

# Future Stories: On Oslo Apiary & Aviary 2014–2018

*Emma Christine Karlsen*

Bachelor of Art History, Master's student, University of Oslo

**Abstract:** At the core of Oslo Apiary & Aviary's artistic practice during the years 2014 to 2018 is ecological intervention performed in urban areas. Taking their work from this period as a point of departure, this chapter explores how 'ecoventions'—such as facilitating for birds, moths and insects in the city—can challenge common perceptions regarding urban spaces and allow for reflection and re-thinking about ontological co-existence in the city. It is argued that Oslo Apiary & Aviary are storytellers that enact new futures that point towards a more sustainable life in the city, both for humans and for birds, moths and insects.

**Keywords:** ecovention, multi-species, urban life, ecological awareness, storytelling

## Introduction

Surrounded by stinging nettles and wild growing plants lies a structure made from concrete, wood, bricks, stones and sticks. Wooden planks are layered to form what can be recognised as a roof or boat hull turned upside down. Inside this strange shelter, four sections are filled with sticks, bricks, logs and stones [figure 1]. These materials make up a perfect site for ants, beetles, spiders and rodents. It is a hibernaculum; it is *The Lifeboat* (2019)—a part of Oslo Apiary & Aviary's artistic practice.

*The Lifeboat* was until late 2019 located in downtown Oslo, on a little green space in an area otherwise characterised by heavy building construction and gentrified urban life. It offers shelter to a range of critters—*saving*



**Figure 1.** Marius Presterud (Oslo Apiary & Aviary). (2019). *The Lifeboat* [Multi-species hibernaculum, various materials]. Reproduced with permission of Marius Presterud. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

them as the title implies—from a fragile existence in a city in which are humans rapidly expanding their territory, leaving less and less space for non-human others. A rope attached to *The Lifeboat* is moored to a little heap of gravel, as if insisting on the hibernaculum’s belongingness to the city. While the mooring seems to have little or no actual function, the symbolic effect becomes even greater (it should be mentioned that the writer later learned that the rope accumulates moisture for bees and other insects, allowing them to drink water without drowning, serving in fact both a practical and symbolic function). Oslo Apiary & Aviary are telling us that non-human lives are as strongly connected to urban areas as human lives are. Thus, we should encourage and embrace them. This kind of intervention is characteristic for the artist group Oslo Apiary & Aviary’s activities.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> An interview with artist Marius Presterud has allowed for valuable insight in Oslo Apiary & Aviary’s practice and excerpts from Presterud’s own records and reflections regarding the artist group’s undertakings, runs alongside the text. All the following quotes by Presterud derive from a conversation between Presterud and Emma Karlsen, 25 October 2019.

*The Lifeboat* is part of a comprehensive artistic practice manifested in the artist group Oslo Apiary & Aviary (hereafter OAA), founded by Marius Presterud in partnership with Mikkel Dagestad in 2013. In addition to building hibernacula, OAA has engaged in activities such as bee-keeping (keeping beehives on the roof of art galleries like Kunstnernes Hus and Henie Onstad Art Centre), butterfly breeding, raising doves and tree growing. OAA's practice can be found somewhere between art production and urban husbandry, in which their different projects create the backdrop for various artistic expressions, such as performances, talks, videos and exhibitions. Their artistic practice can thus be identified with what Sue Spaid calls 'ecoventions,' referring to 'an artist-initiated project that employs an inventive strategy to physically transform a local ecology' (Spaid, 2002, p. 1). In OAA's artwork *Work Relief* (2018), all the above-mentioned activities can be detected. The work consists of a total of 16 reliefs made of beeswax (extracted from their own beehives) [figure 2] and upcycled thermoplastic [figure 3]. The yellow and black squares are cast from the same set of moulds, making two identical sets. Originally the plates made up two separate artworks, and when assembled



**Figure 2.** Marius Presterud (Oslo Apiary & Aviary). (2018). *Work Relief* [Eight-piece demi-relief in beeswax]. Reproduced with permission of Marius Presterud. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.



**Figure 3.** Marius Presterud (Oslo Apiary & Aviary). (2018). *Work Relief* [Eight-piece demi-relief in upcycled thermoplastic]. Reproduced with permission of Marius Presterud. All rights reserved. The image is not covered by the CC-BY license and cannot be reused without permission.

in accordance with what the frame suggests, they form a coherent motif. The relief depicts two persons (seen in the left and right lower corners) in beekeeping suits, supposedly depicting Presterud and Dagestad themselves. Amongst the reliefs one can also detect motifs like the construction of a dovecote, a set of top-bar beehives, and some stairs referring to a performance OAA held in 2014 at Kunstnernes Hus, where they poured honey down the main staircase. These beeswax reliefs can thus be read quite literally: what we see are pictorial representations of OAA's artistic practice.

By performing such ecoventions, OAA engages with what Donna Haraway calls 'multi-species complexities.' In her theories, Haraway is concerned with making a more liveable planet, not only for humans but for all other kinds of creatures as well. In her books, the notion of *story-telling* is a recurring trope and the ability to 'think-with' is emphasised. She writes: 'Telling stories together with historically situated critters is fraught with the risks and joys of composing a more livable cosmopolitics' (Haraway, 2016, p. 15). OAA's attention towards creatures that have no immediate value to humans and that are even commonly unwanted, testify to their thinking-with. To think-with enables OAA to explore how

‘beings render each other capable in actual encounters’ (Haraway, 2016, p. 126). In making this effort into an artistic practice, OAA become storytellers. By placing beehives on rooftops, breeding butterflies in the city and welcoming commonly unwanted pigeons, OAA questions the otherwise so anthropocentric cityscape.

In an interview with the Norwegian magazine *Billedkunst*, Presterud described OAA as a ‘dark ecological service provider’ (Håland, 2018, p. 132). The wording echoes Timothy Morton’s concept of ‘dark ecology’ and suggests that OAA shares Morton’s view on humans as an integral part of the natural world. Morton argues that ‘nature’ is a twelve-thousand-year structure (Morton, 2016, p. 5); a result of early humans separating themselves from (some) non-humans and labelling them as ‘nature.’ This, according to Morton, has been the predominant way of organising human society ever since, and it has proved to be a ‘weapon of mass destruction,’ causing Earth irreparable damage. Seen like this, nature is something we practice through our language and actions. In Norway there are even laws (the Outdoor Recreation Act) and interest groups (e.g. the Norwegian Trekking Association) unknowingly dedicated to practicing this distinction.

*We have tried to return insects to the city—moths, bees, making hibernacula, we have tried to bring some birds back to the city—there’s hardly any bird song here anymore. [...] But we have also been working more theoretically, with how we practice the distinction between culture and nature, city and rural.*

—Marius Presterud

In their practice OAA tries to bring similar attention to what constitutes the life of species living in the city. This inspection of how the city can, or cannot, be renegotiated can be read as a reaction to the urgency of our times. Presterud explains that the project started out as a sort of green entrepreneurship producing and selling honey before they started to question how to use this to work with social conventions and culture. The duo cultivated an artistic interest in things that have value but cannot easily be commercialised. Presterud describes this as ‘a blind spot in our society, if it can be commercialized it can have room, if not it gets pushed



out' (Presterud, personal communication, October 25, 2019). The hibernacula, doves and moth breeding have no commercial value. The beekeeping on top of Kunstnernes Hus became a way to explore whether unused commercial spaces could be used in new ways.

*We have many ritualized, considerate acts in 'nature'. There is a sense of blasphemy in nature that we don't have in the city, and it would be nice to bring some of that into the city. But to have an interest in that, to understand the need for it, you have to be more relationally oriented, you must develop a more ecological self.*

—Presterud

Presterud suggests that in order to understand the need to rethink the city's philosophical value, one must develop a more ecological self, which can be translated into 'ecological awareness.' This term appears in Timothy Morton's writings and denotes a sense of realising that everything in this world is interconnected. In accordance with Arne Næss, Morton claims that we need new ways of living.

In the article 'The Art of Urban Transformations,' Emma Arnold and Karen O'Brien explore how artistic practices like those of OAA can generate much needed 'transformation to sustainability.' They believe that artists, by using public spaces in unexpected ways, can both 'challenge conceptions and behaviors' and 'lead to a change in perspective' (Arnold & O'Brien, 2015). In OAA's practice there is no hierarchical privilege given to humans, that is, to themselves. Artistic expressions can function as gateways to inner spaces of reflection; spaces where matters can be re-thought and new considerations can be cultivated.

Nature might have its own agency, one that might differ from ours. When OAA tried to plant seeds on top of Kunstnernes Hus, seagulls settled down and laid eggs there. Consequently, a group of red listed seabirds occupied the roof; an involuntary ecovention. Or, as mentioned by Presterud, a built and raised dovecote stood nearly empty, inhabited mainly by spiders and occasionally visited by birds when he put out food. 'Nature' does not always bend to our will.

OAA's ecoventions are a response to the urgency of our time, a time Haraway refers to as 'a period of intolerable extraction, unequal human

deprivation, multispecies extinction, and blasted ecosystems' (Kenney, 2015, p. 263). The artist duo is showing others to care for other species. This is what Haraway calls 'response-ability,' which differs from the ordinary usage of the word 'responsibility.' Response-ability is about participating in a multi-species world. In Haraway's words: 'Response-ability is not something that you just respond to, as if it's there already. Rather, it's the cultivation of the capacity of response in the context of living and dying in worlds for which one is for, with others' (Kenney, 2015, p. 257).

*We learned a lot about what it means to be relationally attuned. For example, how little I now believe in human agency, the idea to control and manage is naive.*

—Presterud

Returning to *Work Relief*, this work depicts the practice of OAA and is therefore to be considered a story. A visual one, yes, but a story, nevertheless. And, if one cares to read it, a story about humans and other species co-existing in urban spaces is revealed. If we look closer into the practice of OAA, we see that it is a story of trying and failing. By 2020, OAA's ecoventions in Oslo had come to an end, but they are moving on, exploring new strategies with the same intentions.

*I have found that I can change my perception. It is possible to challenge an individual self. I am starting to see some lines that can lead to a more ecological oriented self. And I can see that I don't find any solutions, but I find new why-questions. I find trouble. Maybe one take on the artist's role of today is to hold up the problems of the ongoing.*

—Presterud

Haraway insists that we tell the story about the Anthropocene starting from the things we care about. Through *Work Relief*, Presterud conveyed a story about extinction and an alternative urban life in such a 'Harawayian' spirit. By executing their projects in public spaces and exhibiting artworks at accessible galleries, OAA's artistic practice has become a *collective* memory. The books we read, the movies we watch and the art we experience expands our inner worlds—they shape us and form our opinions. OAA enables us to think about the future the way that Timothy

Morton prefers: ‘For this is what we should task ourselves with: thinking future coexistence unconstrained by present concepts’ (Morton, 2016, p. 27). By facilitating for bees, doves, butterflies, moths and other critters, OAA offered a new perspective, a new way of being human in the city, telling stories with and for all creatures.

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