

Susan McHugh

smchugh@une.edu

Image, Story, Crash: Lenore Malen's I Am The Animal

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You see interchangeable robots tugging a placid child across the room. You see dancers, some in bee costumes, so many fading in and out onscreen that their movements are hard to follow. You see cars parading symmetrically around a track in one image, and in another, repeated, a car crashes in a tunnel, then others pile up from behind, crashing in a chain reaction. All the while, in other corners of your field of vision, you try to follow stories of beekeepers who love, and appear to be losing, an animal with whom they are intimate, a companion species on whom we all rely for food. In this subtle way, the visual metaphors that build up to the crash image in Lenore Malen's video installation *I Am The Animal* (2012) bring familiar notions of bees to where scientists and philosophers alike fear to tread: an acknowledgement of failure in our representations of honeybees, and a reorientation toward longing to live together.

In this characterization, students of philosophy will recognize Gilles Deleuze's critique of representation in favor of a theory of life itself, which rejects the usual ontological premise of autonomous selves, individuals differentiated in opposition to masses of animals or things, and starts with the radically leveling proposition that life itself boils down to two things: desire and the social, or longing and living together. One difficulty of rising to Deleuze's challenge is that it requires us to abandon the hierarchical dualisms through which we have learned to think of creation as separate from, and lesser than, ourselves. And another is that visualizing this new ontology rules out the possibility that the work of art is to illustrate philosophical points.

Through this creative theory, artist and art historian Steve Baker characterizes a distinctly contemporary artistic engagement with animal life that he characterizes in *The Postmodern Animal* in terms of an aesthetic of "botched taxidermy" that deliberately shows the seams, the bald spots, the imperfections or failures of representing animal life but that does not therefore constitute artistic failure. Rather than being "didactic or moralizing or sentimental," he argues, this kind of animal art has its own integrity, does its own work to open up the ways in which people think about animals. And it involves what he calls in more recent work a "formal toughness," signaled by artists' "unflinching" gazes in "working with form, and not – to oversimplify – with sentiment-drenched content." Ranging across forms my

own book *Animal Stories*, I follow these developments across fine art and other visual media as well as literature to investigate more precisely what happens in acts of narrating what happens between humans and other animals, and I'm becoming increasingly fascinated with creative people's stories of living with and learning from members of other species on the brink.

Like few contemporary artists, Malen follows honeybees through familiar explorations of alien and utopian aesthetics only with an intensely visual and unflinching contact with bees. I was not surprised to learn that she kept bees so much as that she did so at her own peril (as someone with a life-threatening allergy to them). This contact grounds an artistically unusually deep engagement with the unique communities of bees and beekeepers in *I Am The Animal* make visible a rupture in species hierarchies, and in so doing create a space in which to engage with the collective activity of a hive. Perhaps it's worth noting, first and foremost, that hers is not the usual story of honeybees today, so often painted in the lurid shades of Colony Collapse Disorder or CCD.

A term first applied in 2006 to a phenomenon in which the workers of a hive disappear, causing the death of the colony, CCD is only one of many suspects in the drastic drop by the millions of hives worldwide. Amid so many pressures on this species, including the spread of known chronic diseases, intensive monocrop farming, widespread chemical use, genetically

modified crop plants, and the shrinking gene pool of commercially-bred honeybees, this phenomenon with no clearly identified causes or cures is only one of the ways in which it is becoming apparent that along with honeybees the insect and avian pollinators of the world are dying, undergoing an unprecedented period of severe endangerment and extinction. Yet, in public discussions as well as in my own recent research into contemporary fiction, film, and fine art that revisits historical connections between mass killings of people and animals, I find a narrow focus on symptoms like CCD at the expense of cures like major overhauls in the business of agriculture, which would involve rethinking plants, animals, people and others not in terms of resources but as lives. This is where Malen's visual figurations of contact between the species stand to make all the difference in the future of human life with (and maybe as) another species.

With her rootedness in the practice of beekeeping, Malen has less in common with honeybee-focused contemporary artists than with hybrid scholar-dog trainers like Vicki Hearne and Donna Haraway, who in recent decades have advanced theories of cross-species companionship only in the limited sphere of human-canine relations, where the antiquity and ubiquity of the relationship makes it arguably the case that our species is conceptually if not physically inseparable from theirs (at least, that's what I claim in my book *Dog*). But can theories of cross-species companionship

that are centered on the respect, reciprocity, and responsibility familiar to the ordinary harmonies of domestic life be extended to account for much more recent and rarified relations like those of humans and honeybees? As the stories of a “group soul” in Malen’s *Beekeepers’ Tales* (2012) indicate, such understandings necessarily involve not only engagements between people and bees but also among people who share the experience of trying to learn what it means to care for insect colonies in increasingly unlikely circumstances.

Like Malen, who has kept hives, I have a special interest in the one pollinator who is also our companion species, *apis mellifera*, or the European honeybee. As an undergraduate at a university then still clinging to its heritage as a land-grant institute, my favorite class was Practical Beekeeping, as a condition of which as students we had to submit to being stung in the university bee yard (none of us proved allergic). There I caught the bug, so to speak, and subsequently volunteered for a year as the Worcester County Honey Queen, traveling to fairs and trade shows to answer questions and otherwise promote understanding of honeybees and beekeeping. So I know firsthand that dramatically dropping numbers concern much more than just economic losses. As one of the interviewees in *Beekeepers’ Tales*, Victor Borghi asks, “How can I help these creatures?” And he’s referring not simply to his “eighty to ninety thousand bees” but to the species as a whole: “What can we do if they die?” While drawing from

this same documentary-style material, *I Am The Animal* organizes it in a formally tougher way, one that purposefully collapses metaphorical and other distinctions between honeybees and humans.

Snippets of documentaries and dramas, musicals and music videos, as well as other materials sourced on the World Wide Web are enfolded to create a productive confusion that does more than just record the fragile and quite possibly doomed relationship between honeybees and people. As metaphors like robot and dancer collapse, *I Am The Animal* uproots the cherished truisms of bees as the perfect image of order, and makes room for the flourishing of emergent scientific and old-time keepers' visions of bees as organized through nonhierarchic networks, both the folkloric group souls and the literal swarms that are central to this super-organism's survival. According to another interviewee, biologist Tom Seeley, the capacity for distributed negotiation in the critical moment of together choosing a new home is the quality that makes swarming honeybees operate as "groups that are far smarter than the smartest individuals in them." In his terms, swarm intelligence not only organizes a "honeybee democracy" but also mirrors that of brain neurons: bee visits, like neuron firings, compete to accumulate a quorum or critical level of support through which the system makes a choice. Popping in and out seemingly at random but leading to a distinct conclusion in *I Am The Animal*, the cacophonous visual presentation of metaphorical and other figures of honeybee life likewise enacts a deliberation rather than

a displacement of viewpoints, and in so doing makes manifest the material as well as political implications for viewers thinking with honeybees.

For, at another level, this presentation takes viewers through a history in which the modern, mechanical metaphors of insect life give way to these new understandings of super-organisms like honeybees as agencies without centers. Media theorist Jussi Parikka (who contributed an essay to the exhibition catalog) argues further that this vision shapes interactions among humans through the new, swarmlike modes of radical politics grounded in multitudes rather than individuals that are rendered perhaps most visible today in flash-mob-style actions orchestrated through social media. What may be more difficult to grasp is how such actions are guided by “alternative logics of thought, organization, and sensation,” in Seeley’s model, the negotiation through confusion at the center of all of our thought processes, and what Malen evokes here in terms of the intensely disorienting sense of collective activity that confronts you when you first open up a beehive.

While it is possible to read *I Am The Animal* as a sort of immersion experience with becoming a bee---through which, for instance, the multiple, simultaneous, moving images might represent viewing the world through three simple eyes along with two compound eyes, each comprising thousands of lenses---this view that I have sketched of the installation instead as an expression of living with bees helps to explain what exactly sets this piece apart from other contemporary honeybee art (and I can talk

about more examples later, if you like). For now, it may be enough to say that, amid these theoretical considerations, the cleverness or audacity---or intelligent outrage?---of Malen's *I Am The Animal* becomes all the more astonishing.

Susan McHugh is a professor of comparative literature at the University of New England.