

TRANSIENT UTOPIAS

People have long been fascinated with the complex, rhythmic lives of bees. The yin and yang of their existence mirrors the ideal organization of society, and the fragility of their colonies is observed with great attention, as if the demise of mankind might be foretold from their ruins. Philosophers from Aristotle to Einstein to Nietzsche have articulated the metaphorical connotations of the beehive and its inhabitants, as bees have qualities desirable for human society: they are harmonious, organized, and efficient, and every individual has a pre-ordained purpose from which they never divert. Architects have embraced the organic and sturdy structure of the beehive, made up of hexagonal interlocking wax cells giving name to the "honeycomb" formation, from Bertrand Goldberg's mid-20th century Marina Towers, twin honeycomb-shaped apartment buildings with nary a right angle, to Le Corbusier's *Urbanisme* (1924) depicting the huts of "savages" similar to rustic beehives, or Antoni Gaudí's arches and cupolas resembling inverted honeycombs.ⁱ And artists have interpreted their social structures, behaviors and products, such as in Diana Thater's series of video installations mining the lyrical bee dance the insects use to communicate, or in a recent 2009 exhibition, *No Bees, No Blueberries*, that used the metaphor of colony collapse to infer the angst and fragility of artists in the New York gallery world.

The apiarian world poses an apt metaphor for Penelope Stewart's installations, photographs, and works on paper, as central to her work are similar philosophical questions surrounding utopian social structure, the fusion of organic with constructed, and the poetic interpretation of space. First made aware of the "beehive metaphor" by Juan Antonio Ramirez's book of the same name, Stewart increasingly gravitated to the connections between her tactile and philosophical interests, and the architecture and social structure of bees. In addition to an interest in modular structures, she was, in her own words, "fascinated by the parabolic arch that Gaudí had revolutionized and was a direct application of how bees build honeycomb, and the ideas of Le Corbusier as realized in *Unité d'habitation* as a planned compact city utopia, and of course Canberra and Brasilia as completely planned cities which mark the modern movement."ⁱⁱ Stewart synthesized these connections in *Apian Screen*, an installation featuring molded beeswax tiles affixed to the walls in various colours of gold and emitting a subtle honeyed fragrance. In her site-specific installation of this work for the Albright-Knox Art Gallery's exhibition *Beyond/In Western New York: Alternating Currents*, 2010, Stewart occupied three walls in the transept of the museum's classical sun-lit sculpture court, transforming it into a mythical space reminiscent of the ancient tomb of a prophet or Egyptian queen. Inspired by drawings of Canberra, Australia's capital city designed by Frank Lloyd Wright disciple and Chicago architect Walter Burley Griffin, the raised relief patterns protruding from the tiles evoked the layout of city maps through geometric lines, curves, and cubes, as if seen from a birds-eye view. The tactile surfaces, which the artist typically encourages the public to touch, felt giddily smooth and rubbery, and running one's fingers over them evoked an archaic, wordless form of Braille. Smell, sight, touch: artwork as sensory immersion, an experience that gently overtook the viewer, first by the twinges of the nostrils, then through the eye's perception of golden luminescence, and finally in the fingertips' tactile touch of molded beeswax.

More broadly speaking, Stewart has spoken of her interest in utopian cities and social architecture as central to her oeuvre. She was initially "drawn to ideas of utopia and dystopia" simply for their binary relationship, but gradually embraced the more complicated, fraught juxtaposition of opposing sentiments, such as the "beautiful but also quite suffocating" nature of fabric over architecture and "a love and hate of domestic space."ⁱⁱⁱ As in *Apian Screen*, this manifests itself in much of her work through her reinterpretation of

architectural spaces using non-traditional and incongruous materials, where the touch of the artist combined with her particular choice of materials creates a new language for existing structures. Her media and methods often have a decidedly soft and domestic sensibility, hinting at feminist undertones and a relationship to the body, particularly in the manner in which her installations create a membrane or skin for the environment they inhabit, and in her use of materials such as textiles, typically associated with clothing. Much of her work, by her own design, is site-specific and temporary, disappearing at the end of installations and performances and evidenced in the history of that space only through documentation. Hers are cities that are designed, built, and erected, only to be taken down.

These elements— of ephemerality, sensory engagement in the viewer, and a hybrid architectural-artistic practice— connect Stewart to the lineage of post-1960s installation and environmental art, where the parameters for what could be considered art expanded into the surroundings and began to shake hands with the discerning, engaged viewer. Artists re-imagined the space around them, both inside and outside of the galleries: Robert Smithson, Michael Heizer, and James Turrell made work in the landscape that would eventually erode through entropy, Eva Hesse and Robert Morris used soft, tactile materials such as latex, felt, and even smoke to make their work, and others, like Carl Andre and Fred Sandback, made work that the viewer walked over, through, and within, evoking imagined floors and walls. Such histories are present in Stewart's *Canopy* series, installations consisting of sewn cloth applied to the interiors of abandoned buildings. In conceiving of these installations, beginning in 1994 and evolving for more than a decade, Stewart was inspired by a desire to "explore the physical immersion in the layers and the blur of two architectures and two histories, knowing this would reveal multiple and invisible architectures yet to be imagined."^{iv} One from this series, *Terminal*, 2006, consisted of organic patterns inspired by the ceiling of a World War II memorial that were photo-silkscreened onto 500 feet of delicate, translucent organza, hand-sewn and installed guerrilla-style in Buffalo's breathtaking abandoned Central Terminal, a haunted relic that was once the primary thoroughfare for industry and social travel. Billowing in the wind and illuminated by natural light from the windows behind, this living, breathing architectural sculpture whispered gentle reminders of the spirits that once walked through the station. Returning to post-1960s installation art and contextualizing Stewart's work in particular with the ideas surrounding the "dematerialization" of the art object, the early media artist Les Levine, calling such spaces "disposable transient environments," wrote the following:

Environmental art can have no beginnings or endings ... It can have no time. Time is the essential difference between theatre and environmental art ... With environmental art, you see as you move and move as you see. Art becomes *transient, not kinetic* ...^v

Stewart's practice redefines space and, by extension, the viewer's experience of the progression of time by layering binary upon binary — feminine with masculine, soft with hard, transparent with solid, old with new. The magic of Stewart's installations lies in their ability to muddle the boundaries of time through their incorporation and layering of symbolic forms and meanings, dislocating their normative associations, and to manifest multiple worlds from the macro- to the micro-cosmic. At once present and past, mystical and timeless, and reflective of contemporary society's global nomadism, these installations are transient utopias for the modern-day Time Traveler.

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ⁱ Juan Antonio Ramirez, *The Beehive Metaphor* (London: Reaktion Books, 1998).

ⁱⁱ Correspondence with the author, July 22, 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid.

^v Les Levine, "The Disposable Transient Environment," excerpted in Lucy Lippard's *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object* (New York: Praeger Publishers, Inc, 1973), 74.