

Harriet Fawcett
Environmental Art

Title of Degree Show piece: Apis as Currency

My work examines the dysfunctional relationship we have with our food. Conceptually my interest lies between science fiction and ecology, exploring our relationship and interaction with the natural world, and the ethical problems we encounter in regards to nature. Responding to future complex scenarios, inventing visual experiences that connect science with imagination, my works create immersive experiences. These experiences encourage ecological conversations regarding consumerism and our treatment of nature. I am interested in understanding how mass-industrialization of farming causes environmental degradation on a global scale. My work specifically focuses on the decline of the bumblebee and the impact this plight will have on the economy of the pollination of commercial crops. The work manifests itself in performance, sound and film, aiming to unnerve the audience, creating a critical distance from the deeply familiar act of eating.

The explosive growth of the human population directly effects directly in ever-increasing demands for energy, food, minerals, and other natural resources. Vast areas of land and water have been exploited by human activity to meet these demands in turn have exacerbated problems of ecosystem disturbance. Bee's wildflower food supplies have been destroyed by modern farming practices and urban development.

My piece focuses on simple mundane objects and actions, stripping the work back to the bare frames of the piece to emphasize the raw message behind the art. The performance is a hypothetical dystopian scenario where all our fruit is produced artificially because we have no bees to pollinate our crops. Three quarters of the crops that humans grow require insects to pollinate them. Without bees and their allies we would not have tomatoes, blueberries, runner beans, raspberries, chili peppers or melons.

The material choices used were a crucial component to the pieces. The artificial fruits are cast out of agar-agar, an edible food product chosen for its aesthetics. With no colour, smell or identifiable taste it adds a layer of uncertainty and discomfort to the work. Agar-agar is a jelly-like substance, obtained from algae. The idea behind the inclusion of this algae food product stem from discourses surrounding alternative solutions for the growing number of mouths to feed whilst finding a solution that doesn't compromise the health of our planet through overuse of arable farmland. Algae is in abundance. While some parts of the world like Japan, China and Korea have embraced seaweed for centuries, few Westerners put seaweed on their weekly grocery lists. Scientists believe that algae is the next super food of the future being 20 times more productive than conventional crops, with little needed in the way of input to keep them alive. Every bite of Spirulina (agar) contains more protein and more iron than 20% of ground beef. The use of this material choice is referencing the alternative solutions for food from overworked arable land which puts the bee's endanger from the pesticides and destruction of their wild flower supply.

Playing with the idea of manufactured produce, the performance will be held within the

confines of a poly-tunnel. The performance uses a conveyor belt as the main movement, which the performers work around. The usage of a LED light table creates a futuristic, clinical stage for the piece.

The aim behind the work is to allow the audience to think about the question of 'what if'? What if bees became extinct? What will happen then? Albert Einstein stated,

“If the bees disappeared of the surface of the globe then man would only have four years of life left. No more bees, no more pollination, no more plants, no more animals, no more man”.

Throughout the duration of the performance the poly-tunnel is closed off to the public, whilst the audience experiences a semi blurred view of the piece through the sides of the tunnel. The artificially made fruit references the distorted view of the interaction with the food production industry and our lack of understanding of where our food comes from. For example the pesticides regularly used in crop production is a main factor, which results in the decline of bee populations. The performance is live streamed onto a surveillance monitor outside the poly-tunnel this reiterates the passivity and disconnection we have with this whole process.

Sound piece

This sound piece consists of a distorted bee composition referencing the economic value of bees. The sound piece, played through a vibration speaker uses the surface of the conveyor belt to enhance this machine like bee sound. This piece was inspired by the facts found in a study looking at ‘the economic value of bees in the UK’. I was amazed by the value bees have when you put a figure to them. The sound of bees is distorted to sound mechanical and man-made. Within this piece I am aiming to create familiar connection to the audience through sound with the idea that in modern day society work and production is connected more with machines than it is to insects.

“Honey production by the estimated 200,000 honey bee colonies owned by the estimated 35,000 beekeepers in the UK is about 400 t per annum, valued at approximately £15.7 million. Wax production is approximately 1.5% of honey production, UK production may be 60 t per annum, which at £2 per kg has a market value of £120 000. Adding the value of honey and beeswax to that of pollination, the total annual value of honey bees can be estimated as £153.6 million.”¹

I aim to give the audience space to think about a future without bees. The work desires a direct change to attitudes, but provide a platform to acknowledge the delicate balance of our ecosystems. *Apis as currency* is part of an ongoing collective series, which references the global decline of pollinating insects. The work I have produced so far has been process based and aims to highlight the issues through futuristic metaphors. To further develop the series I am working on, I strive to not only be critical of current problems, but also highlight the significance of future solutions.

¹ Carreck, N, Williams I (1998) e economic value of bees in the UK, *Bee World* 72(3):115-123.

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