

Beehave

Press Release

Exhibition Date	14 September – 11 November 2018
Venue	Kunsthhaus Baselland St. Jakob-Strasse 170 CH-4132 Muttenz/Basel
Press Conference	Wednesday, 12 September 2018 10.30 am
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Curator	Ines Goldbach, Director Kunsthhaus Baselland
Opening Hours	Tuesday – Sunday 11 am – 5 pm
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Introduction

The idea for *Beehave* emerged and travelled like an agile bee colony going in search of a new place to nest. The exhibition at the Kunsthaus Baselland began to develop around two years ago, thanks to the initiative of Martina Millà, Head of Programmes at the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona. As the subject rapidly gathered momentum it soon became clear that the project had to have a site-specific bent in each of its locations. The point of departure in Barcelona is quite different to that in Basel: for some time, urban bee life has been significantly curtailed in Spain and, as a result, beekeeping has been limited or even forbidden. This has not changed to this day. The exhibition in Barcelona, which ran from February to May 2018, thus took on the important task of changing perceptions of a complex subject through contemporary works within the museum as well as beyond in urban space. In Barcelona the list of invited artists was long: Jerónimo Hagerman, Anne Marie Maes, Goig (Pol Esteve and Miquel Mariné) + Max Celar, Philip Wiegard, Joan Miró, Xavi Manzanares and Àlex Muñoz, Marine Hugonnier, Toni Serra (Abu Ali), Luis Fernando Ramírez Celis, Joan Bennàssar, Luis Bisbe, Alfonso Borragàn, Joana Cera, Gemma Draper, Melliferopolis (Ulla Taipale and Christina Stadlbauer), Vadim de Grainville, Marcos Lutyens, Anna Moreno, Andrés Vial and Pep Vidal. It is to be hoped that the experiences the whole project brought about over many months will bring about a sustainable effect – if not immediately perceptible, then visible over time.

Now the exhibition concept has arrived in Switzerland where it experiences both a continuation and a transformation. In Basel and its surrounds, the situation is entirely different – at least for urban bees. There is talk of more than a thousand privately and publicly established and maintained bee hives in the city. This may sound positive at first, yet apiculture is not a hobby but a skill and an ability that not everyone is able to practise. In professional circles you hear how unskilled keepers, for example, do not recognise a disease in bees or a bee colony, or only do so when it is too late. Affected bees swarm out and infect healthy colonies. And the varroa mite is a major problem here, as it is in many places worldwide.

Yet does the astonishing concentration of urban bee colonies, and do the countless hives and the passionate pursuit of apiculture throughout the Swiss landscape – in the mountains as in the valleys – denote a greater understanding of bees themselves? Or is this an obvious consequence of our proximity to nature? The topic can be traced out more clearly in

contemporary art – not merely as a motif, but by posing weighty questions with an effort to create understanding of this fascinating ‘useful insect’. It is striking that this interest is not a new development. In fact, the topic of honeybees and/or their products of honey and wax has been dealt with centrally in many works or series for years, if not centuries. For a long time, artists have almost seismographically signalled the particularities of this form of life and how we deal with it – and that is not even to mention the representation of bees in very early art history.¹ Nonetheless it has taken some time for the subject to enter into the mainstream with a broader public and, in the process, to be taken more seriously. Indeed, because of their ongoing endangerment there is currently a boom in reports in the media and on film, including *More than Honey* and *Der Imker* (The Beekeeper) from this century, as well as major newspaper coverage such as in the Folio section of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* in August 2018. If, however, we consider the ever-diminishing actions brought to bear to help endangered animals and their environment, we should not rest easy.

Might art, or more precisely artists, take on an important task here? Or is the honeybee simply one subject among many? What distinguishes these recent works that deal with honeybees or their production, and what story can be told with the selection made of regional, national and international artists and their artistic discussion of the subject? We believe it is possible to discuss and understand the subject more broadly, and to develop a more nuanced, holistic picture of it, thanks to the coexistence of and cooperation between the exhibitions in Barcelona and Muttenz and the different configurations of artists in them. For the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Baselland we were also particularly interested in how artists found ways of working directly with bees, to engage with them directly or in dialogue and, thus, to trace their rhythms. From this resulted artistic works that, not least, reflected on the social behaviour and how a bee colony lives together in solidarity, and in so doing became relevant to how we coexist. Historical works in turn show how interest in this useful creature and its special role within the ecosystem is not just recent but has been an important subject for some time.

¹ There are many examples of bees represented in art-historical iconography. We can think of Peter Bruegel the Elder’s famous drawing *The Beekeepers* from the 16th century. Much earlier illustrations of bees and humans, such as the cave painting from Bicorp in Spain (Cuevas de la Arana, 10,000–7,000 B.C.), or antique bronze statuettes found as burial objects alongside actual honey may also come to mind. In Switzerland, for example, there is rumoured to have been a bee republic in the city of Chaux-de-Fonds in the course of a socialist movement. There is just cause for numerous bee illustrations to be found throughout the city on its coat of arms, and on fountains or reliefs.

Twenty-four Artists – A Large Swarm

So what distinguishes the works exhibited at the Kunsthau Baselland? Zurich-based **Brigham Baker** (b. 1989, Nipomo, USA) has been working with bee colonies for a long time. For the work *Weaving House* the artist offered his bee colony sugared water pigmented with substances used in the food industry. The workers processed the sugar within the hive and thus created differently coloured combs; it is no accident that artificial and natural light shining through these makes one think of contemporary stained glass. On the other hand, with his work *Arbeit Hive (Work Hive)* Baker returned to a customary bee-related activity. In order to unite two colonies, newspapers are placed between the two hives dividing the colonies. The paper, which the artist had previously dyed blue, is gradually eaten through by the colonies – giving them enough time to grow accustomed to each other. Presented in the space they can be read in a wide variety of ways: as landscapes, maps, stages, or indeed abstract, poetic forms.

In his work **Mirko Baselgia** (b. 1982, Lantsch / Lenz CH) has engaged with the honeybee and its behaviour for some time. For his multi-part series *Midada da structura* he offered a bee colony honeycomb frames for its hive; instead of the customary machine-made wax comb leaves he produced a modified form, made with a great deal of handwork, with a pattern with Arabic echoes. The pattern includes hexagons but also stylised flower shapes. Yet instead of simply adopting the new form or overwriting it with the usual perfect hexagonal shape, the bees seemed to enter into a dialogue. They built new forms in their comb and also allowed small mistakes in the familiar system. Here an exciting dialogue resulted, not only between man and insect, but equally between nature and culture. Baselgia's photo-gravure series *Aviöl* and *Tü ed eu* from 2015, in which he shows the bodies of dead bees on a 1:1 scale, can be read as at once poetic and melancholy. The delicate bodies lift softly off the paper and seem, with this, still more fragile. Fascination and intelligence are dealt with again and again in Baselgia's works, but equally the friability of the complex useful insect.

Many years prior to this, in 1975, a surprising interview was published in the *Rheinische Bienenzeitung* (Rhenisch Bee Newspaper, 126th year, vol. 12, December 1975): in it the artist **Joseph Beuys** (b. 1921 Krefeld, d. 1986 Düsseldorf, DE) who was then living in Düsseldorf, spoke about the power of a bee colony and its queen to change states, bring about processes and establish a social warming sculpture. He saw a parallel between people and humans in this very capacity to create form. His *Bienenkönigin* (Queen Bee), a delicate

drawing in pencil and watercolours, complemented the text. Dating back to 1955, it is proof of Beuys' longstanding interest in the useful insect. In discussion, he brought together the important behaviours for bees of negotiation and forming – and bemoaned the lack of freedom, democracy and socialism in human life. Can bees, with their creative will, be a paradigm in this respect?

The work *ohne Titel* (Untitled, 2016) from Berlin-based artist **Björn Braun** (b. 1979, Berlin, DE) equally shows a form of artistic dialogue with bees – in this case with masonry bees, who seek out holes or cavities in concrete walls or in various woods. Eggs are laid in these cavities and nourishment is provided; then food and eggs are covered with mud, earth or clay. In warmer months the larvae emerge and, bit by bit, eat through their protective wall in order to mate with other emerging bees. In this work Braun intervenes in the process – without harming the insects in the process. In a wall furnished with holes he placed cocoons with larvae and closed them in with a clay-earth mixture which had been supplemented with food colouring. A multi-channel video installation shows larvae emerging through the multicoloured holes. Braun knowingly plays on art-historical works such as paintings from Jerry Zeniuk, an artist he highly admires. This eating-out-through-painting also has a humorous, poetic touch – and relates in a way to Brigham Baker and Mirko Baselgia's works; new creative works which cannot be planned down to the last detail come about in dialogue with nature, and bees in particular.

Mike Hentz (b. 1954 New Jersey, USA, lives in Berlin) is represented in the exhibition with the video and stills from the installation performance *Bees*. Hentz, who has always been interested in music, performances and art, realised this special form of uniting insect and human at Hamburg's Freie Akademie der Künste in 1980. For a week the American-Swiss artist, at the time the guest professor substituting for Sigmar Polke, shut himself up in a low-lit room with a bee colony. Following intensive artistic phases in which the colours blue, red and green were central for him, for this performance he coloured the floor of the classroom and his own naked upper body with yellow pigment and positioned props such as a tall table with a ladder, a lamp, etc. The camera becomes central in the space, documenting not only the artist's approach to the bee swarm but also, like a window, records for the outside the view of the interior of this constructed beehive.

The spare text queries causalities. *Economy Eats Democracy, Devours Bees*. **Enrique Fontanilles** (b.1951 Barcelona, ES) who works mostly in Basel, often makes the relationship

between business and power the subject of his works. Texts and digital media are in many cases the chosen form, but the topic is also sounded out in melancholic, poetic ways in many video, installation and performance works. The text Fontanilles has selected for the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Baselland pinpoints one of his key reflections on business and ecology: while, according to the artist, bees' industry could provide an example for democracy, it is a no-go for the modern global market economy.

The video work *circulaziun* from 2009 by **Carmen E. Kreis** (b. 1964 Basel, CH) communicates – already through its rapid edits – a fast-pulsing rhythm for the whole film. The Basel-based artist also pulls off an astonishing close-up perspective on bee colonies observed and filmed during periods spent in Nairs-Scuol and Neuchâtel. The concentration of image, sound and editing interweave for the viewer to create a dance-like movement that tells of the beings' communal life as well as of life with them.

The works and practices of the two Basel-based artists **Katharina Anna Wieser** (b. 1980 Zurich, CH) and **Boris Rebetez** (b. 1970 Lajoux, CH) are very different; their submissions for two separate site-specific commissions are both fascinating and comparable. In both instances the work is conceived of as more than just a sculpture or an architectural intervention in exterior space; indeed, both projects are remarkable for setting in motion processes with long-term effects. In Wieser's work *Schwärmen* (Swarming) the buildings made for cultivated and wild bees on the roof of a tram depot in the Canton of Zurich emblematised the trams' own movements of departure and return. Rebetez's project *Atlas* in turn unites the direct relationship between the lives of inhabitants of an architectural development and the honey production taking place on the roofs of the new residential complex. Rebetez considers the abstract sculpture, which is reminiscent of a honeycomb form, and the whole project as a monument to the utopian idea of not only consuming nourishment in living areas but also producing it. Neither of the two site-specific projects was realised.

Marta Margnetti (b. 1989 Lugano) shows the corpses of numerous honeybees, bumblebees and wasps found in different places, and then cast in silver and bronze, with the title *Wasps! Wasps! Wasps!* The dead insect animals – which we know all too well – are cast on a 1:1 scale and through the choice of material they become precious, particular bodies of memory. The artist sometimes displays the small silver and bronze works within an exhibition context as if left in passing or by accident; or she integrates them in performative actions in which she

places the casts in the hands of selected visitors for a short period. In the exhibition at the Kunsthaus Baselland the works are drawn close to an antique honeybee, once a valuable burial object and probably a symbol for regeneration. Small as the antique and the contemporary representations are, they express an enormous respect for the living creatures.

The drawings of **Leiko Ikemura** (b.1951, Tsu Mie, JP), which are generally created in series, often relate to transitional subjects. The drawing *Honigtasche* (Honey Pastry) from 1983 is part of a larger series that the Japanese-Swiss artist realised while in Zurich. The exhibited work evinces her continual interest in insects as well as her closeness to and fascination with nature. Links to this can be found often in her gestural drawings or paintings. Insects or animals and people blend together into fabulous, dream-like mixed beings and tell more tales of transformation, as well as of foreignness and exclusion.

For many years **Sandra Knecht** (b. 1968 Bern, CH) has consistently dealt with the question of how identity is formed. For Knecht, home or *Heimat* is not a fixed place and has no fixed form but is rather a societal state which must continually be renegotiated. The major work series *Kimono my House* (2018), developed over two rooms within the exhibition, is reminiscent of an archaeological exhibition or the interior of a beehive. It tells of Knecht's own coming into being in the context of the society in which she lives: of transformation, of allowing herself to be inspired by objects, by works from artists she respects, by nature itself or by the place in which she finds herself. In this process the artist's immediate surroundings in the Basel region are as meaningful as her exchanges with colleagues or the traces of (art)-historical precursors or (Swiss) traditions. It is no accident that Knecht is also renowned as an innovative cook, who transforms products from nature and through them allows us to understand and access her own influences and narratives.

The starting point for the work *Constellation Ordinaire #9* (Ordinary Constellation #9) by **Jan Kopp** (b. 1970 Frankfurt am Main, DE) was a wild bees' nest that the artist found in a roof space. It was bee-free, but remained full of honey. The artist stuck small pieces of wood, like Mikado sticks, in a large number of fragments of the nest and presented the resulting raised structure of numerous parts on a raised glass surface in the space. Throughout the exhibition honey drips continually out of the still-filled comb onto the wooden sticks and exudes a sweet fragrance within the spaces.

Xavi Manzanares (b. 1974 Barcelona, ES, where he lives) and **Àlex Muñoz** (b. 1966 Barcelona, lives in Arbúcies, Girona) have focussed on honeybees for some time. Àlex Muñoz is himself an engaged apiarist. For their work *Eixams* (Swarms) the artists thought up a complex system that enables a visual, auditory and haptic experience of the inner activity of a beehive, thus enabling better understanding of it. A multimedia connection between the beehives that stand outside the Kunsthaus Baselland and large wooden panels, on which the visitor is invited to lie, complete with headphones and a projection of the interior of the hive, enable a sensory experience of the bees' activity within. Developed together with the Barcelona Producció 2018 La Capella municipal emerging art programme and made in collaboration with the Culture Institute of Barcelona, the work, which is based on detailed research, demonstrates the contemporary technical capacity to gain a complex understanding of systems and (natural) phenomena.

The bronze *Fillette au chapeau nid d'abeilles* (Girl with a Bees' Nest Hat) by **Joan Miró** (b. 1893 Barcelona, d. 1983, Palma, ES) from 1955 shows an abstract figure whose head is crowned with a cast of a fragment of honeycomb. The Spanish artist's extensive oeuvre, which encompassed sculpture, ceramics, painting and printing, reveals again and again his lasting interest in novel connections between constructed form and found objects from nature – a means of disrupting the classical understanding of sculpture and, with objects from nature, also linking (Spanish) folk art more closely with life.

The monotype *Bienenflug* (Bee Flight, 1958) from **Meret Oppenheim** (b. 1913 Berlin, DE, d. 1985 Basel, CH) is an astonishing print and, from a contemporary perspective, it enables us to think of the complex manner in which bees communicate with one another. By now we know much about the extraordinary ability of honeybees to use a waggle dance to communicate the approximate direction and distance of blossoms and flowers to the other insects of a colony. But what can we really know and state about nature, and how does our own communication with others function: indeed, how much does the unconscious play a part here? As nimble as Oppenheim's work may appear, the questions that it frames are numerous and profound.

Luis Fernando Ramírez Celis (b. 1969 Bogotá, COL) has been practising as an architect for many years in Bogotá. In the context of the exhibition he shows the work *Corte* (Cut), a column of six-sided Plexiglas rods filled with honey and sealed with wax. The fragility of the column, which is not a continuous structure, but which, by virtue of a break in the middle, can be

different heights, is in contrast with the stable method of construction. For Ramírez Celis the honeycomb structure, with its attached hexagons, is a system that can serve as a utopia for future architectonic models and visions thanks to its stability and solidity. For the artist the beehive is an ideal construction that carries, supports and protects, is functional and adapts to spatial givens.

The Bee Opera by **Peter Regli** (b.1959 Andermatt, CH) is a wooden palace and salon in one. It is a space for three to a maximum of four people – and a bee colony. Regli came up with the idea in 2009 during a workshop at the Berne University of the Arts. The now permanent, weatherproof form which found a home at the Novartis Campus in Basel emerged from this concept. In 1995 Regli coined the term ‘Reality Hacking’ to designate his works and he gives each of his works a number. *Bee Opera* carries the identifier *RH No 272*. But if the title seems systematic and cold, the work itself is humorous, poetic and profound. No sooner has the visitor entered the small room than excerpts from operas or spaghetti westerns are played on a flat screen on the back wall. In a glass wall the bee colony consorts with the sonorous images; with its comb structures and activities it creates a continually shifting framework and confers wit, poetry or drama on whatever plays on the screen.

In his approximately 50-minute film *En el camino de las abejas* (The Way of the Bees) **Toni Serra** (Arabic name Abu Ali, b. 1960, Manresa, ES) traces widely diverse possibilities of beekeeping around the world. Depending on geographic location and cultural tradition, different potential and behaviours develop in relation to these useful creatures. Scenes play out in very different areas and settings, such as in rural Morocco, where honey is also used medicinally; the work also considers the different ways in which bee colonies are kept, such as in baskets, in abandoned building fragments, etc. It is striking how much respect interviewees accord the insects and living with them.

Till Velten (b. 1961 Wuppertal, DE) has for many years been interested in the smaller stories hidden by major ones – and how those minor stories can lead to a better understanding of the full picture. His countless interviews are based on curious questioning and challenging of the world; he carries them out with people who lead him through footnotes to the major narrative. It might be a museum guard, or it might be the interviewee he presents in this exhibition, apiarist Wichmann. The dialogues also tell us about everyone’s creativity and desire to make – and this is as much in evidence with a beekeeper as it is with an artist. It is no accident that Velten places another interview next to that with the apiarist: one in which he

himself, as artist, is challenged. Velten contrasts the immaterial forming of time and knowledge in a conversation with ‘conversation sculptures’ – chain-like formulations that allow a memory of what has been and what was experienced during the interview.

Pep Vidal (b.1980 Rubí, ES), who is also a mathematician and physicist, has an artistic practice marked by (natural) scientific enquiry. This frequently relates to challenging systems whose potential and possibilities for change interest the Barcelona-based artist. Vidal has long since been interested in the bee system – both for its dependence on ecological systems and as itself being illustrative of a complex system. For the exhibition he developed 300 drawings, entitled *Blooming System*, which show movements and directions – akin to vectors. From a distance they appear like abstract blooms and flower forms.

Philip Wiegard (b. 1970 Schwetzingen, DE) includes two large drawing installations in the exhibition: *Artist Screening #1* and *Artist Screening #2*. Both are the result of a several-day-long performance workshop which the Berlin-based artist carried out with a group of participants at the beginning of December 2017 at the Fundació Joan Miró in Barcelona. In this the artist’s enquiry regarding collective work and the development of a societal structure, one which at the same time recognises individuality, is central. Through his choice of material – distemper – and the large-scale presentation in the space, the drawings generate an inwardness which is also reminiscent of a (bee)basket structure.

In the 1980s **Andrea Wolfensberger** (b. 1961, Zurich, lives and works in Zurich and Waldenburg) was already working intensively with beeswax as a material. It is remarkable not only for its softness and elasticity but equally for the quality of rendering physical phenomena visible. For the work *Wachsstele* (Wax Stele), Wolfensberger poured a large amount of liquid wax into a hollow wooden construction. During the cooling process millions of wax molecules moved, as if coordinated, in a uniform spiral direction, which then formed like a spine in the cold wax and became visible when the stele was opened. Wolfensberger’s interest in physical phenomena also informs the multi-part work *Vom Gesang der Bienen* (On the Bees’ Song). The artist arranged lumps of beeswax in a large geometric form on the ground. She arranged the cut edges of the wax parts in such a way that vector directions emerged and it ultimately created an illustration of an electrostatic pattern – relating to the electric field that honeybee colonies generate in the hive.

As varied and multifarious as the invited artists from across the world and from different generations are, when their work is seen together one thing becomes evident: their respect regarding the honeybee, their desire to learn and understand from its behaviour as a social being, as the architect of spatial forms, as a being that is agile, social and eager to create. So it is only right that the exhibition *Beehave* allows the word 'behave' to resonate – or would a term relating to a creative task have been more apt? For the question is directed at us, how we behave today and will behave in the future, and what we want to propose: what role do we want to play within contemporary society and what position should we adopt in relation to generations to come? What can we do in order to actively design and positively create in the here and now, while also ensuring that what comes tomorrow or far in the future remains worth living for? These are urgent questions at a time in which we can no longer depend on political, economic, societal or humanitarian stability worldwide, when solidarity and considerate action seemingly need to be re-learned and when our ecological footprint has already been marked and is showing disastrous consequences. The time for being silent and observing is long gone. We must act!

But where should we start? With the small and immediate or the major global issues? Which part can art be granted in this? Might it make us aware of topics that we cannot yet comprehend but that tomorrow may demand we make possibly drastic decisions? Maybe art does not drive us directly to make decisions, but it can hone our consciousness and understanding of diverse subjects, even those with which we have not – or not yet, – engaged for different reasons. It can offer us a place where we can experience something, can encounter the new and unfamiliar, and where the unknown becomes the familiar. Art and culture can place tools in our hands with which we can create, make change and have an effect. But each of us must do this for ourselves.

Beehave is created in cooperation with the Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona. Our special thanks goes to Martina Millà for the idea of the project.

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