

Respecting the Hexagon: Honeycomb Ornament and Attentive Practices in Bee-Art.¹

MONOGRÁFICO_
CONFLUENCIAS
ESTÉTICAS ENTRE
COTIDIANIDAD Y
NATURALEZA

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Abstract

The growing cultural attention to bees, exemplified by hives at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, raises the question of the extent to which they can be regarded as co-creators of art. This article interweaves György Lukács's notion of ornament, Yuriko Saito's aesthetics of care, and Gilles Deleuze's concept of becoming-animal to examine interspecies collaboration. The work of Czech artist Jan Karpíšek shows how beekeeping and bee-art challenge anthropocentric notions of authorship. The article calls for rethinking animals as co-creators in art, highlighting respect and interspecies aesthetics as vital for understanding nonhuman agency.

Key words: Bee-Art; Ornament; Interspecies Collaboration; Attentive Practices; Karpíšek.

Resumen

La creciente atención cultural a las abejas, ejemplificada por las colmenas del Museo de Arte Moderno de Nueva York, plantea la cuestión de hasta qué punto pueden considerarse cocreadoras de arte. Este artículo entrelaza la noción de ornamento de György Lukács, la estética del cuidado de Yuriko Saito y el concepto de devenir animal de Gilles Deleuze para examinar la colaboración interespecies. La obra del artista checo Jan Karpíšek muestra cómo la apicultura y el arte apícola desafían las nociones antropocéntricas de autoría. El artículo invita a repensar a los animales como cocreadores en el arte, destacando el respeto y la estética interespecies como vitales para comprender la agencia no humana.

Palabras clave: Arte apícola; Ornamento; Colaboración interespecies; Prácticas de atención; Karpíšek.

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1 · Introduction

The growing cultural attention to bees is evident in their increasing presence in urban spaces, including on the rooftops of institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, and the Rudolfinum in Prague. These initiatives highlight the symbolic and ecological significance of bees, whose role as pollinators has become emblematic of both environmental crisis and renewal. Yet beyond these gestures, this article asks a more radical question: to what extent can bees be considered co-creators of art? The article explores what happens when bees actively participate in the creative process.

This question emerges against a cultural backdrop that has long been anthropocentric. In Genesis, humans are granted dominion over animals (Gen. 1:26–28), a passage often read as sanctioning human superiority. Much of Western thought reinforced this hierarchy: animals were treated as mute or mechanistic, instrumental to human purposes. Bees in particular have carried a heavy symbolic load—signs of divine order in antiquity, allegories of monarchy in early modernity, and objects of study in modern science. Precisely because of this symbolic burden, their actual lives and agency have often been obscured. They were aestheticized and moralised, rather than recognised as actors in their own right.

This article moves beyond such appropriations by considering bees as co-creators in artistic production. Doing so requires a shift from subject–object aesthetics to a more distributed account of agency. The guiding question is how human–bee interactions—whether in beekeeping or art—can be rethought as interspecies aesthetics.

Three theoretical perspectives shape the framework. First, György Lukács's notion of ornament and worldlessness interprets ornamental form as abstract and detached from lived reality. This raises the question of how to situate the hexagonal honeycomb: does it fit Lukács's definition, or does it enact a nonhuman mode of world-making? Later theorists, such as Michaela Fišerová and Lenka Lee, providing a counterpoint to Lukács, argue that ornament, through repetition, also shapes identity and consolidates communities. Second, the aesthetics of care, developed by Yuriko Saito and Josephine Donovan, emphasises attentive practices, respect, and responsibility as

aesthetic practices. This perspective allows us to evaluate beekeeping—and art with bees—not only ethically but aesthetically, depending on whether it respects bees' agency. Third, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becoming-animal, along with Steve Baker's extension of it to contemporary art, provides tools for understanding how art can suspend fixed identities and open zones of proximity between humans and animals. Together, these perspectives expand aesthetics beyond human limits and suggest new ways of thinking about art with bees.

The empirical core is a case study of Czech artist Jan Karpíšek (b. 1981), a painter, performer, gardener, and beekeeper living on the outskirts of Brno, the capital of Moravia. He incorporates bees into his creative practice by placing canvases or objects in hives, allowing them to chew through paper, deposit wax, or seal surfaces with propolis. His work creates a rich framework for examining how ornamentation, care, and becoming-animal manifest in practice. This will be analysed through Karpíšek's writings, interviews, and selected artworks, focusing on how the activities of bees are represented within these pieces and how the notion of human-animal artistic cooperation is redefined.

The case study is situated within the broader trend of urban bee-keeping, which has emerged as both a cultural fashion and an ecological intervention in the twenty-first century. Rooftop hives are often celebrated as symbols of sustainability and urban ecological renewal. Yet ecological research points to risks: oversaturation of managed colonies, stress on wild pollinators, and disease transmission. This tension makes urban apiculture a revealing context for reflecting on ornament, care, and interspecies collaboration. The question arises regarding how Karpíšek's practice aligns or differs from these urban trends, wherein bees are frequently used as mere symbols or aesthetic props, with their well-being neglected.

The significance of this inquiry lies in its potential to rethink art, ecology, and human–animal relations. If bees can be considered co-creators of art, this challenges conventional notions of artistic authorship, creativity, and ornament. It also reframes aesthetics through care. Finally, by applying the concept of becoming-animal to artistic collaboration with bees, the article contributes to a broader philosophical project that destabilises anthropocentrism and explores interspecies world-making.

The structure of the article is as follows: after presenting the theoretical framework and methodology, the first part of the analysis revisits the concepts of ornament, care, and becoming-animal in light of nonhuman agency. The second part applies these perspectives to Karpíšek's practice, drawing on his works and interviews to examine how bees act as participants in art. The discussion then reflects on the implications for aesthetics, interspecies collaboration, and sustainability. The conclusion highlights how rethinking bees as respected co-creators not only reshapes our understanding of art and ornament but also contributes to a more ecological and care-based aesthetics.

1 · 1 · Co-Creation or Co-Authorship: A Conceptual Overview

Before delving into the theoretical part, I would like to briefly discuss the concepts of human artistic sovereignty, authorship, and interspecies collaboration in art. In recent years, contemporary posthumanist aesthetics have aimed to decentralise the human agent, namely by prioritising subjects from nature and artificial intelligence (see Sueur and others 2024).

The question of whether animals can be regarded as participants in artistic creation raises broader issues concerning authorship and agency. From the Renaissance onward, authorship in the arts has been understood as the expression of an individual consciousness—an origin of meaning that guarantees both intention and ownership. Larry Shiner further demonstrated in *The Invention of Art* (2001) that the modern notion of the autonomous artist-author was solidified only in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Shiner 99–129, 197–212). Before that, art was largely understood as craft, a form of making situated within *collective traditions* (Shiner 6).

Michel Foucault famously described the *author function* as a discursive construct rather than a natural category (1998 211–222): the author's name organises a field of discourse, establishes limits of interpretation, and regulates responsibility. Authorship, therefore, is not an ontological fact but a historically contingent device that emerged within particular institutional and legal frameworks. Recognising this historical and cultural context opens a space for reconsidering creative agency beyond the human.

In this broader context, I find the term “*co-creation*” describes the collaboration between humans and animals in the creation of a work of art more appropriate than “*co-authorship*” for my research. Co-creation emphasises process, relation, and material interaction rather than intellectual ownership. It accommodates the reality that animals intervene in artistic outcomes through their own embodied logics—instinctual, environmental, or sensorial—without implying *intentional authorship in the human sense*. The aesthetic result arises from the meeting of heterogeneous agencies: gestures, movements, secretions, or patterns that humans may curate, interpret, or contextualise but *do not fully control*.

Recent interspecies art practices—such as collaborations with parrots or axolotls (Fischer 2020)—demonstrate that aesthetic form can emerge through relational and entangled agency, often marked by unpredictability or chance, and not solely shaped by human will or intent. To acknowledge animals as co-creators is to shift emphasis from the sovereign human author to distributed processes of making, from possession to participation. This conceptual realignment does not erase the artist’s role but reframes it as facilitation, mediation, and care within a network of living collaborators. The case study will focus on examining the extent to which bees contribute to the creation of a work of art and how their role is perceived by artist Jan Karpíšek.

2 · Of Bees and Men: Paths of Method

Methodologically, this study employs a qualitative approach, integrating conceptual analysis with a focused case study. The text operates within an interspecies aesthetics framework, which justifies viewing bees as co-creators (see above).

The theoretical framework draws on three strands of aesthetic thought: Lukács’s notion of ornament and worldlessness followed by Fišerová’s and Lee’s reinterpretations of ornament as a social practice; Saito’s and Donovan’s aesthetics of care; and Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming-animal. Although these authors rarely discuss bees directly, their concepts provide a productive set of tensions for addressing the aesthetics of interspecies encounters. Each theoretical strand (ornament, care, becoming-animal) will inform specific aspects of the Karpíšek case study:

Lukács's ornament theory will frame the honeycomb and wax patterns in his art, care aesthetics will guide the examination of his beekeeping practices, and becoming-animal will be used to interpret his immersive approach to working with bees.

The analysis proceeds in two steps. First, I conduct a close reading of these aesthetic theories, with attention to how notions of ornament, care, and becoming-animal can be reinterpreted in relation to nonhuman agency. Second, I apply these perspectives to the case of Czech artist Jan Karpíšek, whose practice of integrating bees into painting and installation offers a concrete site where theoretical insights can be tested.

Empirical sources include Karpíšek's artworks and writings (catalogues, interviews, personal communications), along with my own observations of his bee-integrated art pieces. Additionally, I examine urban beekeeping within both ecological and cultural contexts. This approach also allows me to compare Karpíšek's bee-art with wider symbolic uses of bees in urban apiculture. By bringing these theoretical and empirical strands together, the methodology highlights both the philosophical implications of ornament, care, and becoming-animal, and their practical manifestation in artistic collaboration with bees.

3 · Re-reading Ornament, Care, and Becoming through Nonhuman Agency

The critical interpretation of aesthetic theory provides the conceptual ground for rethinking bees not only as symbolic objects but as active agents in artistic creation. By revisiting three distinct but interrelated categories—ornament, care, and becoming—we can illuminate how nonhuman agency destabilises anthropocentric aesthetics. Each of these concepts, once developed for human contexts, can be reinterpreted through the lens of bee life and bee-human collaboration.

3 · 1 · Ornament and Worldlessness

György Lukács associates ornamentation exclusively with human activity and treats it as a distinctive aesthetic form grounded in abstraction. In *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*, he defines ornament as a self-contained con-

struct composed of rhythm, symmetry, and proportion, largely independent of representational content (Lukács 266). Even when ornamental motifs borrow from the natural world—plants, animals, or human figures—these are stripped of their original context and integrated into an abstract system. This process gives ornament its character of *worldlessness*: it consciously ignores the objectivity and relationships of the real world, replacing them with purely geometrical connections (*Ibid.* 267).

Worldlessness, however, is not mere emptiness. For Lukács, it embodies a specific aspect of reality, an “abstract connection at all” (*Ibid.* 284), which generates aesthetic pleasure through order and repetition. The evocativeness of ornament lies in its capacity to produce harmony and stability without depicting concrete life. Lukács asks why geometric relations hold such aesthetic power, and he attributes this to the principle of order, a reflection of humanity’s earliest social labour practices, such as weaving or land measurement (*Ibid.* 274, 279). In this sense, ornamentation is rooted in the socio-historical development of humanity, distinguishing human adornment as a social rather than biological phenomenon. Importantly, worldlessness does not imply triviality. Lukács emphasises that the absence of depth in ornament is not a sign of superficiality but rather expresses a unique dimension of reality—a pre-dissonant harmony akin to myths of a lost paradise (*Ibid.* 289–293). Ornamentation, though abstract, is socially mediated and historically dynamic, reflecting humanity’s pursuit of order and meaning.

The hexagonal honeycomb exemplifies Lukács’s definition of pure geometry through its rhythmic, symmetrical form. But unlike ornamental worldless designs, the honeycomb serves essential functions—dwelling space and storage—making its abstraction a necessity for survival. This blurs the line between aesthetic form and practical need, as its ornamental geometry is integral to the colony’s existence.

This fact unsettles Lukács’s boundary between aesthetic ornament and material production. It suggests that worldlessness may not apply to nonhuman creation at all. Instead, bee-produced ornament can be read as *world-making*. The comb does not ignore reality but constitutes it, merging geometry and biology in a way that resists anthropocentric categories. Later reinterpretations reinforce this move. Michaela Fišerová posits that orna-

mentation emerges from repetition, shaping both individual and collective identity while providing rhythm and coherence to lived experiences (Fišerová 90–93). Lenka Lee extends this by describing ornament as a social practice of repetition that consolidates communities (human and nonhuman) and territories (Lee 64–65). If we apply these perspectives to bees, honeycomb building is not a passive function but a constitutive practice of community. The comb is simultaneously geometry and social glue: an aesthetic repetition that secures the cohesion of the swarm.

Thus, bees shift the understanding of ornament from worldlessness to world-making. They demonstrate that ornamental abstraction does not have to be detached from reality but can be embedded in ecological necessity. This reading challenges Lukács's anthropocentric assumption that ornament is exclusively human and opens the concept toward interspecies aesthetics.

3 · 2 · The Aesthetics of Care

If ornament speaks to form, the aesthetics of care speaks to relation. Yuriko Saito's *Aesthetics of Care* (2022) insists that attentiveness, respect, and responsibility are themselves aesthetic practices. Everyday acts—maintaining a household, tending a garden, or interacting with animals—shape the quality of our shared world. As Saito puts it, “Cultivating and practising the care relationship with others should provide aspiration for living a good and virtuous life and contribute to the good life of others” (2022 167).

Josephine Donovan extends this framework explicitly to animals in *The Aesthetics of Care: On the Literary Treatment of Animals* (2016). She critiques traditions from Descartes to Kant that reduced animals to objects or metaphors and instead advocates for recognising their subjectivity. Art and literature created under an aesthetics of care, she argues, emerge from a participatory epistemology—an “I–Thou” rather than “I–It” relationship—in which the natural world and its creatures are recognised as subjects with stories of their own (Donovan 2016 73). This relational, dialogical stance becomes central for interspecies art: it is only by treating bees as partners rather than objects that collaboration can acquire both ethical and aesthetic value.

Saito has earlier pointed out, in *Everyday Aesthetics* (2007), that aesthetic preferences strongly influence which animals humans choose to

care for. Environmentalists have long complained that public concern tends to favour charismatic or “attractive” species—lions, eagles, or dolphins—while neglecting less appealing creatures such as cod or insects (Saito 2007 60). Aesthetic judgments are significant as they influence conservation agendas and funding. The case of bees illustrates this, with campaigns like Greenpeace’s “Save the Bees” appealing to their symbolic and aesthetic value.³ The campaign featured a sentimental image of a bee on a flower and highlighted that seventy of the top one hundred human food crops rely on pollination, providing ninety percent of global nutrition. This example highlights how aesthetics—here the choice of an image and its emotive resonance—becomes a tool for mobilising care, even as it risks oversimplification.

Since her book *Aesthetics of the Familiar: Everyday Life and World-Making* (2017), Saito has argued that everyday aesthetic choices have transformative power. Even seemingly minor preferences—such as valuing certain landscapes, goods, or species—carry profound environmental and social consequences (2017 141–147). She refers to this dynamic as “the power of the aesthetic,” stressing that daily judgments guide both behaviour and policy (*Ibid.* 141). Crucially, she shows that care, respect, and thoughtfulness can themselves be aesthetically expressed through design, gestures, and practices that cultivate mutual responsibility (*Ibid.* 150–151). Although she does not discuss bees directly, her framework illuminates how attentive beekeeping and interspecies art can be understood as practices of world-making, generating sustainable relations based on care rather than exploitation.

Care thus redefines authorship. It shifts the emphasis from human mastery to shared responsibility. By foregrounding attentive practices and respect, care allows bees’ agency to appear in the artwork without reducing them to tools or metaphors. Because without care, interspecies art risks becoming mere exploitation.

3 · 3 · Becoming-Animal

Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of becoming-animal offers a final perspective for rethinking nonhuman agency. They explicitly distance it from imitation:

³ See <https://www.greenpeace.org/usa/save-the-bees/>.

Becoming is a rhizome, not a classificatory or genealogical tree. Becoming is certainly not imitating or identifying with something; neither is it regressing-progressing; neither is it corresponding, establishing corresponding relations; neither is it producing, producing a filiation or producing through filiation. Becoming is a verb with a consistency all its own; it does not reduce to, or lead back to, 'appearing', 'being', 'equaling' or 'producing.' (Deleuze and Guattari 239)

Becoming-animal is therefore not symbolic but processual. It is a real transformation of intensities: "Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? ... What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes" (*Ibid.* 238). This process has no subject distinct from itself; it produces only itself and always unfolds in alliance rather than filiation (*Ibid.* 238–39).

Three elements clarify this perspective. First, multiplicity: "A becoming-animal always involves a pack, a band, a population, in short, a multiplicity" (*Ibid.* 240). A bee is never only an individual; it is always already part of a swarm. To become-bee is to dissolve individuality into swarm logic, where relations, not entities, form the basis of existence. Second, thresholds and fibres: the self is only a "threshold, a door, a becoming between two multiplicities" (*Ibid.* 249). An artist entering collaboration with bees crosses such thresholds, becoming part of the hive assemblage where human and insect multiplicities intersect. Third, zones of proximity: becoming occurs in the spaces where intensities meet, producing a resonance that cannot be reduced to analogy or symbolism (*Ibid.* 273).

Steve Baker develops this point in relation to art:

Why, for Deleuze and Guattari and for others, is the very idea of the animal aligned in some way with creativity? What does it take to gesture toward the other-than-human, and thus to enter that privileged 'experimental' state of identity-suspension

which they call becoming-animal? ... this raises perhaps the most perplexing question of all: what does becoming-animal look like? (Baker 67)

Baker suggests that the work of the artist is to risk this entry into a zone where human identity loosens and other rhythms take hold.

For artists collaborating with bees, this means becoming part of the swarm, a multiplicity without centre. The artist's role shifts from solitary author to a node in a larger network of wax, bodies, and vibrations. The autonomous authorship is transformed into an assemblage: the buzzing of bees, the accumulation of wax, and the gestures of the human hand converge in a "block of becoming" that resists reduction to either species alone. The human does not literally become a bee, but through proximity to the swarm, through resonance with its rhythms, she undergoes a process that is real, transformative, and creative.

In this sense, becoming-animal is both aesthetic and ethical. It challenges the anthropocentric assumption of sole authorship and redistributes agency across species. Bee-art embodies this when the artist enters the hive as part of a multiplicity, accepting unpredictability, and allowing nonhuman agency to shape the artwork. The swarm, as Deleuze and Guattari note, is itself a multiplicity that continually transforms into others: "the Wolf-Man's pack of wolves also becomes a swarm of bees" (Deleuze and Guattari 250). Bee-art thus makes visible the swarm as an aesthetic force, where human and nonhuman life form a zone of entangled becoming.

3 · 4 · Toward Interspecies Aesthetics

Reading ornament, care, and becoming-animal through the lens of bees allows us to rethink aesthetics beyond the human. Ornament, once conceived as worldless, becomes world-making when performed by bees. Care, once marginal, becomes central to enabling interspecies collaboration. Becoming-animal, once metaphorical, becomes a lived artistic practice of entanglement and proximity.

Together, these frameworks articulate a nonhuman aesthetics in which bees are not merely symbols or tools, but co-creators. They open a

path toward interspecies aesthetics: a practice that values nonhuman agency, embraces unpredictability, and fosters worlds built on care, rhythm, and collaboration. Having established a theoretical framework, let us now turn to the practice of Jan Karpíšek to see how these concepts are manifested in art.

4 · Jan Karpíšek and Bee-Art Collaboration

4 · 1 · Introduction to Jan Karpíšek

The empirical focus of this study is the work of Czech artist Jan Karpíšek (born 1981 in Jihlava), whose practice provides a fertile ground for exploring how theoretical concepts of ornament, care, and becoming-animal may be enacted in artistic creation. Karpíšek studied painting and performance at the Faculty of Fine Arts, Brno University of Technology, and has since developed a body of work that spans painting, drawing, and performance. Alongside his visual practice, he identifies himself as both a gardener and a beekeeper. These activities are not just supplementary to his art; the garden and the bees are integral collaborators that influence what he describes as joint assemblages (TV Divutvor 2025). Karpíšek's sources of inspiration extend beyond ecological practice to include Zen, meditation, ritual, and reflections on time and meaning. His own writings echo this theoretical insight. He notes:

I am constantly learning to experience the unity of reality, which the human mind is accustomed to divide and classify into many parts and overlapping categories. For example, when walking between my upper garden, where I live and the lower garden, where my bees live. (Karpíšek 2020)

This combination of environmental attentiveness and spiritual orientation positions him within a broader movement of contemporary artists who seek to destabilise the autonomy of the human subject and open their practice to other-than-human agents. Karpíšek is by no means the only art-

ist to work with bees and their products. Joseph Beuys's famous installation *Honey Pump at the Workplace* (Beuys 1977) exemplifies how bees have been mobilised in art as symbolic helpers. Aganetha Dyck has long explored the intersection of human objects and bee labour by placing everyday artefacts in hives (1992–1998). Similarly, Pierre Huyghe has incorporated live colonies into complex ecological installations (2012). Other artists have also utilised beeswax, honey, and even live colonies as materials, objects, or collaborators in their work (see Kosut and Moore 2014).

What distinguishes Karpíšek is not only his willingness to invite bees into his artistic process but also the poetic language with which he reflects on these collaborations. His writings and interviews reveal a sensibility attuned to coexistence, interdependence, and respect for insects, coupled with a consistent concern for their well-being. This attentiveness ensures that artistic experimentation does not overshadow ecological responsibility. Crucially, his insider perspective as a practising beekeeper allows him to grant the insects a degree of autonomy: rather than instrumentalising their activity, he openly acknowledges their independent contribution to the shared, entangled artwork.

In selecting Karpíšek as a case study, I was guided by both methodological and conceptual considerations. Methodologically, his work offers abundant material: artworks, catalogues, reports, video records of exhibitions and performances, and artist statements provide resources for textual and visual analysis. The core of the study consists of my correspondence with the author, along with our structured interview conducted vis-à-vis. During this interview, I explored his visual and performative work, referenced his previously published comments, and posed questions based on my research intentions.⁴ Conceptually, his practice exemplifies the very questions raised in this article: to what extent bees can function as co-creators of art, how care can be enacted aesthetically, and how becoming-animal might be experienced in practice. His work allows for a comparative analysis with broader cultural trends such as urban beekeeping, while also maintaining its own distinct poetic and philosophical orientation.

⁴ Our collaboration on my research and text took place at the turn of August and September 2025, and the records of emails and interviews are stored in my personal archive.

Karpíšek's art thus provides more than illustration. It is a site where ornament, care, and becoming-animal intersect with lived practice, inviting us to rethink not only the role of bees in human culture but also the very categories of authorship, collaboration, and aesthetics.

4 · 2 · Beeswax scented artworks

For the purposes of analysis and interpretation, I focus on two of Karpíšek's works, *Forest Beings* and *Towers*. Unless otherwise indicated, the artist's statements are drawn from our correspondence and interview (see footnote 3).

Karpíšek's painting *Forest Beings* (Figure 1) demonstrates how bees can enter a painting as active co-creators. While the painter provides the basic composition – a landscape horizon complemented by a stylised crocodile, several trees ending in a foot, and a view of the artist's feet from the perspective of the head – the bees respond by chewing the canvas in places where human torsos emerge. At the same time, around the gnawing openings, yellow-coloured propolis dissolved, creating a surprising effect of radiant halos. This intervention appears as a spontaneous completion of "missing" parts, creating the illusion of a meaningful reply. Karpíšek calls this phenomenon "the cunning provocation." He provides bees with a medium, which in this case is a painting on canvas, letting them freely complete it. Then he observes how the human mind interprets their activity as a form of communication (TV Divutvor 2025). In this case, a cognitive illusion arises – the impression that the bees "understood" the image and reacted by completing the figure.

This interplay exemplifies Lukács's ornament theory inverted: whereas Lukács (266–267) emphasises that ornament arises as an abstract system of rhythm, symmetry, and proportion detached from concrete reality, here the bees' ornamentation is *world-making*, not worldless. The negative forms chewed into the canvas are the result of a biological practice – the removal of foreign material from the hive – and yet they manifest aesthetically as a rhythm of repetition and pattern. This repetitive activity, carried out instinctively and almost mechanically, recalls the kind of patterned, collective movement that Siegfried Kracauer (1995) famously described as the *ornament of the mass*, where synchronised gestures of individuals form a larger social

design. In the case of bees, the instinctive removal of alien material thus becomes a collective ornamental practice, an emergent pattern that arises from repetition.⁵ As Fišerová notes, ornament arises precisely from repetition that structures both individual and collective identity, generating rhythm and coherence (Fišerová 92), while Lee emphasises ornament as a social practice of repetition stabilising communities and territories (Lee 65). In this sense, collective bees' activity can be seen as a kind of social ornament that connects biological necessity with aesthetic and communal form.



Figure 1: *Forest Beings* (39×40 cm, honeybees interaction/acrylic on canvas) 2016. Courtesy the artist.

Following on from research by Kosut and Moore, which analysed various variants of the artist-bee relationship (2014), the bees participating in the painting *Forest Beings* are not mere “tools” but full-fledged, unique co-creators whose labour crosses the boundary between biological function and aesthetic effect. The human viewer, meanwhile, cannot resist

⁵ The waggle dance of bees is another example of their ornamental behaviour. This repeated and rhythmic movement functions as a means of communication and collective orientation within the colony. Although it may appear to us as a stylised dance, for bees it is a precisely differentiated semiotic system for sharing information about distance, direction, and food quality. In this way, the waggle dance embodies the convergence of communication, biology, and ornament, reinforcing the view that ornament, in the case of bees, is inseparable from their social and ecological world-making (see Shihao and others 2023).

interpretation – the bees' intervention is perceived as intention, dialogue, completion. This creates a space where human projection and nonhuman agency intersect; the bees assume the role of active co-creators, even though their activities are guided by a logic distinct from human creation.

The second work, *Towers* (Figure 2), was created without the artist's intention, solely thanks to the activity of bees: "*Towers* were created by accident. An IKEA towel was placed on the upper bars of the frames to mitigate the effects of formic acid treatment, but the bees responded by sticking propolis to it, probably to prevent the acid vapours from flowing in. This created a kind of collapsing tower of plates. It is actually a ready-made."⁶ The author's contribution to the artwork lies in his decision to give the propolis-coated cloth a new function, that of a work of art, which he names. It is a choice, a concept, and a context that surrounds a mass-produced object with an aura of creativity and uniqueness. Karpíšek describes the painting *Towers* as a ready-made, but it is more of an assemblage combining a ready-made (an IKEA cloth) and the ornamental structure of a bee's propolis, which can be interpreted as collapsing towers of stacked plates.

The initial point for the creation of the *Towers* was the care of a beekeeper, who applied medicinal formic acid, which caused a reaction in the bees – they covered a cloth with propolis. The beekeeper's action—introducing formic acid to protect the hive—was itself an expression of care, which in turn provoked the bees' reciprocal care, sealing and protecting their environment with propolis. In this reciprocal relationship, care transforms into an aesthetic experience; it turns into art. The artwork emerges not from a unilateral gesture of making but from a cycle of attentive practices, defence, and mutual adjustment. Care here is visible not only as an ethical stance but as a generator of aesthetic form, transforming necessity into a patterned surface that the artist reframes as art.

In the context of Karpíšek's entire oeuvre, bees are not the only natural agents whose effects he utilises in his work. He also works with rust, dirt, puddles, and even other insects—honeycomb moths, for example—but in the case of *Towers*, the distinguishing feature is his *initial unintentionality*, followed by the subsequent decision to grant the resulting object artistic status.

⁶ From an email received on September 10, 2025.



Figure 2: *Towers* (honeybees interaction/propolis on towel (ready-made), 55×40 cm, 2016). Courtesy the artist.

At the same time, the rhythmic layering of propolis reveals a distinct ornamental quality – nature's intention and the instinct of bees. The bees' actions generate parallel lines and accumulations that create regular patterns. The ornament emerges as an embodied practice of defence and survival. The patterned propolis traces in *Towers* may be understood as a form of social ornament: an instinctive, repeated action that takes on aesthetic form.⁷

By accepting the bees' interventions as constitutive of the work, Karpíšek exposes himself to unpredictability and relinquishes full control over the art process. The towel becomes a surface where human and nonhuman agencies converge. The resulting assemblage embodies a shared vulnerability: the bees respond defensively to human intrusion, and the artist, in turn, embraces their response as a form of co-creation. This openness to nonhuman

⁷ But as Karpíšek explains, even in this case, the bees follow the grid given to them by the arrangement of the queen excluder, which in turn is based on human knowledge of the behaviour of the queen and the discovery of the 'queen excluder gap' measuring 4.2 mm.

agency destabilises anthropocentric sovereignty and exemplifies an identity suspension of the human artist and interspecies becoming in which art is generated through exposure, reciprocity, and risk (see 4.3).

Both artworks underline that Karpíšek's artistic practice cannot be separated from his beekeeping. His creative process unfolds not only in the studio or gallery, but also in the hive itself, where everyday apicultural routines shape the conditions of artistic collaboration. For this reason, it is important to turn to his beekeeping philosophy and methods.

4 · 3 · Going into the Bees

Jan Karpíšek identifies as a traditional beekeeper who seeks compromises that benefit both himself and the bees. Although he does not explicitly use the term "golden mean", it can be inferred from his life approach, including his beekeeping practices. He uses classic insulated multi-box hives, one of which he created in a wide-format design, specially adapted for inserting large artefacts that the bees will complete. When asked about the shape of the hives, which resemble those created by wild bees, he argues that the ones he has encountered lack sufficient space and are difficult to handle. He eliminates pests using chemicals and feeds his bees beet sugar. As a result, his bee colonies are thriving, with no fatalities. This approach can be summarised by the laconic words of a Hungarian beekeeper involved in research on the motivations, practices, and values of beekeepers in Hungary: "What is good for the bees is good for us" (Feketéné 9).

When talking about his beekeeping, Karpíšek uses the expression *jdu do včel* – literally, "*I am going into the bees*". In Czech beekeeping jargon, there is a telling linguistic distinction: practitioners use this phrase, whereas non-beekeepers would say *jdu ke včelám* ("*I am going to the bees*"). The former suggests entering into the hive community, becoming part of the bee family, while the latter positions the human as an external visitor.⁸ This contrast highlights how language itself can register a mode of *becoming-bee*: for the insider, tending bees means going inside their world, rather

⁸ English lacks such a difference—both beekeepers and outsiders simply say, "I'm going to the bees/hives".

than merely approaching it from without. Karpíšek's "going into the bees" approach exemplifies a lived becoming-bee (as per Deleuze & Guattari) and an ethics of care in practice.

He visits the bees without protective clothing; he has long since passed the stage of swelling caused by stings and is well versed in the moods of bees now. The difference in interacting with bees without protective gear is articulated in the article "*The Smell of Selfless Love: Sharing Vulnerability with Bees in Alternative Apiculture*" by Claudia, a member of the alternative beekeepers' association in Ashurstwood, England:

I cannot tell you how every single one of your movements is very, very different when you've got no gloves, no veil, nothing. You just move in a different way, you think in a different way, your whole inner attitude becomes different, and then you realise "this is something to aim for ... in your relationship to the bees" (Green and Ginn 161).

Becoming-bee means entering into the dynamics of the bee colony, attuning oneself to the rhythm and intensity of bee life (cf. Massumi 98–102). Becoming-bee means sharing in human vulnerability by exposing oneself to stings, forgoing protective suits, and engaging in risky proximity to hives.

Karpíšek's intimate and vulnerable approach positions him as an "insider" in relation to his colonies. Yet his reflections do not remain confined to his own hives; they extend to the wider debates about urban apiculture. His perspective offers a counterpoint to the celebratory narratives of rooftop hives and institutional bee projects, situating artistic beekeeping within ecological and cultural controversies.

4 · 4 · From Meadow to Metropolis

Beyond his personal practice, Karpíšek reflects on the broader phenomenon of urban beekeeping, which has emerged as both a promise and a challenge for pollinator conservation. Research shows that cities can sometimes act as refuges: urban areas provide diverse forage, extended flowering seasons, and nesting sites, often supporting greater bee diversity than intensively farmed landscapes (Remmers and Frantzeskaki 1283; Sponsler and Bratman 4). At the same time, risks are evident. Dense hive concentrations may increase

competition with wild pollinators, spread disease, and encourage reliance on ornamental plantings that privilege spectacle over ecological balance (Remmers and Frantzeskaki 1287; Sponsler and Bratman 7).

Karpíšek positions his own practice as a counterpoint to these trends. He maintains his colonies at the city's edge, where meadows and gardens intersect, and he frames his beekeeping not as a cultural display but as a lived responsibility. His trajectory—from early permacultural idealism to a more rational and tempered, Zen-like balance—emphasises attentiveness over showmanship.

He views with stoicism the current fashion of installing hives in museums or concert halls, often as symbolic tokens of sustainability. Bees in cities, as in villages, require healthy environments and attentive care. In our conversations, we discussed cases where swarms repeatedly left hives in central city parks or rooftop colonies inaugurated with great ceremony were later removed without comment. Such examples highlight how bees are sometimes reduced to cultural props, while the original meaning of *cultus*—cultivation, care, respect—is neglected. Karpíšek's art resists this tendency. By grounding his practice in both ecological responsibility and interspecies collaboration, he demonstrates how bees can participate in art not as exploited symbols but as partners in a shared aesthetic of care.

5 · Reframing Aesthetics through Bees

5 · 1 · From Theory to Practice: Bees' Impact on Aesthetics

Building on Karpíšek's case, this discussion demonstrates how his approach reshapes key aesthetic categories. He effectively puts theory into practice: Lukács's notion of "worldless" ornament, Saito's aesthetics of care, and Deleuze and Guattari's concept of becoming-animal all gain new significance when bees collaborate in art. Rather than serving as passive motifs, the bees in Karpíšek's practice emerge as active co-creators whose presence transforms both the creative process and its guiding philosophies.

First, the honeybee hive redefines the very notion of ornament. Lukács described ornament as detached from life—essentially “worldless”—but for bees, the comb’s hexagonal geometry is no mere embellishment. It is literal infrastructure: a matrix for dwelling, food storage, and daily work; its rhythmic pattern is inseparable from its function. Far from being an arbitrary decoration, the honeycomb’s design actively constitutes the bees’ world. In other words, what appears as a geometric ornament doubles as a survival mechanism. Bee-created patterns blur the line between aesthetic form and ecological necessity, revealing that ornament can be both beautiful and indispensable.

Second, Karpíšek’s practice elevates care into an aesthetic principle. As Saito argues, attentive practices and responsibility have aesthetic value in their own right. In beekeeping, the difference between exploiting bees and collaborating with them is not just ethical; it also visibly shapes the resulting art. Karpíšek aligns his creative process with the bees’ well-being, timing his interventions to their natural cycles and treating the insects not as mere materials but as partners to be respected.

For instance, a regular mite treatment using formic acid causes bees to seal the cloth with propolis resin. This is a self-protective behaviour that leaves behind amber-coloured traces. Karpíšek repurposes these resinous deposits as a form of natural art, integrating the propolis-covered cloth into his creations (see Figure 2). These outcomes show that *care itself can be an artistic medium*, with aesthetics emerging from reciprocity rather than design. By “going into the bees”—immersing himself in their world—Karpíšek cultivates a relationship of trust and cohabitation. The art that emerges—from wax patterns to textured sealings on the IKEA cloth—results from this respectful coexistence.

Finally, Karpíšek’s bee-centric method calls into question the idea of the artist as sole author. In effect, he enacts a “becoming-bee” (in Deleuze and Guattari’s sense) that blurs the boundary between artist and animal. Rather than imposing a fixed design, he places canvases and paper inside the hives and allows the bees’ autonomous actions to shape each piece. The marks that result are hybrid forms—neither solely the artist’s nor solely the bees’—and each finished work emerges as a true co-creation shaped by the interplay between human intent and bee instinct. He even works without protective

gear, attuning himself to the hive's rhythms and accepting the risk of stings as part of the collaboration; this embodied vulnerability further dissolves the conventional artist–subject hierarchy and turns the creative process into a negotiation—a conversation between species.

5 · 2 · Interspecies Art Interaction

Crucially, Karpíšek makes the bees' contributions explicit. He even describes some of his techniques with terms like "honeybee interaction," openly acknowledging these pieces as the results of interspecies collaboration. By naming the bees as co-creators, Karpíšek challenges the convention of hiding nonhuman agency in art. In doing so, he affirms that the insects are not mere metaphors or living tools, but active participants whose own behaviours help shape the work. The bees' labour – building, sealing, altering surfaces – receives direct recognition as part of the artwork's creation. This stance challenges anthropocentric notions of creativity, expanding the creative process beyond the human realm.

The backdrop of contemporary urban apiculture further highlights the significance of Karpíšek's approach. Beehives on city rooftops and in galleries have become fashionable symbols of sustainability, but such trends often prioritise spectacle over bee welfare. If mismanaged, urban beekeeping can actually harm both domestic honeybees and wild pollinators. Karpíšek avoids these pitfalls by keeping his practice grounded in the bees' needs. He places hives where they can thrive, always prioritising the insects' health over artistic display. While his art certainly draws on society's fascination with bees, it insists that ecological responsibility and respect come first. The "honeybee interactions" he fosters are genuine exchanges with the colony, not stage-managed performances for an audience. In this way, his work models a form of cultural engagement with bees that remains keenly mindful of ecological realities and of bee agency.

Taken together, these elements – world-making ornament, an ethos of care, and genuine human–animal co-creation – converge in Karpíšek's art to suggest an emerging interspecies aesthetics that challenges anthropocentrism. Here, aesthetic value resides not only in static objects or patterns, but in the dynamic relationships that produce those forms. The honeycomb's

geometry, for example, is both pattern and home; propolis traces left on a treated cloth are records of care; and the bees' imprints on canvases embody a fusion of intentions. By decentring the human and including honeybees as creative partners, Karpíšek extends the scope of art beyond the human. His practice shows that art can become a truly collaborative, ecological enterprise – a shared process of world-making in which humans and bees together negotiate what counts as creative and beautiful.

6 · Conclusion

This article demonstrates that bees can be understood not only as symbols or materials but as unique and respected co-creators in artistic production. By bringing Lukács's theory of ornament, Saito's aesthetics of care, and Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-animal into dialogue with Jan Karpíšek's practice, the study shows how honeybee activity unsettles anthropocentric categories of form, relation, and artistic authorship. The honeycomb and the waggle dance exemplify ornament as *world-making* rather than "worldless" pattern. Attentive beekeeping, in turn, embodies care as an aesthetic practice, and Karpíšek's human-bee collaborations highlight vulnerability and reciprocity as essential conditions for *becoming-bee*.

Situated within debates on urban apiculture, Karpíšek's work also underscores that interspecies aesthetics must remain grounded in ecological reality. While rooftop hives may symbolise sustainability, they risk reducing bees to mere decorative props when genuine care is lacking. In contrast, Karpíšek's art illustrates how respecting the agency of bees yields both ethical and aesthetic value.

The broader aim of this inquiry has been to reframe the concept of aesthetics itself. If the aesthetic dimension arises not from isolated expression but through relational creative processes, then an interspecies aesthetics opens a space where humans and nonhumans co-shape meaning and participate in world-making together.

In the end, bees as co-creators turn art into a platform of ecological awareness and collaborative creativity, one defined by interspecies relationships rather than solitary human genius.

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Figure 1. Jan Karpíšek, *Forest Beings*, 2021. Acrylic on canvas with bee interventions, 39x40 cm. Private collection. Courtesy the artist.

Figure 2. Jan Karpíšek, *Towers*, 2020. IKEA cloth with propolis, ready-made/assemblage, 55x40. Private collection. Courtesy the artist.