



I am the animal

LENORE MALEN

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Wave Hill, 2011 • Tufts University Art Gallery, 2012

I Am The Animal is based on an exhibition of the same name held at Tufts University Art Gallery January 19 – April 1, 2012

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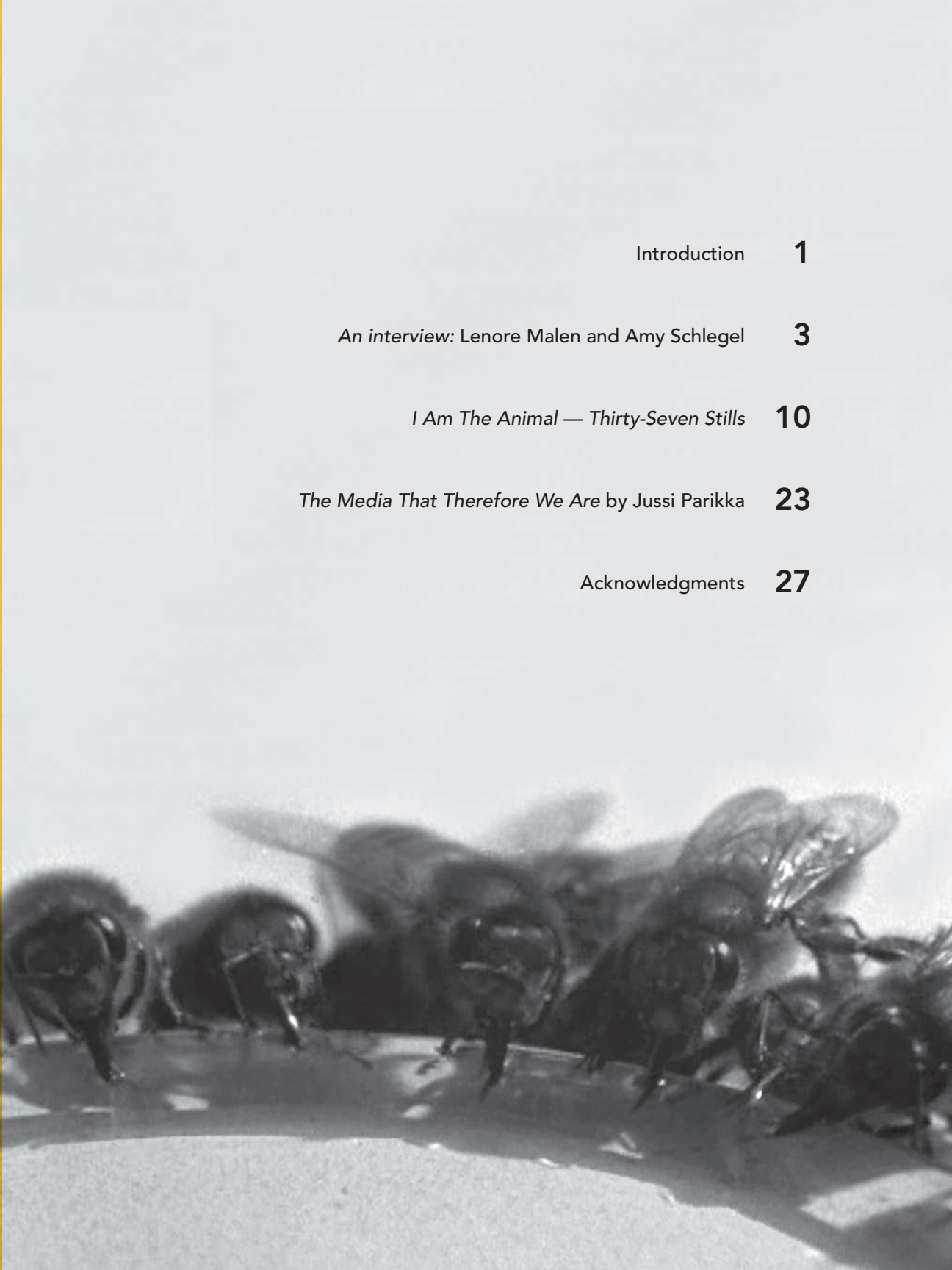
Introduction 1

An interview: Lenore Malen and Amy Schlegel 3

I Am The Animal — Thirty-Seven Stills 10

The Media That Therefore We Are by Jussi Parikka 23

Acknowledgments 27





Introduction

We know that animals have a special intelligence, a sixth sense that humans do not have. Animals are able to presage earthquakes and other natural disasters. Nearly every culture ascribes anthropomorphic and spiritual characteristics to animals. In many mythologies, animals are trickster figures that jostle us out of our human cocoon, the status quo, and serve as mediators between the sacred and the profane, the divine and the human, transgressing boundaries between the two spheres, making the invisible perceptible. Many domesticated mammals, like pigs, goats, and horses, make sympathetic, if not always popular, human companions, while the desire to domesticate wild animals, like foxes, ravens, wolves, and tigers, hints at the capacity for interspecies intelligence and communication. Yet humans are disadvantaged compared with the rest of the animal world in that we are encumbered by our “technics” — our bodily extensions, like clothing, glasses, smartphones — that shelter and protect us but also create a highly self-conscious, embodied subjectivity that divides us from each other and separates us from animals.



Opposite: May 20, 2008: Lenore Malen dressed in a suit typically worn by novice beekeepers.

Now, try to imagine the opposite of anthropomorphism. How can we engage in a process of becoming animal? What can we learn from animals' intelligence(s) to make us less dependent upon the artificial intelligence props we surround ourselves with to interpret our world for us?

In *I Am The Animal*, artist Lenore Malen visually poses these big, provocative questions in her immersive three-channel video installation, an ode to the emerging discipline of “post-humanities.” Malen is a true intellectual, in the best sense of the term, for her love of learning that transcends — and weaves together — the disciplines of biology, ecology, philosophy, dance/performance, and political science, and the appropriation of a plethora of source material. As she says, the value of such intra-disciplinary thinking in the generation of new knowledge and new ways of organizing and structuring what we think of as real. Her learning for *I Am The Animal* was at first practical (learning beekeeping culture and how to keep bees), then academic (learning



principally about insect biology, utopian societies, and Western metaphysical and political

philosophy), and finally technological (learning the software to create a complex, non-narrative three-channel video). *I Am The Animal* creates a visual metaphor for the fragmented, compound vision of insects in which we, as viewers, become the animal situated inside a hive-like, sheltered gallery space. Perhaps viewers should be asked to disrobe while experiencing the installation, to aid in the becoming-animal process. As the creator of this complex vision, made in response to the ecological crises of global warming, commercial globalization, and sustainability, Malen has transformed herself into a kind of trickster, beguiling us to think that humans can indeed learn from animals to solve some of our most pressing problems.

— Amy Ingrid Schlegel, Tufts University

An interview

LENORE MALEN AND AMY SCHLEGEL

Amy Schlegel This book is a documentation of *I Am The Animal*, the three-channel video installation that you completed in 2010. In the installation you begin with the beehive as metaphor, but go beyond that.

Lenore Malen Yes, the real subject of the film is the breakdown of boundaries between human and animal, organic and inorganic, the biological and the technical that leads to the realization that “there is no human and there never has been” and that “the human is not a given but rather is made in an ongoing process of technological and anthropological evolution,” and here I’m quoting the writer and theorist Cary Wolfe.¹ You might think that we already know this because these ideas have been in circulation since the 1970s or earlier, but it’s not so. The anthropomorphic thinking that lies at the root of these binaries still predominates everywhere. You could call *I Am The Animal* an attempt at a reverse anthropomorphism, re-imagining human culture as a hive, if that were even possible.

A.S. You’ve been investigating models of utopian society in your artistic practice for a number of years. What compelled you to begin looking at the beehive as

an alternate model?

L.M. In September 2007 I staged a performance at the Cue Art Foundation in New York City, as part of my exhibition, *The New Society for Universal Harmony*. I chose the hive as the subject, calling the performance *Harmony as a Hive*, because I found it fascinating that the hive has 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). But *The New Society* is more than a single exhibition. My original idea in 2000 was to reinvent in contemporary terms an actual 18th-century utopian society, La Société de l'Harmonie Universelle; it's evolved over the

years to become an ongoing collaboration with eight artists and actors. All my work is produced by The New Society for Universal Harmony because everything I do touches on the wish for community and for a perfect society. The wish is always unfulfilled, but the longing remains.

A.S. It's a leap from exploring the hive as a motif in your artwork to actually keeping bees. What motivated you to do this?

L.M. In May 2008 I began raising bees in upstate New York, knowing nothing about how difficult it would be or how much it would change

my thinking. Bees, and all insects for that matter, were always very scary creatures to me, truly alien, and I've spent most of my life fearing them. After the performance at the Cue I bought two "packages" of bees on a total impulse and then met with local beekeepers to learn how to tend to them. At the same time I secretly hoped that I would become part of the place-bound rural utopia that I fantasized. When it came to setting up my hives, the beekeepers were incredibly generous. It was a barter economy, but complicated because the beekeepers had strong political beliefs ranging from socialism to libertarianism. They invited me to see their hives; they preside over them as if each one were a sovereign state. In 2009 I produced a 22-minute documentary about these men and women who have devoted their lives to their hives and are trying to save the species *Apis mellifica*. I focused on the ecological threats that plague the honeybee, from climate change and globalization to habitat loss.

I kept my hives for two years until an allergy forced me to give them away. During summers I spent countless hours sitting beside the hives observing them. When I watched them it made me think about our own blind animality, our hive mind. Someone wrote that the hive is like an enormous animal whose arms span miles across and then retract. Similarly our world consists of complex nets of relationships, affects, and becomings. I watched the bees build their house collectively by extruding wax from their abdomens. They're inventors. Their inventions are their bodies and the assemblages they make with them. But for humans invention takes place outside our bodies.

A.S. Why did this project ultimately need to take the form of video projection?

L.M. I observed this: Every minute the entire hive adjusts its activity according to the position of the sun, the humidity, the nectar flow, and many other things. We humans may parse our days into ever-smaller intervals of time, and we also act in lockstep, but we don't perceive it as such. We think of time more as an abstraction. But time or duration is at the root of everything we do and are, and that's why, since I wanted to deal with bees in relation to humans, I needed to make a film. Duration is intrinsic to film.



In his book *Deleuze on Cinema* Ronald Bogue writes about Deleuze's debt to Henri Bergson. His description comes very close to how I view this projection. I see each clip as a thought, but a thought that is not formed linguistically.

Bogue says: "The things we commonly call space and time are merely extremes of the contraction and dilation of a single *durée*, or duration... The universe for Bergson is an open vibrational whole, a flow of matter-movement that contracts to form the fixed and discrete entities of the spatial world and dilates to form the temporal dimension of a universal past surging through the present and into the future."

Apply these ideas to *I Am The Animal* and duration is experienced as a coming and going, an emergence and disappearance or contraction and dilation, and also an overlay (past surging) of discrete clips, or thoughts, that move laterally across an illuminated but physically flat space.

It is impossible to represent this video installation on the pages of a book. I've assembled a few stills, included some photographs, and linked them all together in a series. The stills vary in size, just like the video clips. But sitting on the page, and no longer anchored to the space and time of the projection, they become something else. They record an event, but are also autonomous.

A.S. How did your beekeeping practice help you understand some of the biological, philosophical, and theoretical texts you were concurrently reading as you were developing this project?

L.M. It's fascinating to think how social insects — ants and bees — shed light on the evolutionary roots of human behavior and politics, in deep time. Bees have lived in cooperative societies for 30 million years. And some of the reading I've been doing also takes a long view on human politics. In his analysis of Western politics the philosopher Giorgio Agamben refers to Aristotle's distinction between bare life *zoe* and political life *bios*. Also, Foucault wrote that "for millennia, man remained . . . a living animal with the additional capacity for a political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics place his existence as a living being in question." I'm thinking:



human, animal, or insect? What's the difference? Where's the divide?

A.S. Could you elaborate on your readings?

L.M. First Agamben. Around the time I began raising bees a friend suggested I read *The Open*, a small book that takes the reader through a very particular history of Western, religious, scientific, metaphysical thought as it pertains to our relationship to animals, the animal *other* that defines who we are. (There's a chapter in *The Open* on Jakob von Uexküll, and so I also read parts of his 1926 book *A Stroll Through the Worlds of Animals and Men*.) Agamben's premise in *The Open* and in some of his other books seems to be that the human/animal distinction that has served as the foundation for Western

metaphysical and political thought (from Aristotle to Descartes to Heidegger, who famously said “The animal is poor in the world, but the stone has no world”) is essentially bankrupt. It’s remarkable that Heidegger’s ideas about the humanity of the human residing in the hand or the opposable thumb continue to be argued and contested today. Briefly stated — only humans have hands, are capable of thought and speech, and only a human can know death.



In death the individual is born.

You could say that the split between human and animal is also a division within the human itself. Agamben writes that we modern humans animalize certain parts of human life and define what is human as that which cannot be animalized. Such exclusions allow us to create a non-human human,

a monstrosity that we are allowed to do anything with. This made possible the concentration camps, and now Guantanamo. The hard distinction between animal and human is in accord with our own societies’ total management of biological life — the very animality of human beings, from blood, to reproduction, to the genome. Similarly, Donna Haraway argues that “animal societies have been extensively employed in rationalization and naturalization of oppressive orders of domination in the human body politic.”

Because of my work with bees and because I had read Karl von Frisch’s *The Dance Language and Orientation of Bees*, I was invited in spring 2010 to participate in a semiotics conference at the University of Michigan, organized by the linguist Craig Colligan, called “Culture/Code/Nature/Machine.”² At the conference I screened a video in which members of The New Society imitated a wide range of bee behavior in a series of dramatic roles. I called this *The Dance Language of the Bees* (2009). (Stills from this video are scattered throughout this book.) Von Frisch’s book, originally published in 1965, recounts research he did in the 1940s when he discovered that bees communicate with their hive

mates by means of the “dances” they perform upon returning from foraging flights. The bees do this on the vertical plane of the comb in the dark hive, at a far distance from their food source. Von Frisch defined this dance as a language — that is, a particular kind of system for encoding and decoding information, and his book for which he won a Nobel Prize, challenged a lot of thinking about animals’ incapacity for language.

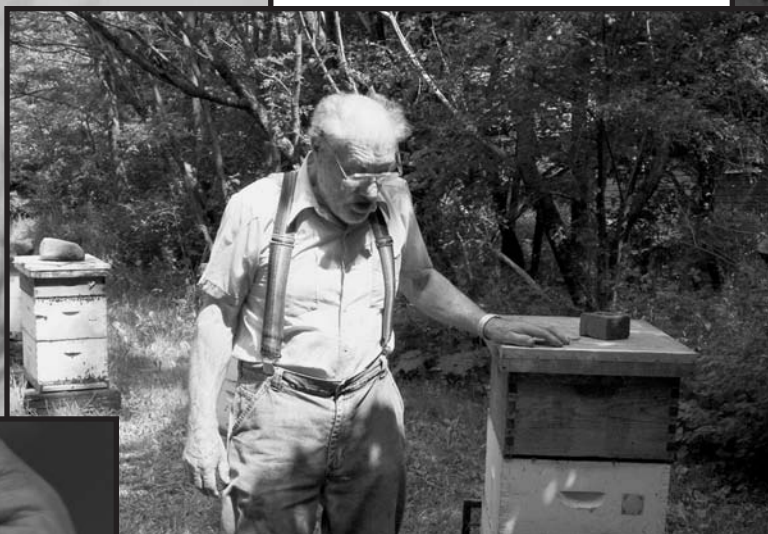
I also read the biologist Tom Seeley’s *The Wisdom of the Hive* and *Honeybee Ecology*.³ Tom’s beautifully written books deal largely with the social organization of the hive and its ability to solve, as he puts it, “cognitive problems” as a social group. I interviewed Tom twice and he appears in several of my films.

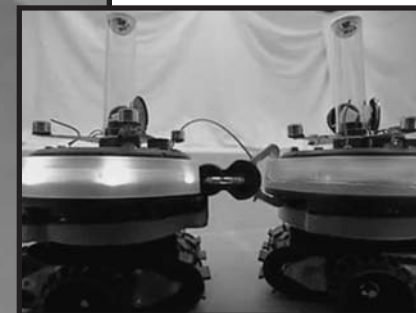
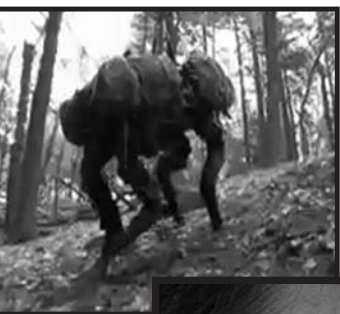
But I named this video project after Derrida’s *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008). Derrida makes reference to animals in many of his texts, including the earlier *The Beast and the Sovereign* (2001–2002). In *The Animal* Derrida interrogates himself. The book playfully (there’s so much play in it) begins with a passage about his discomfort when emerging naked from the shower one day to find himself being looked at by his cat. You could call it a critique of his own selfhood — self and observing self — and also a critique of notions of subjectivity that by definition exclude everyone other. Derrida also writes eloquently about his profound distress over the suffering of animals that comes from this self. He says: “A subject is not a morally or legally neutral process but is structured by a number of symbolic and literary constraints that are potentially violent and exclusionary toward all beings deemed to be non-subjects, especially animals.” I love this book despite its difficulty.

1 http://www.carywolfe.com/post_about.html.

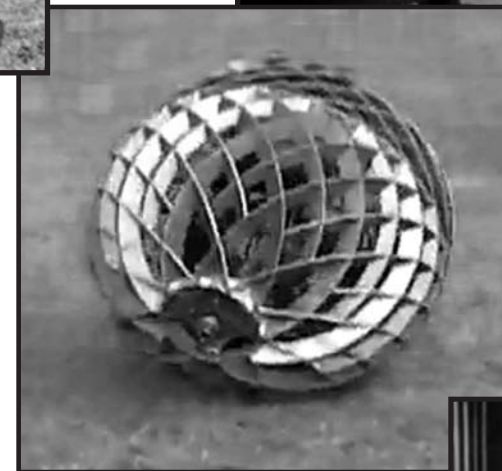
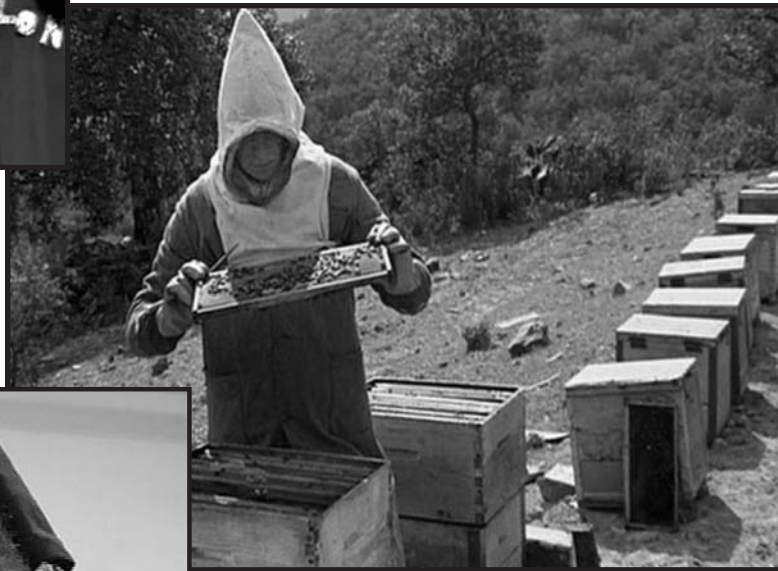
2 March 12-13, 2010. Participants: Paul Boissac, University of Toronto; David Chirico, SUNY Binghamton; E. Valentine Daniel, Columbia University; Terrence Deacon, University of Toronto; Bruce Mannheim, University of Michigan.

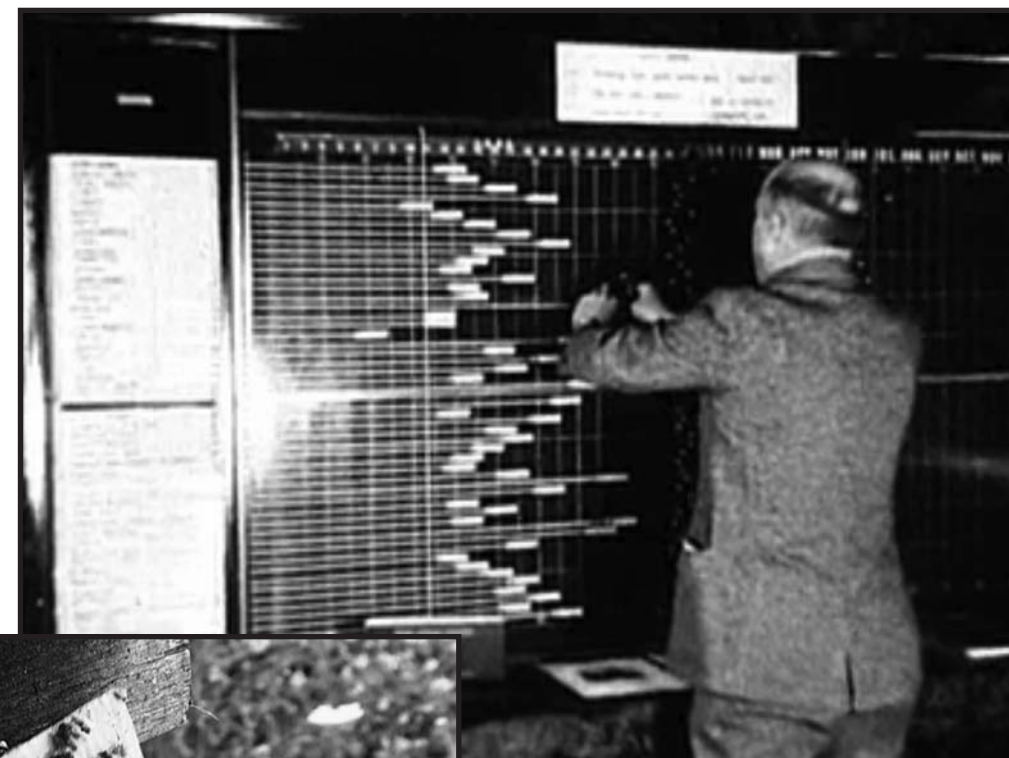
3 His most recent and widely praised book is *Honeybee Democracy* (Princeton University, 2010).

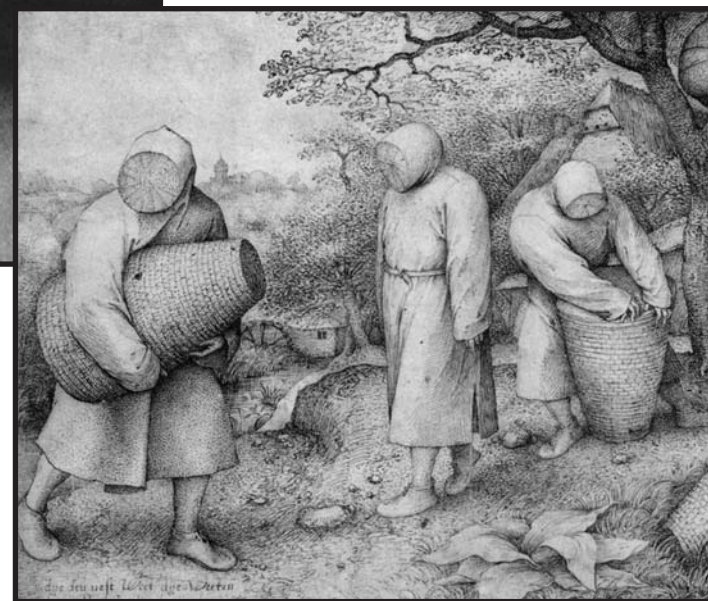
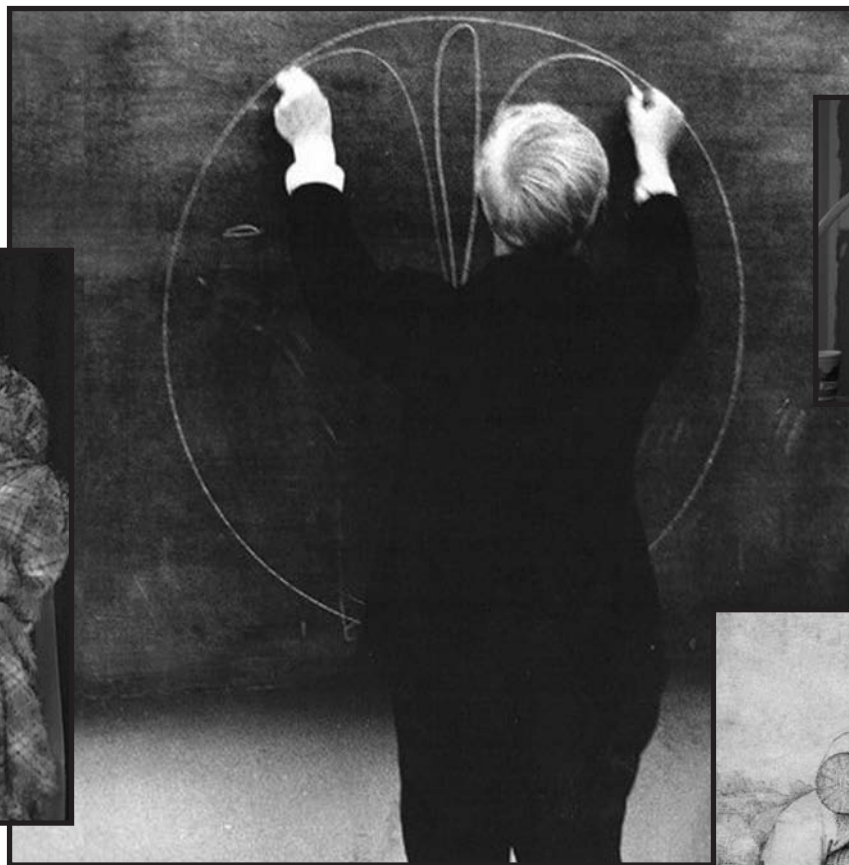














The Media That Therefore We Are

J U S S I P A R I K K A

It's a matter of scales. If you are far enough away, and your perspective is mediated by a layer of concepts, abstractions, and an organizational eye, you might indeed see them as models of ideal society. It's all order. Everyone does what they are supposed to. There is one Queen. No wonder the protofascist Maya the Bee was an ideal cartoon character for 1930s national-socialist Germany. One is tempted to see the idea of a strong leadership to which everyone submits as an example of sovereign power per se, even if, to be honest, the Queen does not choose to execute power — it happens much more intuitively, almost in a subconscious way. Of course, when it comes to bees, there is no such talk of subconscious; instinct used to be the word in the 19th century for this near mystical mode of organization. This is evident in, for instance, Maurice Maeterlinck's *The Life of the Bee* (1901), which refers to “the spirit of the hive.”

But on another scale, it looks very different. Look closely enough and they become the aliens they are: their weird compound eyes composed of thousands

Opposite: Weather station, Northeast Regional
Climate Center, Cornell University, Ithaca, New York.

of lenses, their six legs, non-human movement, jerky, non-mammal insides folded out. This has been the other story since the 19th century and the birth of modern entomology: insects as aliens, otherworldly non-humans, often seem almost to possess technology in their capacities to see, sense, and move differently. The insects are the Anti-McLuhan; technics does not start with the human but with the animal, the insect, and their superior powers of being-in-the-world (the allusion to Heidegger is intentional).

Lenore Malen's *I Am The Animal* intertwines the various histories, aesthetics, and idealizations of the bee community as well as the bee's relations with beekeepers. It's all about relations, and establishing relations with our constitutive environments — including bees. Donna Haraway talks about companion species (specifically dogs, but other animals too) as formative of our being in the world; she discusses the ways in which those relations are formative of our becomings.

Our relation to insects is reflected in much more than the narrative aspect of Malen's work. The immersive environment of the installation envelops the spectator in a milieu of becoming. The clips Malen uses are mini-thoughts, mini-brains, which are brought together with her digital software tools; the clips are memes that Malen excavates from online archives and audiovisual repositories, and composes into a three-channel envelope.

I Am The Animal poses the question: *Can insects be our companion species?* This is paradoxical in light of Derrida's *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, to which Malen's title refers. Derrida starts with the gaze of the animal — his cat, to be exact, lazily gazing at Derrida's naked body. But catching the insect's compound eyes is more difficult, if not impossible. For Malen, Derrida's essay functions as a critique of subjectivity. Derrida continues to analyze how the cat does not feel its own nakedness, has no need of clothes, whereas we — as technical beings — surround our bodies, envelop ourselves in extensions, such as clothes. We are not only enveloped in cinema, media, and technology but in fundamental forms of shelter.

So do animals have technology? They might not plan buildings and

produce external tools, but an alternative lineage claims that animals, insects and such, are completely technical. Henri Bergson was of such an opinion: even if humans are intelligent in the sense of being able to abstract, plan, and externalize their thoughts into tools, insects occupy technics in their bodies and embody intertwining with the world. The body itself is already technical. One could think of examples of insect architecture, of various stratagems of the body for defense or attack, of modes of movement, and of perception as media. If the body is media — as Ernst Kapp suggested in the 19th century and McLuhan later — then what kind of media does the insect suggest?

The three screens of *I Am The Animal* are rhythmic elements that deterritorialize our vision. A slowly progressing multiplication of viewpoints is the becoming-animal of perception that the installation delivers. The immersive space is also one of measured fragmentation into the compound vision of insects. Slow disorientation is one tactic of this mode of becoming; it points both to the world of insects and to the media in which we are immersed. The early avant-garde connection between the technical vision machine and the insect compound machine — in the words of Jean Epstein, “the thousand-faceted eyes of the insects” — creates a sense of space as split; perspective is multiplied into a variation. Malen's *I Am The Animal* is about such forms of multiplicity.

The animal is incorporated into the machinated cultural assemblages of modernity; the disappearance of animals from urban cultures during the past couple hundred years is paralleled by the appearance of animals in various modern discourses from media to theory. We talk, see, incorporate animal energies. Akira Mizuta Lippit in *Electric Animal* (2000) writes how “the idioms and histories of numerous technological innovations from the steam engine to quantum mechanics bear the traces of an incorporated animality. James Watt and later Henry Ford, Thomas Edison, Alexander Graham Bell, Walt Disney, and Erwin Schrödinger, among other key figures in the industrial and aesthetic shifts of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, found uses for animal spirits in developing their respective machines, creating in the process fantastic hybrids.”

Animals as well as media are elements with which we become. Matthew Fuller in his essay “Art for Animals” (2008) identifies a two-fold danger in relation to art with/about nature: that we succumb to a social constructionism or that we embrace biological positivism. And yet, we need to be able to carve out the art/aesthetic in and through nature and animals in ways that involve the double movement back and forth between animality and humanity. Art for animals is one way, to quote Fuller: “Art for animals intends to address the ecology of capacities for perceptions, sensation, thought and reflexivity of animals.” What kind of perceptions and sensations are afforded us by media/nature? And conversely, what worlds do we create in which animals and nature perceive, live, and think?

Jussi Parikka

Jussi Parikka is a media theorist who works at Winchester School of Art (University of Southampton, UK). His *Insect Media* (2010) mapped an archaeology of animals and technology, and in his other publications including *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses*, *The Spam Book*, *Media Archaeology*, *Fibreculture*’s special issue “Unnatural Ecologies,” and the forthcoming *Media Archaeology and Digital Culture*, he has been mapping the connections between contemporary culture and its archaeologies of technology, animal energies, and aesthetics. <http://www.jussiparikka.net>.

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I Am The Animal (2010)

Produced by Lenore Malen & *The New Society for Universal Harmony*

Director: Lenore Malen

Cameras: Ezra Bookstein, Lenore Malen

Editors: Ruppert Bohle, Lenore Malen

Post-production: Ruppert Bohle, Lenore Malen

The Dance Language of the Bees (2009)

Produced by Lenore Malen & *The New Society for Universal Harmony*

Director: Lenore Malen

Assistant Director: Kathryn Alexander

Designer: Todd Erickson

Cameras: David Bee, Lenore Malen

Editors: Ruppert Bohle, Lenore Malen

Performers: Kathryn Alexander, Todd Erickson, Kale Evans, Seyhan

Musaoglu, Jay Riedl, Nicholas Shifrin, Elke Solomon

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Credits

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Page 22, photograph of weather station: [http://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/
climate/ithaca](http://www.nrcc.cornell.edu/climate/ithaca)

Back cover: Derrida, Jacques (2008), *The Animal That Therefore I Am*,
trans. David Wills, Fordham University Press, p. 51.

<http://lenoremalen.com>

The animal, what a word!

**The animal in general, what is
it? What does that mean? Who
is it? To what does that “it”
correspond? To whom?**

Who responds to whom?

**Who responds in and to the
common, general, and singular
name of what they thus
blithely call the “animal”?**

Who is it that responds?

— Jacques Derrida

The Animal That Therefore I Am, 2008

Translation by David Wills

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