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Visual & Sensory Neuroscience Group, Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland.



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www.virtual-art-initiative.org

MELLIFERA IS PRESENTED IN CONJUNCTION WITH



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EXHIBITION DATES

19 August to 5 September 2009
The Block, QUT Creative Industries Precinct, Brisbane, Australia
IHBI, QUT, 60 Musk Avenue, Kelvin Grove, Brisbane Australia

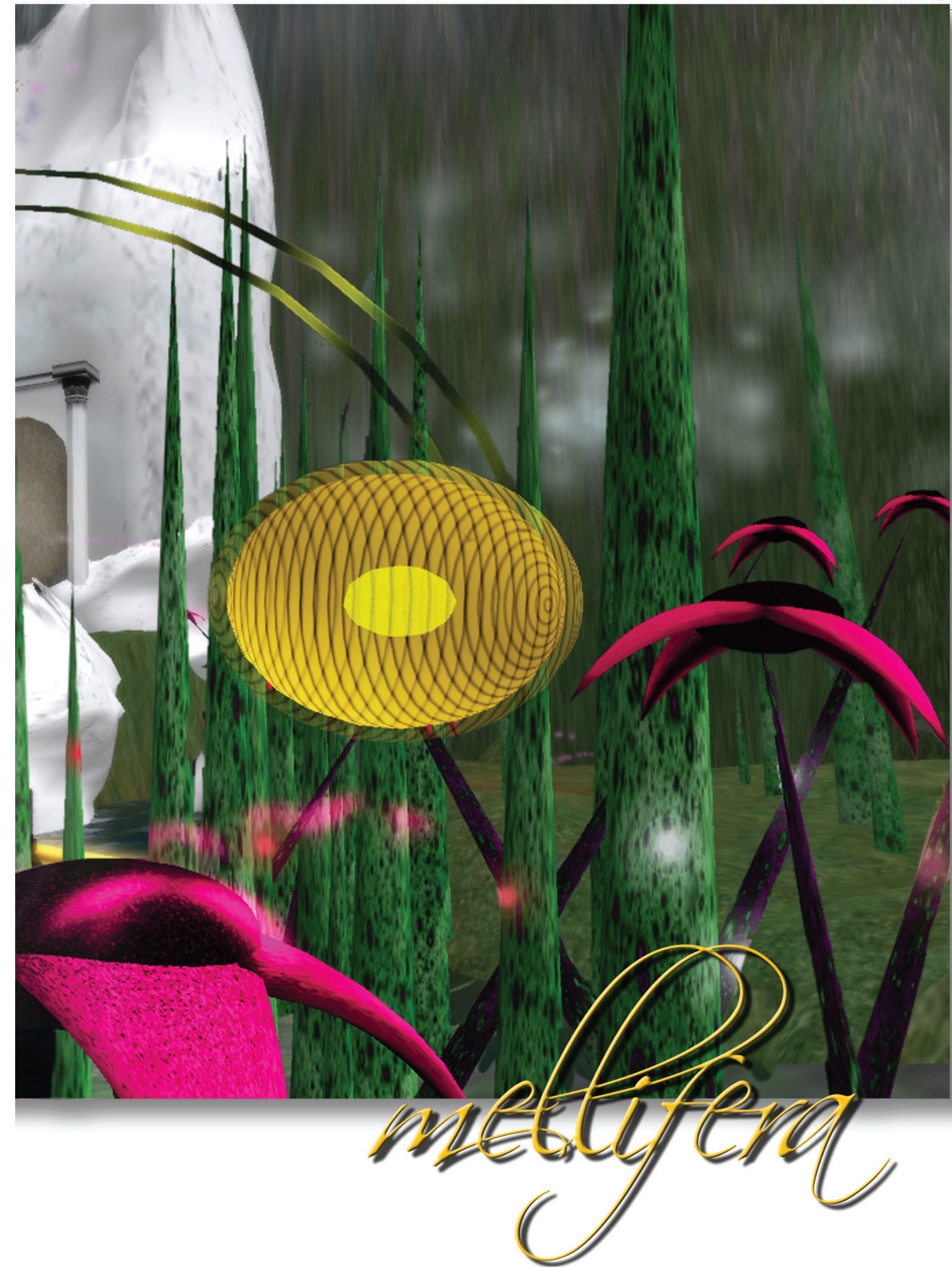
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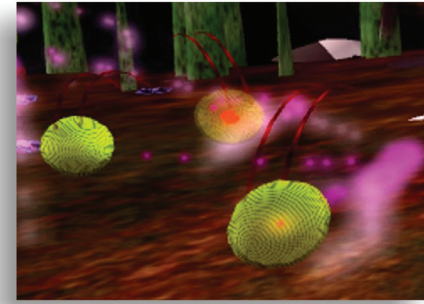
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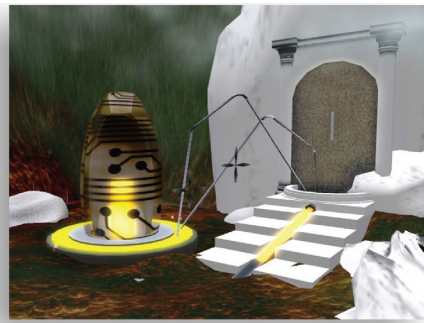
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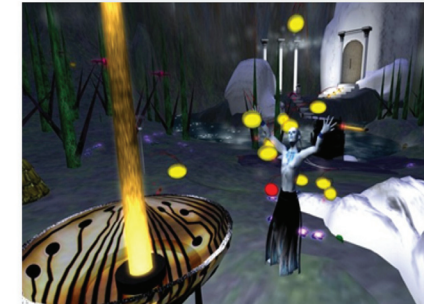
mellifera



Mellis Florae



Hexas Source



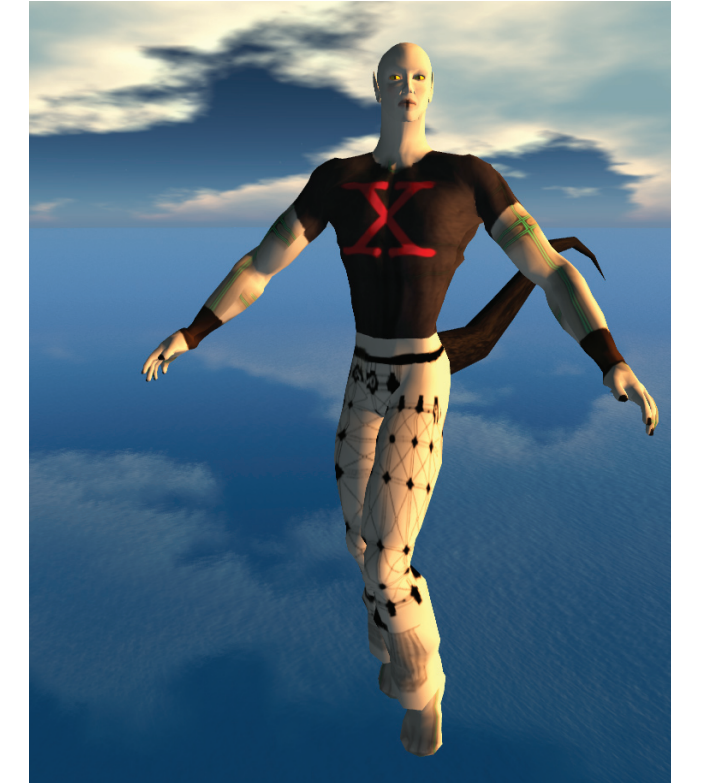
Essential Beeswing



Terra Mellifera



Neurone Schism aka Trish Adams



Nonnatus Korhonen aka Andrew Burrell

To quote her two creators, *mellifera* is a site where many elements converge to form a whole; the ultimate hope for which is that this emergent whole becomes something quite different from the parts which constitute it. Situated in the virtual world of Second Life®, *mellifera* is an emergent, online, interactive, ecologically sensitive bio-system which takes its basic trajectory from the artists' engagement with aspects of bee behaviour at the Queensland Brain Institute, where the cognitive, navigational and communicative attributes of honey bees are being scientifically investigated. These poetic as well as scientific interactions with bees have inspired the development of *mellifera* as an experiment in human / computer interfaces, one which will provide modes of sensory delivery for both virtual and real-world participants concurrently culminating in a space that allows the viewer to interact with artificial life created in virtual worlds via direct physical engagement through various interfaces. These provide a platform whereby post human technologies and modes of sensory delivery are being investigated from an artistic vantage point.

Trish Adams' and Andrew Burrell's (aka. Neurone Schism and Nonnatus Korhonen) wish to create an emergent system, the sum total of which would engender an entirely novel meaning, independent of its parts seems to have materialised to quite an extraordinary extent: Indeed so hermetic is the piece and (at least for me) so unexpected is the ultimate outcome that it seems in order to address the significance of its individual components before proceeding to a definition of its overall conceptual Gestalt.

The most conspicuous of these components when the virtual site is visited are the flora, notably the ever present Mellis Florae (honey flower) from which the virtual bees gather the honey and the secondary white flowers, Mellis Dentel, which gently fall from

above, denoting the traces left by the virtual visitors of the site. I was told that these white flowers would mark the trail left by the visiting avatars and would eventually dissipate within twelve hours or so after the avatar that who had evoked their generation had left the location. A gentle signifier of the fact that you were there, that you had been present... These temporal, gentle Mellis Dentel stand in stark contrast to the stationary field of the Mellis Florae, resolutely proclaiming their artificiality/virtuality through a deliberately selected, highly saturated colour scheme; almost proclaiming "I am my own thing - not a representation, not a simulation, though I am grounded in a language that comes from real world systems". The stationary field of the Mellis Florae itself however, is the signifier of the life blood of the installation: honey, which in its turn is a metaphor for the gathering and dissemination of information, networks and data storage. Honey is sweet and nourishing, and honey has been harvested by human beings since time immemorial – as indeed can also be said for the flow of information. Honey is a life force – as is information.

Yet another component is the artificial agent "Essential Beeswing", a genderless human look-alike: Essential is the intermediary between everything, connecting avatars with Real Life, as well as the transfers of real world actions occurring in the Real Life exhibition space into Second Life. Thus sensor data from the physical realm is sent into the virtual domain through the code embedded into Essential Beeswing: While visitors in the physical exhibition space walk across surfaces their vibrations are sent into Second Life creating a virtual response in the Mellis Florae, whose sound in its turn will vibrate water contained in vessels in Real Life. The non-gendered Essential is referred to as "ou". I was told by the Trish Adams that this gentle human look-alike artificial agent created strong responses of empathy in both the artists as well as the visitors of *mellifera*:

Avatars visiting the site in Second Life as well as Real Life visitors of the exhibit are instantly drawn to Essential, creating levels of strong identification, making it difficult to reconcile "ou's" presence with the conventional definition of the concept of "artificial agent".

A third component is an energy beam placed in a central location, and according to the artists this beam is a source energy indicator, signifying a release or the pointing at a direction "out" of what is essentially a closed system. This "out", according to Adams and Burrell is the unknown end of the historical trajectory, i.e., the future.

And it is of particular interest that this beam, which points at a future which lies beyond memory, is located somewhere on the path leading to what, at first glance, appears to be the most incongruent component of the system: The facade of an antique temple embedded into the virtual rock of the island on which *mellifera* has been rendered. An Arcadian Visions of places that are imagined but never were, reminiscent of those sepia photographs taken by the Edwardian and Victorian tourists documenting a past that never was. A metaphor for creating our own past compounded by the pursuit of finding this idealized history strongly suggests itself in the white purity of the edifice.

For the artists Trish Adams and Andrew Burrell *mellifera* is about many things: The flow of information, for which the honey stands as a powerful, sweet, life giving metaphor; the convergence of physical and virtual spaces which are manifested through the agency of Essential Beeswing as well as the trajectory of human history through which knowledge flows, unfolding through the presence of artefacts such as the Arcadian Temple and a light beam pointing towards a yet un-lived-in future, and of course the very timelessness

of the production of the honey itself.

For me, the ultimate binding attribute of *mellifera*, the thing which creates an unexpected outcome which turns out to be a thing larger from the sum total of its component parts is an intuitive depiction of "durée" in the Bergsonian sense of the term, in other words the conjunction of "time" and "consciousness". For Bergson, duration is neither a unity nor a multiplicity and since it is, in fact, ineffable, the way toward understanding it can only be shown indirectly through images. And yet even these can never reveal a complete picture of "durée", for it can only ever be grasped through a simple intuition of the imagination. It seems to me that Burrell and Adams have provided the visitor of *mellifera*, be it real or virtual, with just such a tool for the realization of such an intuitive act. From the rain of white flowers, which mark our transitory passage through the site, to the signifiers pointing at imaginary futures and histories, to their connection by means of knowledge systems and engendered informational data symbolized through the age old production of honey, to the timelessness of the genderless "ou" connecting the physical with the virtual, for me this piece is sequence of symbols and metaphors masterfully arrayed to evoke a fleeting, ephemeral and yet resoundingly cogent understanding of time and temporality.

Professor Elif Ayiter aka Alpha Auer
Visual Arts and Communication Design Program
Sabanci University, Turkey

As an artist who collaborates with scientists I am in the position of engaging with specialists in disparate fields and developing a cross-disciplinary practice. Mediated through art, I reinterpret my scientific experiences for a wider audience.

The *mellifera* project has drawn upon my residency with the Visual & Sensory Neuroscience Group, Queensland Brain Institute, The University of Queensland. This group carry out research on the honey bee, and observations and experiments there have inspired aspects of both the *mellifera* Second Life environment and the interactive real-time installation. This metaphoric translation of bee behaviours references many aspects of our environment; particularly social and ecological concerns.

Fragile traces left in the virtual 'mellifera' environment create a complex interplay between networks of systems – ephemerality of data merges with analogue processes in real-time to probe constructs of identity and the nature of the "self" – echoing my earlier explorations into corporeality and constructs of "humanness"; carried out during a collaboration in the Biomedical Sciences.

Dr. Trish Adams

There are many disappointments in life, and it is a disappointment shared with many that I will most likely never make it to space. Perhaps this is why my practice has led me to create new realms worthy of exploration. *mellifera* in particular and virtual environments in general have made it possible to realise many ideas that previously existed merely as flights of the imagination.

A central unifying thread throughout my practice of the last years has been one of exploring and searching for a potential site of the self – or perhaps to dare wonder if this site even exists at all. So in observing and studying the honey bee, and in asking what such a creature would be like if it were native to a virtual environment, and creating a world for it to live in and a narrative construct surrounding it, I am also extending an ongoing investigation into the self as a construct of narrative, and the implications of artificial life upon a traditional view of the self.

My interests in this case are well counterbalanced with those of Trish – our collaboration having found new and exciting territories to explore, and in doing so we have forged and created a unique territory in which we now ask you to take the role of active explorer.

Dr. Andrew Burrell