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# Installation of Pierre Huyghe's Untitled (Liegender Frauenakt) (Reclining Female Nude), 2012

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## Introduction

In 2015 the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) opened an exhibition of the works of the French contemporary artist Pierre Huyghe known for his controversial and eccentric art installations involving aquariums, ice-skating rinks, ants and spiders, and other assorted items. One of his most unusual artworks included in the exhibition was a life-sized concrete statue of a female figure lounging on a plinth with an active beehive on her face.

The installation of this sculpture presented a number of unique challenges to the art conservation staff and art handlers at LACMA. Given the nature of the artwork, a considerable amount of work and preparation was required in advance of the artist's arrival. The installation relied heavily on written instructions and long distance communication with the artist's studio, which proved challenging. In this paper, the authors will discuss these unique challenges with an emphasis on balancing the artist's expectations and vision of the artwork with the reality of using living organisms in an exhibition.

Fabricated in 2012, this artwork features a cast concrete female figure reclining on a plinth, with a real beehive for a head.



Figure 1. Reclining figure on plinth.

The sculpture is comprised of three main parts: the figure, plinth, and bee-hive structure (Figure 1). The figure, composed of cast concrete with a steel armature (Sikacrete 008 Self-Compacting Concrete), measures 145 x 45 x 75 cm and weighs 220 kg. The plinth, also cast concrete (A100 C25/30), measures 145 x 55 x 30 cm and weighs 300 kg. When assembled, the figure rests on the plinth, registered in position by a series of pegs.

The sculpture can be exhibited both indoors and outdoors. When displayed outdoors the sculpture develops a "patina" from exposure to the elements and to the activity of the bees which the artists considers natural and acceptable. However, if any part of this work is damaged to the extent that it changes or compromises the integrity of the work, then the damaged components must be replaced or repaired.

The "bee-hive structure" consists of a specially designed armature upon which a live bee colony constructs its wax comb (Figure 2).

The armature is made up of a series of parallel, circular yellow plastic plates possessing indentations that mimic honeycomb and is secured to the head of the sculpture by a series of set-screws.



Figure 2. Beehive structure

When the sculpture is displayed outdoors, the wax comb is inhabited by a live bee colony. When displayed indoors however, the bee hive structure simply consists of the armature covered by the empty wax comb.

For indoor display, the artist has strict guidelines to preserve the purity of the structure. It cannot be touched or exposed to extreme temperatures for fear of unnatural discoloration and/or distortion. The beehive itself will naturally age overtime, and may become slightly darker in color, and this is acceptable. If it is suspected that the hive is changing color for any other unnatural reason, the artist must be contacted.

If the beehive structure suffers an impact and is broken or compressed, then it should be repaired as possible. The "repair" of the beehive structure may actually require that a bee colony be introduced onto the beehive structure for a period of time, so that they can rebuild the wax forms that were damaged.

## Installation of the sculpture

Untitled was first shown at DOCUMENTA (13) in Kassel, Germany in 2012. After much praise, it became part of Pierre Huyghe's retrospective show at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (2013), Museum Ludwig in Cologne (2014), and at LACMA from November 2014 through February 2015.

At LACMA, the sculpture was exhibited outdoors on a patio adjacent to the north entrance to the Resnick Special Exhibition Pavilion. The glass façade of the pavilion allowed the public a direct view of the art work from inside the building, though access to the patio was possible through an interior doorway.

During installation of the artwork the patio was temporarily enclosed by a five foot retaining wall which was removed at the end of the exhibition. This proved particularly challenging as the on-going construction of the enclosure



Figure 3. Patio enclosure under construction

around the patio generated considerable noise and vibration that tended to disturb the bees (Figure 3).

Though the exhibition was scheduled to open in late November, it was necessary to establish the bee colony well in advance of the exhibition. The artwork arrived at LACMA at the end of August, which only left a short period of time to cultivate a beehive large enough to completely cover the armature by the opening of the exhibition.

To delay matters further a key component to the installation and the development of the beehive process was missing: a wooden hive box. This custom designed box is critical to the establishment of live bees on the sculpture, and it was not sent with the rest of the objects from the exhibition due to custom import restrictions. Designed by the artist's



Figure 4. Hive box

studio, the box consists of two separate halves that close around the figure and lock together with a removable lid that fits tightly on top (Figure 4).

There is a small opening cut in the side of the box for the bees to enter and exit while enclosed for installation.

The complex shape of the reclining figure and the needs of the bees were both a consideration in the design of the box. It needed to fully encapsulate the head and shoulders of the figure, provide enough room for the hive to grow in size, and be able to be taken on and off without damaging the hive or disrupting the bees. In the end LACMA spent valuable time and effort obtaining technical drawings and photographs from the artist's studio and having a new box fabricated.

Establishing a suitably sized bee colony in time for the opening of the exhibition proved a major challenge. Bee colonies have a life cycle that follows the seasons. There is only one egg laying queen in a hive while there are tens of thousands of workers whose purpose is to build the hive, forage for nectar, care for the young, and produce wax and honey.

In the fall, a decrease in the number of flowering plants reduces the collection of nectar and pollen which decreases the bee population. The number of eggs produced by the queen decreases considerably and may cease altogether during the winter months. During periods of cold weather, the physical size of the bee colony also becomes smaller as the bees huddle close together, sharing body heat and feeding on stored food supplies.

As suggested by the artist's studio, a local apiary was contracted to provide a bee colony and to help establish and maintain the hive throughout the exhibition. The local apiary recommended using the Italian honey bee, *Apis mellifera ligustica*, given its docile nature and ready availability (Figure 5). (The Italian honey bee is commonly used for honey production and the pollination of crops in California.)



Figure 5 Italian honey bees with queen

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## Installation of Pierre Huyghe's Untitled, continued

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Given the short installation window, the establishment of the beehive began in earnest even though the final placement and orientation of the artwork awaited the arrival of the artist. The reclining figure was temporarily placed on a wood support resting on dollies to allow the sculpture and beehive to be easily moved to its final location.

### Preparation of the beehive

The bees were first introduced on September 22, 2014 leaving only 8 weeks until the opening of the exhibition. The transfer of bees from an existing hive supplied by the local beekeepers to the sculpture was undertaken at night when the bees are less prone to fly and are relatively quiescent.



Figure 6 . Bee hive



Figure 7. Caged queen



Figure 8. Bee transfer

The beekeepers provided a healthy young queen bee and 10-15,000 bees (Figure 6). The queen was carefully located, isolated, and removed from her hive. She was then sealed inside a small wire cage with a mini marshmallow plugging the door (Figure 7). The caged queen was secured to the top of the figure's head between two of the plastic honeycomb plates. The wooden hive box was immediately closed around the upper torso and head of the sculpture. The remaining bees from the hive were then carefully brushed into the box (Figure 8).

The box was sealed for several days to allow the bees to acclimate to their new home and free the queen by eating through the marshmallow plug in her cage. Feeders containing sugar water (a 1:1 ratio of sugar and water) and pollen were attached to the inside of the wooden hive box to stimulate hive growth and to encourage the queen to start laying eggs.

This first attempt at establishing the bee colony failed as many of the bees escaped through small openings where the hive rested unevenly on the base of the sculpture. Large numbers of bees were found outside the box huddled under the platform. These were collected and placed back into the hive box which was completely sealed with tape and foam to prevent further escape. When examined several days later, the bees were found building comb on the lid of the box and the queen was missing.

A new caged queen was introduced on September 30<sup>th</sup> along with another 10,000 bees. In addition to resealing the hive box a new lid was fabricated which was lighter and easier to remove. Brood comb from this second colony was also added and placed between the rows of the circular plastic plates in an effort increase the total number of bees and achieve the desired coverage (Figure 9). The feeder was also moved closer to the head of the sculpture.

Though the colony appeared to thrive producing large numbers of bees, the artist disapproved of the dark colored brood comb when forwarded images of the sculpture and asked for it to be removed. It was at this time that the artist also noticed that the plastic plates of the beehive structure were not parallel and were slightly misaligned.



Figure 9 Brood comb in beehive structure

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## Installation of Pierre Huyghe's Untitled, continued

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Though it was not clear prior to this time, the exact shape and color of the hive as well as the alignment of the plastic plates were critical to the artist's aesthetic. This proved to be a critical misunderstanding between the artist and the beekeepers who were attempting to balance the need to increase the population of bees (at a time of year where colony growth is slow) and achieve the desired shape and color of the hive. It was felt that if the bees could build enough new comb and increase their numbers, the beekeepers could then manipulate the shape of the hive to the artist's liking.

In the end, after numerous email exchanges with the artist's studio, most of the dark colored comb was removed though an area of fresh, light colored comb in the center of the hive structure which had the queen on it was left in place. The hive structure was then carefully realigned so as not to disturb the remaining bees.

When the hive was examined a week later, it appeared healthy and the bees were consuming considerable sugar water and drawing comb on the plastic templates though not as rapidly as hoped to produce the desired shape and size of hive in time for the opening of the exhibition. With the approval of the artist, the decision was made to cage the existing colony queen and attach it to the head of the figure and add an additional 10,000 worker bees from another colony in the hope that the worker bees would accept the queen and begin building more comb.

Unfortunately, when the sculpture was inspected several days later, the beekeepers observed large numbers of dead bees (over 25%) surrounding the hive box even though the bees on the sculpture appeared active and healthy and were drawing comb and tending brood.

Initially the die-off was thought to be due to all the surrounding construction activity associated with the fabrication of the patio enclosure, but the discovery of queen cells (Figure 10) in the hive indicated the bees were raising a new queen and that the previous queen had probably been killed by the worker bees that were added to the original colony. The dead bees outside the hive were probably worker bees that left the colony to forage but became confused or did not return to the hive when their queen died.



Figure 10. Bee hive showing queen cells

With time running out before the opening, it was decided to start over and add a new colony of 10,000 bees and their queen. Ironically, this coincided with the arrival of the artist and his studio assistants.

When the hive box was unsealed several days later in early November, the queen was found uncaged by her attendants and the workers were beginning to build new comb. However, after a week the colony was still too small to produce the desired effect.

With time running out and the head still not sufficiently covered with bees, on November 12 the beekeepers decided to once again add as many bees as possible from another colony to increase the size of the hive. This time the new worker bees were caged inside the sealed hive box for several days to allow time for the bees to acclimate and accept the caged queen (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Addition of more bees



Figure 12. Application of white bees wax

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## Installation of Pierre Huyghe's Untitled, continued

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Prior to adding the new colony additional feeders were introduced to facilitate growth and, after much negotiation with the artist, the plastic templates were brushed with a pure white bees wax to stimulate comb production and to hide the yellow plastic template (Figure 12). When examined several days later the newly added bees had freed the queen from her cage, and they were building new comb.

Unfortunately, during this time two-thirds of the bees began building comb in the corner of the box. Four days prior to opening of the exhibition on November 19, the beekeepers made two critical adjustments. The comb was removed from the side-wall of the box and attached to the head of the figure, and the feeders were relocated to encourage growth in areas that were sparsely covered by wax comb. This ultimately proved successful (Figure 13).



Figure 13. Bee-hive prior to the opening of the exhibition

With the preparation of the hive the final installation of the sculpture was not without incident. Contrary to the beekeepers recommendations, two days prior to the opening of the exhibition the artist decided to reposition the sculpture to a new location approximately 20 feet away from its original location which required rigging the reclining figure with its hive and transporting the base to its new location (Figure 14).

Not surprisingly, continued growth of the hive was slow given the cool fall weather though it was also hampered by the on-going loss of worker bees due to the installation of a sculpture immediately adjacent to the bee sculpture (*L'Expédition scintillante, Acte 1* (weather score), 2002) which generated snow, fog, and rain. Over time the water contributed to the death of a number of bees.

Similarly, the interior lights of the adjacent museum gallery tended to attract bees returning to the hive at dusk which resulted in the loss of even more bees over time. Despite the beekeeper's concerns, it proved difficult to mitigate against these issues given the artist's vision for the installation.

### Care and maintenance

Despite all these difficulties, the sculpture was a success and proved extremely popular with visitors and patrons. Its ongoing care and maintenance throughout the length of the exhibition was relatively easy. The wooden hive protection box was placed over the sculpture at night and removed in the morning. Dead bees were removed from the hive daily and the area kept clean. On rainy days the hive was covered immediately as there was no shelter from the rain on the patio. Upon de-installation at the end of the exhibition the beehive was removed by the beekeepers and relocated back to their apiary.

### Safety

Though relatively docile, the Italian honeybee can display aggressive defensive behavior when provoked. If the bees sense a threat to their hive, they have been known to buzz and chase the perceived threat, animal or human, for long distances. Throughout the installation staff wore protective clothing including beekeeper suits and veils. Despite everyone's best efforts, the handling of the bees inevitably resulted in some people getting stung.

A fixed stanchion was installed to keep patrons at least three feet from the sculpture. During the day foraging bees moved rapidly back and forth from the hive and as long as they were left undisturbed, the public was relatively safe. Signage was installed on the gallery doors to the patio warning the public of the live bee colony. There was also a gallery attendant posted at the doors and outside to caution visitors and monitor their safety.

### Conclusions

Installation of Pierre Huyghe's *Reclining Female Nude* proved exceedingly challenging. Establishment of the beehive took numerous attempts involving multiple bee colonies and required nearly the entire duration of the exhibition to achieve a satisfactory appearance. It's estimated that over 60,000 bees were needed in the end to build an adequately sized beehive that met the artist's expectations.

Many of the obstacles the staff faced were known and planned for: a very short installation time, the time of year related to the life cycle of the bees, and the difference in breeds of honeybee available in Southern California.

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## Installation of Pierre Huyghe's *Untitled*, continued

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However, there were additional circumstances that added to the overall challenge of installation: the fact that LACMA was the first time the sculpture was installed in the United States; 5,000 miles of separation between the museum and the artist's studio; and the slow emergence and clarity of the artist's vision.

The beekeepers and the conservation staff only realized certain nuances of the artwork as the installation unfolded. Without the artist onsite for consultation, decisions had to be made (and in some cases un-done) based on the local

expertise of the beekeepers. The beekeepers' loyalty to the health of the bees and the artist's unfaltering vision of his artwork were at times in friendly opposition.

### Acknowledgements

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Figure 14. Re-positioning of the sculpture

