a small portion of the community, and their main responsibility is mating with neighboring queens, after which, they die (*Honeybee Democracy* 23-25). All of these roles are essential for the functioning and preservation of the group.

In conventional language, groups of honeybees are called colonies. However, I associate the word “colony” with the domination and subjugation of capitalism and imperialism. Alternative terms for honeybees are few. “Superorganism” sounds formal and scientific, and “hive” technically refers to the bees’ home, not the group of bees themselves. Drawing on my personal background with cooperation, I substitute “collective” for “colony,” offering an alternative way of thinking about honeybees’ organizational structure and parallels for re-imagining human communities as well.

Bees have long been part of the human imagination about communities. Beekeeper and

cultural entomologist, Tammy Horn writes about the ways that honeybees, which European settlers introduced to the Americas, became a symbol of colonialism: "...the traits associated with honey bee society—industry and thrift—were directly associated with the benefits that the New World offered those European immigrants willing to work hard" (4). She traces these ideas to 17th- century England, when "royal authorities and clergy dictated that the lower classes and unemployed should be 'busy as bees' so they would not rebel," noting their impact on contemporary ideas about the American dream (16). "...if somehow people do not attain the American Dream, we tend to think they have not worked hard enough or did not save their money—in short, they are too much like drones" (16).

The artist Lenore Malen's recent work extends her long-time research into utopias, this time focusing on bees and communities. Her 2012 exhibition, *I am the Animal*, presented at Tufts University, uses multi-channel video installation, offering the viewer the imagined perspective of a bee's compound vision. Since 2000, Malen has collaborated with a group of artists and actors called The New Society for Universal Harmony, and their 2007 exhibition *Harmony as a Hive* grew out of her interests about cultural ideologies associated with bees. Malen says beehives have "for millennia been emblematic of utopia (which usually meant whatever political system was ascendant at the time—from monarchy to socialism, to capitalism, and even national socialism)" (4).

Horn and Malen's observations illuminate the ways that we have projected our ideas and values about communities onto bees, and I am aware, as I label them "collectives," that this reflects my own biases. I am also wary about idealizing another species in human terms. However, since our ideas about honeybees and culture have been so entwined for so long, I think

that re-framing how we think about them can help us expand our imagination about communities as well.

Swarming is the way that bees reproduce their “collectives.” In the spring or summer, when food stores are replenished after winter, and there is a new generation of workers, new queens are raised on a special nutrient called royal jelly, and a large number of the collective fly away with the old queen, often clustering temporarily in tree tops while they look for a new home (Evens 129-130). Usually the first emerging new queen takes over reproductive control of the old hive, killing the other young queens as they are born, but sometimes there are additional swarms, with other subgroups of bees accompanying a new queen to seek a new hive (*Honeybee Democracy* 41-42). Beekeepers tend to try to prevent swarming, because it means less managed bees in the hive and less honey, but, for bees, this is part of the natural reproductive cycle.

Our bees swarmed at least once this year, in the early fall. Navigating this as a new beekeeper brought up practical and ethical questions. Usually, beekeepers manage swarming by watching for signs and splitting the hives themselves, before the bees take off, so they can benefit from the reproduction. This manipulation sometimes strikes me as the beekeeper exerting dominance in a manner akin to colonization. However, experienced beekeepers also must consider the wellbeing of the bees if they want to sustain their own interests. We didn't have another hive ready to go anyway, and we watched with trepidation as we saw the long, peanut-shaped queen cells appear on the edges of the honeycombs in our hive. When our bees left the first time, I felt conflicted. I started keeping bees because I wanted to learn about them and care for them, not because I wanted to harvest as much honey as possible. On the one hand, I was glad that they swarmed, because swarming means more bees. On the other hand, the bees that left would have only a couple of months to find a new home, build a nest, and accumulate

enough food stores to get them through the winter. It was quite possible that the swarm would die, and I felt sorry that I was not able to better accommodate their needs if that was the case.

Biologist Tom Seeley writes and speaks about how swarming bees use movement patterns known as the waggle dance to make consensus decisions about new home prospects (*Honeybee Democracy*, “Honeybee Democracy”). He describes how scout bees present choices of different hive locations with this dance and the whole superorganism makes its selection with a quorum process. Learning about this led me to find a group of dancers to work with to create *Honeybee Consensus Dance*. Seeley writes about ways that humans can borrow organizing strategies from honeybees—in fact, he implemented some of these tactics successfully in department meetings when he was chair of Neurobiology and Behavior at Cornell University. Seeley identifies five specific strategies that human communities can adopt from bees, including working in groups with shared interests, minimizing a leader’s influence on the group, seeking diverse solutions to problems, having healthy debate, and employing a quorum process for making decisions (*Honeybee Democracy* 218-231).

I was particularly interested in Seeley’s discussion about learning from honeybees’ decision-making process, because I have used the strategies he outlines in a variety of experiences with non-hierarchical organizing, although we never associated them with bees. From my early 20s through my mid 30s, I worked at worker-operated co-ops and lived in collective houses in a handful of cities and towns. I was part of artist and activist collectives and helped run radical community centers and “info-shops” (activist spaces that disseminated political information and provided places to organize). I have seen the beauty and struggle of this kind of organizing. There was always the tension of having to live under the constraints of a capitalist society no matter how we strived to create alternatives. We still had to respond to the

economic pressures of the dominant paradigm, and we all grew up with ingrained cultural values that sometimes reared up, despite our best efforts to shed them. It takes work to let go of the habit of just looking out for oneself. Sometimes, in more or less overt ways, this manifested in sexism, racism, or other similar power dynamics. I often likened working collectively to being in a relationship with 3, 10, 40, or, at one place I worked, 120 people, who each have their own positive and difficult qualities that sometimes clash with one another. I saw dysfunction and communication breakdowns but also amazing, collaborative creations and alternative models for living that could only have happened as a result of these heterogeneous mish-mashes of brilliant personalities.

The Tyranny of Structurelessness, written in 1970 by Jo Freeman talks about un-acknowledged power structures within self-identified, non-hierarchical organizations. This essay and *The Tyranny of Tyranny*, a retort written by Cathy Levine in 1979, resonated at a time when I was experiencing a lot of conflict within a collective. Levine's article acknowledges Freeman's points while reminding us of the greater power disparities in top-down modes of organizing and asks us to recommit to anarcha-feminist values while working to make them more egalitarian. Like Levine suggests, I continue to believe in collective organizing models, despite their imperfections.

I worked at collectively-managed food co-ops, café's, and bakeries off and on for about fifteen years. Many aspects of this work were satisfying: I didn't have a boss (though we often joked that, instead, we had many bosses), and I worked at businesses that had mission statements that prioritized needs of communities and the environment over profit. On the one hand, it was radical to be able to provide good, healthy food, to build relationships with local farmers and connections with neighborhood communities, to work co-operatively and to be accountable to

one another. On the other hand, our businesses were still, ultimately, part of the capitalist system oriented towards buying and selling goods. As I became more experienced with and committed to collective organizing and consensus decision-making, which was typically a part of it, I became more articulate about my feminist, anarchist, and anti-capitalist values, and I became more aware of the compromises inherent to running a business of any kind. At the same time, I had a desire to more-fully develop my critical thinking and artistic abilities than I was able to do at these jobs or in the little free time I had outside of them.

Academia has been a trade-off in different ways. It has been deeply satisfying to dedicate time and resources to developing my art and scholarship, and I have challenged myself beyond what I could have imagined, using my skills to raise awareness about social issues. I have set the foundation for a career as an artist and educator, and I feel like I have found my calling. But the cost has often been isolation. Graduate school, especially, is fundamentally focused on individual work. While it has been an experience of growth and confidence building to expand what I am able to take on alone, it has been a lonely process. Much like running a cooperative business within capitalism, the university system is also a place of tensions and contradictions. It is a hierarchical structure that functions similar to a corporation in many ways, and yet I have found support for pursuing radical study. Some of my professors have modeled feminist pedagogies in their classrooms, countering the broader culture of top-down learning. This has been very helpful to my own development as an instructor and my understanding of how to make changes from within the system. I have also found support for integrating collaboration into my own work.

Community was an intrinsic part of *Honeybee Collectives* at many levels, and it was particularly satisfying to culminate my MFA thesis with a project that built, celebrated, and

interrogated community. Questions about what community is, how we make it, and what we can learn about it from bees have guided and motivated this work.

Peter Block, a writer and consultant who studies alternatives to patriarchal organizing, offers a useful definition of community as “the experience of belonging.” He notes that both common meanings of “belonging” are relevant to community: “to be related and a part of something” and also “to act as both creator and co-owner of that community” (xii).

The impulse to be part of something larger and to create communities based on common values has been a motivating factor throughout my life and is at the heart of *Honeybee Collectives*.

The Hughes gallery functioned as a temporary hive. Nearly a hundred people, ranging in age from babies to senior citizens, and including beekeepers, neighbors, artists, activists, and academics, visited and participated in interactive installations. *Honeybee Collectives* brought together many people who didn’t know each other for an event that seemed to provoke curiosity and wonder and engage the senses. People explored as much as observed, not only watching but also listening, touching, smelling, and tasting. Visitors stayed throughout the evening, talking, eating, and laughing. The awareness this event raised about bees is linked to unique experiences that this temporary collective of people shared. Helguera writes about socially engaged art and community-building, saying “the effects of a project may outlast its ephemeral presentation” (12). Comments visitors left in my guestbook reflect this sentiment:

“An amazing adventure!”

“This evening encapsulated so much of what I love about Southern Illinois and the people/art/bees here.”

“Maybe I should look into becoming a beekeeper.”

Almost every other entry is a bee pun, which reflects the levity of the night:

“So Fun! I could barely bee-have myself.”

“Loved bee-ing a part of this amazing project!”

“Way to bee!”

A honeybee nest resembles a sphere, extending across parallel combs in a managed hive. Brood is raised in the middle, and pollen and nectar (bees’ protein and carbohydrates) are stored close by, in surrounding and peripheral cells. Food was at the heart of *Honeybee Collectives*, and its location at the center of the gallery drew visitors deeper into the “hive.” *Feast of the Bees* (called *Libations* in my program) was a table of ceremonial abundance. Celebrating foods and drinks pollinated by bees, there were with grapes, strawberries, blood oranges, mandarins, dates, almonds, Brazil nuts, hazelnuts, pecans, celery, carrots, broccoli, and chocolate, all heaped onto plates garnished with bok choy and curly kale leaves (see fig. 8.).



Fig. 8. *Feast of the Bees*, photo Stacy Calvert, 2015

A favorite part of the feast was a sampling of bee pollen gathered each month from July to October, which a local beekeeper shared. People loved tasting the intricacies of flavors that

reflected what was in bloom as the summer turned to fall. July was sweet and tangy, and October had undertones of brassicas, as one visitor pointed out.

It is easy to see the relationship of food to community-building—just think about the ubiquitous potluck—whether at the anarchist community center or church basement. Sharing food brings people together, sets a mood of comfort and commonality, and sometimes provides critical nourishment. When food and community come together with art, they form a powerful triad. Many artists have made food sharing a part, or sometimes a focus, of their practice. Food has always been central to Bread and Puppet, a political theater company active since 1963. Founder Peter Schumann says, “We give you a piece of bread with the puppet show because our bread and theater belong together” (*Bread and Puppet Theater*). Last year, artist Seitu Jones organized a public feast for 2,000 in Minneapolis, MN. His work, *Create: The Public Meal*, involved food, choreography, poetry, handmade placemats, a half-mile-long table, and 500 volunteers and aimed to raise awareness about food access, food justice, and healthy eating (*Create*). Juan William Chavez, the St. Louis artist working with bees, runs the Northside Workshop, which hosts a project that teaches teenagers beekeeping, gardening, cooking, and art. He talks about the importance of food in building communities and says that many of his projects have focused around it in various ways. Among other projects, he organized a recipe sharing event, community dinners, and a snow-cone booth that accepted drawings for currency (Chavez). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes, “When participants are invited to exercise discernment, evaluation, and appreciation, food events move towards the theatrical and, more specifically, towards the spectacular. It is here that taste as a sensory experience and taste as an aesthetic faculty converge” (1). Food, art, and community merged as *Honeybee Collectives* visitors stood in the light of beeswax candles sampling pollen, comparing observations, laughing, and taking near the lush color palette of foods pollinated by bees.

Feast of the Bees set a mood of conviviality, which inspired laughter, exclamations, and conversation. These sounds blended with the ones I had curated, but, rather than distracting from the “art,” they merged with the ambience like the looping soundtrack I had people buzz in to for *Melissamorphic*. Although the cacophony was unintentional, the experience of festivity and the experience of art happened together and created a communal event. In the next chapter, I talk more about the art and community-building practice of adapting to unforeseen circumstances.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION: ON THE ETHICS OF ADAPTABILITY

Honeybees are incredibly adaptable. They build hives wherever they can and get food from whatever food sources they can find. A few years ago, beekeepers in eastern France were mystified when their bees started producing blue and green honey, which they eventually traced to waste from an M&M factory several miles away (Genthon). Beekeepers often feed bees sugar during the winter and when there is a dearth of blooming flowers, and commercial beekeepers sometimes feed bees high-fructose corn syrup to maximize honey-production, regardless of the health impacts to bees or human honey consumers (Crowder 64-65). Bees may shelter in hollow trees, a nook in a cliff, or even the walls of old buildings (Hemmenway 11-12). Humans are adaptable too. Experienced beekeepers often look for these nests and carefully relocate the bees to their own hives (Crowder 35-38).

The Hughes gallery, where I presented *Honeybee Collectives*, is a small, 19th-century house on a quiet brick street in the historic district of Murphysboro, IL, owned and managed by the General John A. Logan Museum, located two doors down the block. The director of the museum allowed me to use the building, which had been vacant for at least a year, for only a small monthly fee to cover heat and electricity, and I was able to access it beginning in January, which gave me plenty of time to build a site-specific installation. When I started working in the space, I spent the first week cleaning it and moving junk to a small storage area. It was dirty, neglected, and slightly crumbling, but it was a beautiful old building. It had previously been used as a gallery and divided into small exhibition areas, which seemed to invoke the cellular structure of a hive. As I cleaned up mouse nests and swept up thick layers of dust, I thought about swarming bees taking up residence in whatever homes they can find. I thought about squatters

too, many friends, who have made homes, community centers, and gardens in abandoned buildings and lots. All of us were reclaiming something neglected and making it useful and beautiful.

Reclamation and re-use were guiding ethics for creating *Honeybee Collectives*. Bees are intrinsically related to ecology, so it was critical to me to consider environmental impacts as I made work about them. The paper mache honeycombs in *Melissamorphic* were made with free and cheap, unorthodox sculpture materials, including recycled cardboard and newspaper, cornstarch, and second-hand house paint. Frugality and resourcefulness are part of my personal ethic and lifestyle anyway—products of growing up with limited economic resources and later being part of subcultures that value Do-it-yourself (DIY)⁶ impulses, sharing, and improvisation. Resourcefulness and adaptability are practices that connect to broader anti-capitalist values as well. They challenge wastefulness and invite creativity, asking the question, “How can we use what we have?”

To me and my peers, DIY culture has been important to embracing lifestyles of meeting our needs for food, shelter, entertainment, and everything else as independently as possible from experts and mass-produced commodities. I have understood DIY as a rallying cry to create the world we want to live in on our own terms, without permission. Yet, the individualism of the term—and the ways it is sometimes expressed—is counter to my experiences and interests with it. What is important to me about DIY culture is inherently communal. So much of what can be accomplished outside of “the system” happens precisely through cooperation. This is not a new

⁶ In her essay *Joy in Labour: The Politicization of Craft from the Arts and Craft Movement to Etsy*, cultural scholar Michelle Krugh traces the roots of contemporary DIY to the Arts and Crafts movement that arose in late-19th-century England and later spread to the U.S. as a response to industrialization and to the politics of John Ruskin and William Morris, responding to Karl Marx’s ideas about the alienation of labor (283-284).

idea, of course. People all over the world have shared labor to accomplish tasks that they would not be able to do as efficiently alone, including growing and harvesting food. Cooperation and adaptability are survival traits with an ethic of mutual aid at their heart, and community building is a natural outcome. Art facilitates these connections.

Like beekeeping, art can engender a sustained presence of mind, as I have discussed in Chapter 3. Responsiveness—a close etymological cousin of responsibility—is critical in developing this capacity, and it is closely related to intuition. In its purest form, this state of mind is a cultivated adaptability that makes quick, nearly subconscious, decisions and draws from all available resources fluently, whether painting, cooking food, or dealing with an emergency. Responsiveness accepts roadblocks and moves around them creatively. It can be difficult to let go of attachment to previous ideas, but this kind of improvisation often leads to satisfying unexpected results.

When visitors at *Honeybee Collectives* far outnumbered the capacity of the inside room where we planned to do our performances, we made a quick decision to move outside. I was resistant at first, for logistical reasons, but we made it work with communal effort. Volunteers moved picnic tables, swept leaves, and drove a car around to light up the performances. The spontaneity and responsiveness with which we adapted raised the energy of the performance, and, when the bee-dancers invited the crowd to swarm with them at the end, it became a dance party (see fig. 9.)

This contagious celebration and joyfulness is an important part of building communities. Art is not only important for raising awareness about social and political ills, but it also is critical in envisioning and creating the kind of world we want to live in. DIT art can give us the immediate revelry of a bunch of people laughing and shaking their tails, pretending to be bees,

while its more radical work, hopefully, happens simultaneously in a more subtle register, marking this temporary community with a visceral experience of belonging that has lasting implications for the individual and the group.



Fig. 9. *Honeybee Consensus Dance*, video still Hassan Pitts, 2015

Honeybees also adapt to changing needs of the collective in ways that they could not on their own. In the summer, they keep the hive cool by carrying in drops of water and fanning their wings, and in the winter, they cluster together, shivering their muscles to create heat (Evans, 156-157). Cold winters can be especially hard on honeybees, and I had heard a lot of stories about people losing hives the year before. Last fall, we tucked our bees in with sugar fondant, insulated the hive with foam and tarps, and hoped for the best. It has been almost a year now since I started keeping bees, and as I prepared for my exhibition, the weather warmed enough for me to open the hive and check on them. Walking across the yard on a sunny day in February, my heart lifted as I first heard and then saw them flying around. As winter turns to spring, flowers bloom, and a new generation of workers and drones are born, we will once again look for signs

of swarming. Professor Lewison has built a second hive, and we may be able to anticipate an exodus this time by moving some of the bees before they get too crowded.

This spring also marks the end of my three-year cycle of graduate school and my own imminent departure. The bees will stay at Mud Farm, while I fly away this time, ready to adapt to whatever comes next. I know that the synthesis of these experiences caring for bees, maturing my art practice, and reaffirming my commitment to collaboration will be lasting influences on my future work. I hope that *Honeybee Collectives*, and the spontaneous community we built around it, leave an impression about the potential for human collectivity that stays with participants beyond the exhibition.

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