Another kind of paradigm : art as practice, art as research

by Armin Medosch (2016)

> " A bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement." Karl Marx, Capital, Volume I[1]

The Brussels based artist AnneMarie Maes has created an ecosystem in front of her apartment on the rooftop of a parking garage, with several hundred square meters filled with vegetables, salads, herbs, bushes, small trees and other plants grown in wooden containers, and also including several so called "intelligent beehives." Standing on a busy tourist street next to Brussels old corn market, one would never suspect such a rural paradise on top of this unassuming building. On the rooftop, at Urban Art Farm,[2] looking from certain perspectives, the garden appears perfectly natural, and one could easily forget to be located on top of a building in the midst of a city as the streets and the noise of the metropolis disappear. This complex ecosystem is completely artificial. Water gets collected on surrounding roofs, soil has to be renewed every few years, and electricity cables and pipes, various sensors for taking measurements and wireless networks for transmissions of data have been installed by the artist.

AnneMarie Maes work, *The Invisible Garden* (2015) was an inversion of her own rooftop garden. She created an assemblage of plants, soil, people, artefacts, scientific findings, datasets, sounds, etc. in a large scale installation in a windowless former textile factory. Her work *Foraging Fields* (2014), which focuses on her work with bees and urban corridors, has been shown at the *Fields* exhibition in Riga. The exhibitions *Waves* (2006; 2008)[3] and *Fields* (2014), both jointly curated by Rasa Smite, Raitis Smits and me, and organised by RIXC, were attempts at re-thinking the material practices of art and technology in their social context. Both exhibitions have been conceived as artistic research. *Waves* had tried to put the discourse on media art from its head on its feet by launching an investigation into the electromagnetic spectrum as a "principle medium and material of art." *Waves* conducted a questioning of the materiality of media art as a self-reflective step, continuing the legacy of modernistic avant-gardes.[4] Yet *Waves* was still open to the misunderstanding that "materialism" was mainly concerned with materiality. While this had not been the case, it could be misinterpreted in that way.

With *Fields* we strove to present a concept which was unmistakably engaged in today's social world. Our curatorial concept was based on the premise that the financial crisis of 2008 marked a deeper structural crisis[5] of the current mode of development. We formulated our invited and public calls for proposals in such a way that the social and historical question maintained a core position:

> "Which *Fields* act as catalysts and underpin those artistic practices which offer the greatest potential for social change towards more imaginative and sustainable ways of living? Which pre-cursors in the last 30-40 years did exist and what can we learn from those often untold stories?"

In short, we asked which transdisciplinary art practices offered the greatest potential for desirable social change. We were looking for artworks that contained a proposition for "how we should live life differently, in a more imaginative and sustainable way." We started from the premises that all art we were looking for was post-media[6] and post-conceptual art. It was post-conceptual because it depended on having come after conceptualism – it could only become recognized as art because of conceptual art. It was post-media art because it was not tied into the legacy of any particular artform and medium such as painting, sculpture or even any new medium such as video or the computer. Each individual artistic practice was choosing its own medium as part of a practice which was transdisciplinary in a very profound way; and we assumed that art which is socially transformative will necessarily be bringing together different fields-as-in *disciplines* in imaginative ways.

We argued that the financial crisis of 2008 was not just one of the decennial crises inherent to the capitalist business cycle, but a deep, structural crisis of neoliberal information society. The artistic practices shown in *Fields* were supposed to provide us with a foreboding of a new historical era which would come after informationalism. This current paradigm, which had become implemented globally over the last 40 to 50 years, combined the neoliberal belief into the free market as a form of utopia with a financialised economy, and global logistic chains.[7] It was based on a specific form of globalisation where industrial expansion was driven by a combination of "Global Cities"[8] with outsourced production in low-wage countries, often ruled by dictatorial regimes. This type of globalization had weakened the organised working class in the former West,[9] and led to shrinking inflation adjusted real incomes in the lower and middle income strata, while the top 1% were getting richer and richer.[10] The direct cause of the 2008 crash had been that Americans had been taking out loans they could not afford, lured into taking those loans by the financial industry which had found ways of "securitizing" them by financial wizardry. To put it bluntly, working people in the USA, and increasingly also in Europe, could not "make a living" any more with their labour. This current paradigm, which is still in place, has shown to be unsustainable economically, ecologically, politically, even psychologically.

The rise of the informational paradigm had not remained unopposed. Since the 1990s, and with increasing intensity at the turn of the millennium, new political subjects formed who were united by a desire for ecological and social justice. It was against this backdrop, that after the crash of the New Economy in 2000 an ecological turn made itself increasingly felt in art and society. A wave of bio-art and eco-friendly art was matched by a more widely shared sudden fascination with urban gardening. In parallel to that but in a more reflected way, the 2000s saw a wave of people, ideas and projects that took inspiration from the digital 1990s and began looking at new types of cooperative practices inherent to so called free software and the digital commons and how those could be transferred from the digital field into other domains. Ideas, initially developed around the notion of the digital commons, were now flowing in the other direction, making the commons in all shapes a central topos of fine arts, software, media arts, and social activism.

AnneMarie Maes has been on the forefront of those developments, with her own rooftop garden, and with several urban garden projects in Brussels, many of which are located alongside a canal and former industrial area forming an urban corridor[11] where also many artist's studios happen to be

located, one of them the project space of the group Okno, an interdisciplinary collective co-founded by Maes together with Guy van Belle. Okno's activity over the past 10 years contained many seeds of Maes' current projects, bringing together wireless citizen's networks, open source technologies and ecological, community oriented practices.

The Invisible Garden (2015) is a culmination of 10 years of work and research, by forming a complete replica of AnneMarie Maes' rooftop garden *Hortus Experimentalis* in a windowless exhibition space. Divided into four distinct ecological zones, the garden, with real plants and a functioning ecosystem, respects the basic principles of Permaculture. This large and complex installation presents itself as an oasis in the urban landscape inviting people inside the “Green light district.” It is reminiscent also of the closed or walled gardens of the late middle ages, early Renaissance. Maes informs on her website[12] that close to where her urban garden is located now, 500 years ago nuns were already cultivating all kinds of medicinal herbs in the Regularissenklooster Jericho.[13] While Maes avoids any referencing of Christian mythology, it is worth mentioning that at the time the “hortus conclusus,” the *enclosed garden*, was very popular in art and was charged with Christian symbolism. During Renaissance, gardens were constructed following neo-Platonic, Hermeticist principles, according to which the enclosed garden was a microcosm that reflected the macrocosm.[14] Transcendence and spiritual renewal could be achieved by entering the inner sanctum.

As Silvia Federici[15] has shown, the medieval herbal garden contained a specific type of female knowledge which was fought bitterly by the up and coming, male dominated scientific revolution. According to Federici, the prosecution of women as witches was part of a campaign to establish male science against earlier forms of knowledge, in particular female knowledge with regard to the reproduction of life.[16] According to feminist science studies, the rise of male, patriarchal science was based on a particular construction of nature as dead, life-less matter. In the Cartesian conception of science, nature had to become purified from all myths and symbolisms to become the object of science. This process is now being reversed from within science, argues philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers. As physics is meeting the boundaries created by its own purely rational and mathematical methods, interpretation, narrative and aesthetics become once more part of scientific reasoning.[17]

Maes does not present herself as a scientist, but her work nevertheless contributes, as a research based practice, to a discourse that strives to find a more socially balanced role of science and technology in society. She understands herself primarily as an artist who is driven by aesthetic concerns. *The Invisible Garden* communicates through the senses and through aesthetics. According to philosophical aesthetics in the tradition of German Idealism,[18] this is the true domain of the artist, operating on an intermediate layer between the material and the conceptual layer, between the senses and the intellect.

The viewer, immersed in this artificial indoor garden, can through the contemplation of beauty make numerous discoveries. The surface appearances offer entry points to the discovery of manifold relationships: between different plants, between plants and their environment, and between plants and society. The work, which on the surface creates a little paradise without making any strong political statement, reveals itself to be entirely political by tapping into topics such as food-security, the oligopolies of seed companies and more generally by exposing what industrial agriculture does to nature and

society. The reception of the work starts on an aesthetic layer, but then for the viewer, through gaining a deeper understanding of relationships created within the field aesthetics of the work, new fields of possible actions open up. The work creates a fully functioning ecosystem which is a mirror world to current spectacular capitalism. As I have argued in my keynote speech on the occasion of the opening of the Fields exhibition, *The Broken Mirror*,[19] art's historical function has been to provide a mirror to society. But this is not just like an optical mirror which produces an inverted image. There can be several ways in which art can be understood as a mirror. One way is based on the autonomy of art that developed in the late 18th century, and became more fully realized together with the rise of the bourgeoisie in the course of the 19th century. Art became autonomous, it stood outside utilitarian relations of production.

As Herbert Marcuse argued, the autonomy of art existed in a complex interplay with the rise of the bourgeoisie to political power and cultural hegemony. The bourgeois revolutions of 1789 and 1848 needed the working classes in order to be successful. Those revolutions therefore came with a promise of universal emancipation. After the mission was accomplished this turned soon out to be an empty promise, as women and workers still found themselves politically disenfranchised. Yet symbolically, the bourgeoisie could not give up its utopian promise of an egalitarian society. Utopia was thus pushed into the realm of art, where the autonomy of art provided a protected space. According to Marcuse, even the most apolitical art, by providing aesthetic sensations of a high quality and being, in principle available to all, contained a utopian "promesse de bonheur" for the repressed strata of society.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse, bringing together a reading of Marx with a reading of Freud, argued that the price for the building of civilization was the repression of libidinal forces.[20] Through art, this can partly be reversed, argued Marcuse. Art can offer an outlook at a world beyond alienation, but within the Eurocentric bourgeois conception of art, this happens within art only. The historical avant-gardes, but also the postwar neo-avant-gardes and post-conceptual art have tried to change that, reconnecting art with life.

AnneMarie Maes' joins in the legacy of postwar neo-avant-gardes such as the New Tendencies[21] in Europe and E.A.T. in the USA. Their overall approach, while informed from many areas, can be called "constructive." Starting in the 1950s, fully flourishing by the mid 1960s, those artists re-connected with the historic avant-gardes, in particular Constructivism, Bauhaus, and the Dutch De Stijl group, and also including aspects of Dada, but did so under new social historical conditions of the postwar economic boom. They adopted new materials from industry and provided new ways of perceiving the world through artistic research and by using concepts and instruments of science and technology.[22] As "last avant-gardes,"[23] their work was tied into the modernistic idea of universal emancipation.

Maes however, identifies less with those artists than with what came immediately thereafter, the critical art practices that defined the 1970s, citing Joseph Beuys, Gordon Matta-Clark, Lygia Clark and Ana Mendieta as key influences. Those practices, known under names such as conceptual art, land art, body art and feminist art, were repeating the gesture of the historical avant-garde,[24] breaking through the barrier between art and life, but with a key difference. Their practice no longer contained the promise of a utopian future. It was based in the here and now, and informed by the sensibilities of the

'68 generation, their work turned to the critical deconstruction of grand narratives of modernity. Maes' work continues aspects of both the constructive and post-conceptual line of work.

The mirror world created by AnneMarie Maes' *Invisible Garden* offers at least temporarily a place from where to gain a critical perspective on society. It offers a space from where the overcoming of the current contradictions of capital can be contemplated in exemplary form. The philosophical foundations for this have been provided by young Karl Marx who developed a philosophy of history based on things considered natural becoming human. Central to this idea of history was a complex understanding of the notion of alienation.[25]

The well-known key political aspect of alienation is related to the appropriation of surplus labour by capital. The product of labour is taken away from the producers and becomes a commodity which then confronts the worker as "something alien and outside of him."[26] This contains the seed of what Marx would later define as commodity fetishism,[27] when those things that we have created, are now perceived to exist outside us, and threaten to dominate us.[28] In capitalist relations of production, living labour is reduced to a mere production factor. Rather than facilitating the fulfilment of our innermost drives, the labour process itself becomes denigrated, pure coercion, something which is endured only because of the need of earning money to survive. But although it is alienated labour it also creates "objective" realisations of human potential. For Marx, labour was the self-realisation of man who applied her or his skills to objects of nature. "Hence," wrote Marx, "nature as it comes to be through industry, even though in an *estranged* form, is true *anthropological* nature."[29] Labour as self-creation, as the realization of a potential, goes to the heart of a Marxist aesthetic theory. According to Marx, artistic production does not just produce works but also creates a more richly developed "*human* sensibility, a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form - in short, senses capable of human gratification, senses confirming themselves as essential powers of men."[30]

Women and men objectify themselves through labour, through the creation of objects. Yet this process of production does not just satisfy needs that are already given but essentially produces those needs in the viewer. A work of art does not just satisfy an aesthetic sense that already exists, but increases the capacity to be sensual. Good music produces our musical ear, it increases our capacity to listen. Marx conceived of this form of "production" not just as something individual but on the level of the species being. What counts as true for the senses, also counts true for "the so-called mental senses - the practical senses (will, love, etc.) - in a word, human *sense* - the humanness of senses ..." Thus, Marx concludes "the forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present."[31]

Labour, in this context, should not be understood solely in individual terms, but as abstract social labour. "The whole character of the species, – it's species character – is contained in the character of its life activity, and free, conscious activity is man's species character."[32] While later the main thrust of the theoretic development was to recognize the systemic forces set in motion by the accumulation of capital, forces which are strongly heteronomic, young Marx argued as a philosopher of freedom, keen to emphasise consciousness and human agency. In a famous and often quoted passage, Marx wrote:

> "Admittedly animals also produce.

> They build themselves nests, dwellings, like the *bees, beavers, ants*, etc. But an animal only produces what it immediately needs for itself or its young. It produces one-sidedly, while man produces universally. … man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom."[33]

The question which Marx raises here is about life as conscious activity. Are human people masters of their own history? Or are they exposed to some blind systemic forces, with their fate determined from outside?

Paraphrasing Marx, we can say that AnneMarie Maes, in the process of the self-realisation of woman, develops the potentialities slumbering in nature, and subjects the play of its forces to her own sovereign power.[34] Her practice overcomes the separations imposed by the capitalist division of labour on natural science, aesthetics and politics, but does so not on the basis of making great claims, but inside a *practice*. The notion of practice allows preventing the reification of artistic labour. This term, *reification*, as introduced by György Lukács[35] refers to the tendency of forms of artistic, scientific, cultural and intellectual labour in capitalist relations to become separated from living labour and achieve the status of a thing. The result of objectification – the realisation of human potential through labour – is becoming reified, thinglike, and can thus become a commodity, just like anything else. Works of art, even though they may have been created with a host of different aims and intentions, are turned into commodities, sold on an art market. However, in advanced cognitive capitalism, reification is not only a result of market forces, but already written into the institutional system supporting art production. Those artists who do not directly produce for a market and are dependent on state subsidies, are exposed to creative industries policies which subsume art under a generic activity of innovation.

For those combined reasons, I emphasise the notion of art-as-practice, or *praxis*. The term praxis refers not simply to making and doing, but to the simultaneous development of practical, artistic and theoretic aims. It is this breadth and depth of her involvement that make AnneMarie Maes a model figure of an ecological artist. By claiming her as a model figure I do not idolize her as an individual human being and artist. I introduce this notion in order to avoid a viewpoint that merely looks at the results, as reified objects for sale on the market, and high-lights instead the type of practice, as a model for others to emulate.

Leonardo da Vinci is often quoted as a kind of model figure for the artist-scientist. Philosopher of science Isabelle Stengers is also working with the notion of a model or "marker"[36] figure as a type of scientist. What should be avoided is to assign the wrong markers. According to the philosopher Heinz Paetzold, Leonardo is often presented like another Newton in artistic guise. Yet in reality, Leonardo remained outside the functional principles of modern analytic science, and his mode of research was fundamentally one that went through visual perception, analogy and morphology, making him not a Newton of the arts but closer to the line that went from Goethe to Paul Klee.[37] And this may be understood less than a criticism and rather as a compliment.

The Invisible Garden creates a complex ecosystem which also implies different social relations in which she invites her audiences to participate. It creates a model world, and realizes in ideal form a promise of a better world where human labour and natural artefacts are brought together in ways which point to a world beyond alienation. The

mirror-world that she creates is an antithesis to the world of material production. This antithesis is not created by “going back” to nature or imagining an Arcadia of urban gardening, but by creating networks of relationships between people, natural objects and objects created by technology and science.

Maes' artistic research is based on a radical epistemological pluralism of the “anything goes” type working at an advanced end of art and science, art and technology, but without fetishizing either of it. Her practice, a constant life-activity which realises itself through artistic research, the creation of new ecological networks, and by offering different forms and types of cooperation, marks her out as a model figure for an ecological artist. Work such as *The Invisible Garden* participates in a discourse of city versus countryside, of nature versus artifice. The Renaissance enclosed garden emerged at a time when modernity began and the city increasingly asserted its rule over the countryside. Now, in post-industrial societies, the countryside returns to the city, and society is in the process of finding a new balance between city and countryside.

Artists such as AnneMarie Maes, but also other artists who participated in the Fields exhibition, such as Shu Lea Cheang, with *Seeds Underground* (2013-14), are offering recipes for turning cities into edible hanging gardens, by experimenting with “technologies” in the most basic sense, such as composting, and by developing social forms of self-organisation. But not just the process of urbanisation in the literal sense is reversed, the psychological clock also gets rolled back. Those aspects of our sensuous and psychic life that have become blocked by centuries of alienation can become unblocked. I am not saying that the artificial garden brings back our true self, but a different self that had been submerged under sediments of traumatic memories of the progress of industrial modernity. This, in my view, constitutes a “political” art practice, which does not have to shout out overtly political messages. The full meaning of the relationship between such a reading of political art and social animals such as humans and bees can only be understood, once we get a grasp on how the bees became so politicized.

Political Bees

In Riga, in the *Fields* exhibition, Maes showed *Foraging Fields* (2014), an assemblage of different individual works and objects, all relating to her work with bee populations. *Flightroutes part#1* (2014), part of the *Foraging Fields* installation in Riga, presents a mapping of the flight routes taken by her urban beehives. The flight routes of her bees connect several green spaces along the Brussels canal zone, among them Urban Art Farm and the Okno space, as well as further art spaces and plots of accidental nature - little pockets of uncontrolled plant and insect life. These open air laboratories are equipped with several sensors taking measurements such as air temperature, air humidity, solar radiation, rainfall and air pollution. Inside the beehives additional data are taken such as temperature and humidity. In addition to that, the dust and pollen brought back by the bees allows analysing their flight routes and the plant and flower menu that's on offer to them. The dead bees are analysed as well. Maes found the opportunity to work in a laboratory at Free University Brussels with a Scanning Electron Microscope. It offers the possibility of making 3D images with an enlargement factor of up to 10.000, ideal for photographing pollen and bee-parts such as proboscis, receptors, etc.[38] A fascinating new world opened up,

determining “all these trees, flowers, herbs and vegetables [which] are in and around the rooftop garden.”

Through those combined activities, the artist gains access to a new image of the urban topology. The beehive acts as a bio-indicator, an extended living sensor that allows assessing the quality of life not only for bees but also for people, other animals and plants. In the Riga installation, fighting against the perception of her work as a kind of aestheticisation of urban gardening, the laboratory character of the work was emphasised. Prints of drawings of flight routes were stuck to the wall, interspersed by mini-computers, so called Raspberry PI’s, equipped with small LED screens. *Flightroutes part#1* (2014) also was a piece of data art, transmitting live-data from Brussels' canal zone to the Arsenals exhibition space in Riga. Using scientific methods of data gathering is not driven by strictly scientific concerns but by an “open social imaginary,” to quote Darko Fritz.[39]

Maes conducts participatory research and in the process of doing so, has developed affective and intellectual relations with the bees. The tendency of science, inherited from Enlightenment, to make nature its lifeless subject is being reversed. The advanced scientific tools of “seeing” allow an opening of dialogue with nature. The traditional borders between categories, arranged hierarchically, become transcended. The work enables “interspecies communication.” By creating affective relationships with living beings, nature becomes empowered. The process has also been documented in detail in her book *The Transparent Beehive*, a Notebook (2014), literally a publication of research materials, images, and texts.

Foraging Fields (2014) presented black & white photography of bees made with an electronic microscope, an early model of the so called *Guerilla Beehive* and the video object *Peephole (dancing bees);* as well as a number of further small objects. The whole set-up was like a study room, presenting those objects next to each other and with a pedestal that could also serve as a bench, so that visitors could sit down and study things more closely. The *Guerilla Beehive* was presented as a prototype. It is based on the idea that those *Guerilla Beehives*, as physical structures, could be dispersed throughout cities to offer bee colonies places to live. The beehives are the result of careful studies, designed in such a way, that they should become self-sufficient and be able to survive without a beekeeper.

This is not in any way a matter of course in present times. Many bee colonies suffer Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) as a result of a sum of different factors, from the weakening of the immune system of the western honeybee (contrary to the Asian or African honeybee) to the use of Neonicotinoides by farmers which are pesticides lethal to bees. Maes' work taps into key political issues of our times such as the political influence of agro-industrial companies like Bayer, Monsanto, and Syngenta. Last not least, monocultures are also a problem for bees. The economics and politics of agriculture and subsidies in the EU give preference to large fields of “mainly maize, sunflowers and wheat, which all flower at once, but a few weeks later leave nothing for the bees to survive” explained Maes in an email to me. For this reason, bees now thrive better in the city where there is more biodiversity and less dangerous pesticides than in the industrialised countryside. Maes also highlights that bees suffer stress, due to the greed of the beekeepers and the bee-industry who build their hives in such a way to constantly animate honey production. The bees, already seriously weakened by all the factors mentioned above, are made to work

very hard. While an eco-beekeeper will leave the honey to the bees for winter, commercial beekeepers take away all honey and feed some sugarwater to the bees. This is a cruel irony, given that the bees have been used (or rather abused) to construct the historical meta-narrative of the benevolence of free market capitalism.

The Fable of the Bees

300 years ago Bernard Mandeville wrote *The Fable of the Bees,* where he argued that *"*private vice creates the publick good.*"*[40] He compared society to a beehive and argued that all the individual bees were only following their self-interest, but that their life-activities as a combined social product created the public good, which he identified as a "prosperous and war-like nation." Mandeville's core argument was picked up by the economist and moral philosopher Adam Smith and was turned into a narrative about the power of the free, unregulated market. While the functioning of the market was based on the self-interest of sellers and buyers – i.e. private vice – the result of all that buying and selling was a more prosperous society.[41] In order for that to work, it needs an intervention from higher above, the invisible hand. Everybody only needs to act in their own interest, but because of the invisible hand – the higher intelligence inherent to the market mechanism – their selfish actions produce a wealthy national product.

Adam Smith's argument for the power of the free market was picked up in the 19th century and turned into nothing less than a utopia, argued the Hungarian-Austrian social philosopher Karl Polanyi.[42] The free market became more than just an economic idea. By becoming the essence of liberal utopia, the free market, abstracted from all other aspects of life, came to rise above society and dominate it. This was what Marx was up against when he included a lengthy quote of Mandeville in has main work:

> "It would be easier, where property is well secured, to live without money than without poor; for who would do the work? ... As they [the poor]. [...] The only thing then that can render the labouring man industrious, is a moderate quantity of money, for as too little will, according as his temper is, either dispirit or make him desperate, so too much will make him insolent and lazy.... From what has been said, it is manifest, that, in a free nation, where slaves are not allowed of, the surest wealth consists in a multitude of laborious poor."[43]

Marx analysed one of the paradoxes of the process of capitalist accumulation, that it produces wealth as well as poverty. "The process of accumulation itself increases, along with the capital, the mass of 'labouring poor'."[44] Accumulation depends on an industrial "reserve army" which is used as a "flexible" pressure valve to accommodate for the cycle of boom, overproduction and crisis. The crash of 2008 had occurred because neoliberal capitalism had produced a globally fragmented "multitude of laborious poor" who were unable to buy the goods which they themselves produced. But behind that economic argument always lurked an argument about what constitutes the essence of man. Adam Smith's idea about the free market and the invisible hand were based on the notion of *homo oeconomicus*, economic man, who was primarily guided by utilitarian and rational calculations for the maximisation of profit.

Seminal ethnographic work by Marcel Mauss[45] on exchange and anthropological fieldwork by many anthropologists since confirms that homo oeconomicus was a

rather fictitious character who had appeared late on the world stage. The market society was a special case in human history rather than the natural state of affairs.[46] For this very reason capitalism tries to naturalize itself. The bees and other social insects are constantly instrumentalized in ideological battles which aim at proofing that capitalism is our true nature and every other political idea a dangerous diversion from it.

The comparison of insect societies with human societies naturalizes politics and instrumentalizes nature for political reasons. On one hand, social relations, although they belong to the domain of politics and are thus changeable by conscious human action, become naturalized as if they were the subject of positivist natural science. On the other hand, analogies with insect societies are used polemically against democracy and workers rights. “There are no political discussions in an anthill, but yet it still functions so much better than democratic societies,” the conservative argument goes. The naturalization of social mechanisms through insect metaphors is used to shut down the development of a “language of opposition.”

In neoliberal information society, electronic markets are presented as anonymous beehives where insect-like swarms of algorithms do the trading. The utopia of the free market has become embodied, in ideal form, in those electronic networked markets. The political instrumentalization of bees and other social insects such as ants is particularly virulent in certain branches of computer science, where the categories of the social and the natural, of what is made and what is born have become profoundly confused.[47]

The instrumentalization of the bees forms part of the “political unconscious”[48] of our society. Through her work, Maes addresses the repressed and displaced content of an economic system, where low wages necessitate cheap food prices, which in turn are based on big agro-business which subsumes nature without recompensation. Society can only tolerate its own alienation, by repressing its real social content, the dissociation between labour and its product, but also the dissociation from the realm of economy of other labour, which is not even recognised as that.[49]

To the same extent that cognitive and creative labour become fetishised in a knowledge economy, many other forms of labour – human labour, but also animals and nature itself – get downgraded to a very low social status, although it is actually of key importance for the production of surplus value. This is the “political unconscious” of neoliberalism, that forms of labour which are looked down upon are actually of key importance for its functioning: the labour of workers in Amazon warehouses; or the people who scan Google Books in California; but also forms of work which are not even recognized as work and thus not recompensed by society at all, such as the work of the mothers and grandmothers of young Chinese factory workers who are rearing their children for them. Female reproductive and affective labour in general are necessary to keep costs down and making profits, but are usually excluded from mainstream discourse. Globally, a gigantic industrial “reserve army” of about 80% of the world population has yet to enter the capitalist economy proper.

The bees suffer exploitation as a species, while their existence as social insects gets politicized in the wrong way. Maes, by engaging with bees on the level of species being, rolls back the fetishized scientific and commercial perspective on bees, by allowing them to exist according to their own preferences. “Once you start working with an

ecological beehive," explains Maes, "you see clearly the difference. Bees become master of their hive again. They decide how fast they develop their colony, how much honey they gather and store, not the beekeeper."

As bees are intensively studied, a lot of received wisdom about them shows to be wrong. "A bee colony is not at all a hierarchical society! They are completely wrong!" the artist explains passionately, "a bee colony is a very balanced society, where the queen is ruled by the worker bees and the worker bees need the pheromones of the queen to smooth out their daily life." The bees are much more individual than it had been believed, with different bees specializing in certain tasks. Even revolution is an option: "The queen is *not* the boss. On the contrary, if the workers are not happy any more with the performance of the queen, they simply make a new queen and kill the old one."[50]

Conclusions: Art as practice

I highlighted the art of AnneMarie Maes as artistic research and as art as practice. As a model figure for an ecological artist, the self-directed life-activity of the artist comprises, for example, collecting pollen, photographing and analysing them, making measurements, taking data, seeding, planting, watering, documenting, planning, making observations. The diversity of practices is connected by ethical, aesthetic and intellectual concerns held by the artist. Through her work, she performs a socialization of plants, animals technologies and scientific artefacts. AnneMarie Maes constantly creates, with great skill, determination and dexterity, networks which connect plants, animals, sensors, real and semiotic networks, thereby creating an aesthetic of relational fields.

Through this aesthetic of relational fields viewer-participants of her work are seduced to engage more deeply with issues and become aware of the wider social significance. Her work, as an ecological and participatory practice, gives people ideas about things they might want to try themselves. It does not stop with making objects for an art market but offers resources for other people to become active themselves. Her work constitutes a "habitus"[51] that facilitates conviviality and a collective experience in the everyday. Writing and studying is a recognizable part of the artistic methodology, implicitly providing a critique of those who want to throw art back to some merely intuitive mode of production.

The work connects cultural techniques, from the neolithic revolution to the present, rolling back layers that have become forgotten and obscured through the capitalist division of labour and the alienation that goes with it. In this post-industrial era the dynamics between city and countryside are reversed, the country returns to the city. The laboratory character of her work enables those new patterns to become visible. Maes develops ideas and practices which are of much larger social significance than social gardening. Her *Invisible Garden* (2015) created an inverted utopia, a mirror to society which contains a promise of life beyond alienation. In *Foraging Fields* (2014), her "political bees" serve as a bio-indicators not only of the health of plants and bees, but show the assumptions on which the master narrative of free market capitalism was built to have been wrong. The work thus also opens up possibilities of a different social life that transcends capitalism as we know it. For all those reasons, AnneMarie Maes can be seen as a model figure of an ecological artist-researcher who contributes to the development of another kind of paradigm which is no longer confined by neoliberal information society.

Postscript:

At the end of the conference that accompanied the *Fields* exhibition in Brussels, an experimental workshop session was held, titled Playing Fields. The participating artists were invited to give brief presentations of their work. We then as a group questioned the artistic concept and developed categories. This is not an attempt at sticking labels to practices but rather about finding words for what yet remains unnamed. At the end of each artist's presentation, a number of new categories were created and people committed to writing short articles about it. In the case of AnneMarie Maes and her work *Foraging Fields*, the new category *Politics of Green Spaces* was created. You find a text by Darko Fritz about this topic in this volume.

---

1 Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin Books, 1976), 284.

2 The project is documented in detail at this website http://annemariemaes.net/research/urban-corridors/urban-artfarm-2012/

3 Armin Medosch, Rasa Šmite, and Daina Silina, eds., *Waves - Electromagnetic Waves as Material and Medium of Art. (exhib.cat. RIXC and Riga Arsenals Aug 24 - Sept. 17 2006)*, Acoustic Space 6 (Riga: RIXC, 2006).

4 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory, 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2003), 773–78.

5 Peer Schouten, "Theory Talk# 13: Immanuel Wallerstein on World-Systems, the Imminent End of Capitalism and Unifying Social Science," *Theory Talks*, 2008, 2, http://www.sinsys.business.t-online.de/wallerstein_theorytalk13.pdf.

6 Armin Medosch, "Fields - an Index of Possibilities," in *Techno-Ecologies 2: Media Art Histories* (Riga: RIXC, The Centre for New Media Culture, 2014), 7–16.

7 David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

8 Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton University Press, 2001).

9 Stanley Aronowitz and William DiFazio, *The Jobless Future: Second Edition* (Minneapolis Minn.: U of Minnesota Press, 2010).

10 Schouten, "Theory Talk# 13."

11 AnneMarie Maes has documented those developments under the tag "urban corridor project," available online: http://annemariemaes.net/category/research/urban-corridors/

12 See "Sense of the City", online, available at: http://AnneMariemaes.net/history-urbanism-sense-of-the-city/

13 http://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Regularissenkloosterter_Jericho Onze lieve Vrouw ter Rosen gheplant in Jericho

14 Aben, Rob, and Saskia de Wit. *The Enclosed Garden: History and Development of the Hortus Conclusus and Its Reintroduction Into the Present-Day Urban Landscape*. 010 Publishers, 1999. Matthews, Caitlín, and John Matthews. *Walkers Between the Worlds: The Western Mysteries from Shaman to Magus*. Inner Traditions / Bear & Co, 2004.

15 Federici, Silvia. *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*. New York: Autonomedia, 2004.

16 It is more than just an irony that Regularissenkloster Jericho was dissolved in 1783 by Austrian emperor Joseph II., Son of Maria Theresia, one of the most thorough believers in secular Enlightenment values.

17 Stengers, Isabelle. *Cosmopolitics II*. University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

18 Heinz Paetzold, *Profile der Ästhetik: der Status von Kunst und Architektur in der Postmoderne* (Passagen, 1990).

19 "The Broken Mirror - Art after the Dreamworld of Digital Utopia," accessed June 25, 2014, http://www.thenextlayer.org/node/721.

20 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud* (Ark Paperbacks, 1987).

21 Armin Medosch, "Automation, Cybernation and the Art of New Tendencies (1961-1973)" (PhD thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012), http://eprints.gold.ac.uk/6924/.

22 Margit Rosen et al., eds., *A Little-Known Story about a Movement, a Magazine and the Computer's Arrival in Art: New Tendencies and Bit International, 1961-1973* (Cambridge, Mass. and Karlsruhe, Germany: MIT Press/ZKM, 2011); Darko Fritz, "Histories of Networks and Live Meetings - Case Study: [new] Tendencies, 1961 – 1973 (1978)," Third International Conference on the Histories of Media Art, Science and Technology (Re:live 09, Melbourne, 2009); Edward A Shanken, "Art in the Information Age: Cybernetics, Software, Telematics, and the Conceptual Contributions of Art and Technology to Art History and Theory" (Department of Art

History in the Graduate School of Duke University, 2001).

23 Lea Vergine, *L'ultima Avanguardia (exhibition Catalogue, Palazzo Reale Di Milano)* (G. Mazzotta, 1983).

24 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

25 Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: Norton, 1972).

26 Ibid., 57.

27 Marx Engels Reader 216-17

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 76.

30 Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, 74.

31 Ibid., 74–5.

32 Ibid., 62.

33 Ibid. my emphasis.

34 Ibid., 1:283.

35 György Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1971).

36 Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics I*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2010).

37 Paetzold, *Profile der Ästhetik*, 35.

38 http://annemariemaes.net/works/bee-laboratory-works/pollen-series/

39 See text by Darko Fritz in this volume

40 Bernard Mandeville and F.B Kaye, *The Fable of the Bees or Private Vices, Publick Benefits* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988).

41 Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1904), http://www.econlib.org/library/Smith/smWNCover.html.

42 Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012).

43 Bernard de Mandeville: "The Fable of the Bees," 5th edition, London, 1728. Remarks, pp. 212, 213, 328.

44 Marx, *Capital Volume I: A Critique of Political Economy*, 1:765 paraphrased.

45 Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: Norton, 1967).

46 Gareth Dale, *Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market* (John Wiley & Sons, 2013).

47 Kevin Kelly, *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, & the Economic World* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

48 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Cornell University Press, 1982).

49 Robert Kurz, "Grey Is the Golden Tree of Life, Green Is Theory - The Problem of Praxis as a Recurring Theme of a Truncated Critique of Capitalism and the History of the Left," *Libcom.org*, December 27, 2014, http://libcom.org/library/grey-golden-tree-life-green-theory-robert-kurz.

50 Interview with the author, March-April 2015

51 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a theory of practice* (Cambridge, U.K.; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=589175.