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New World Evolutions: *Transmute*

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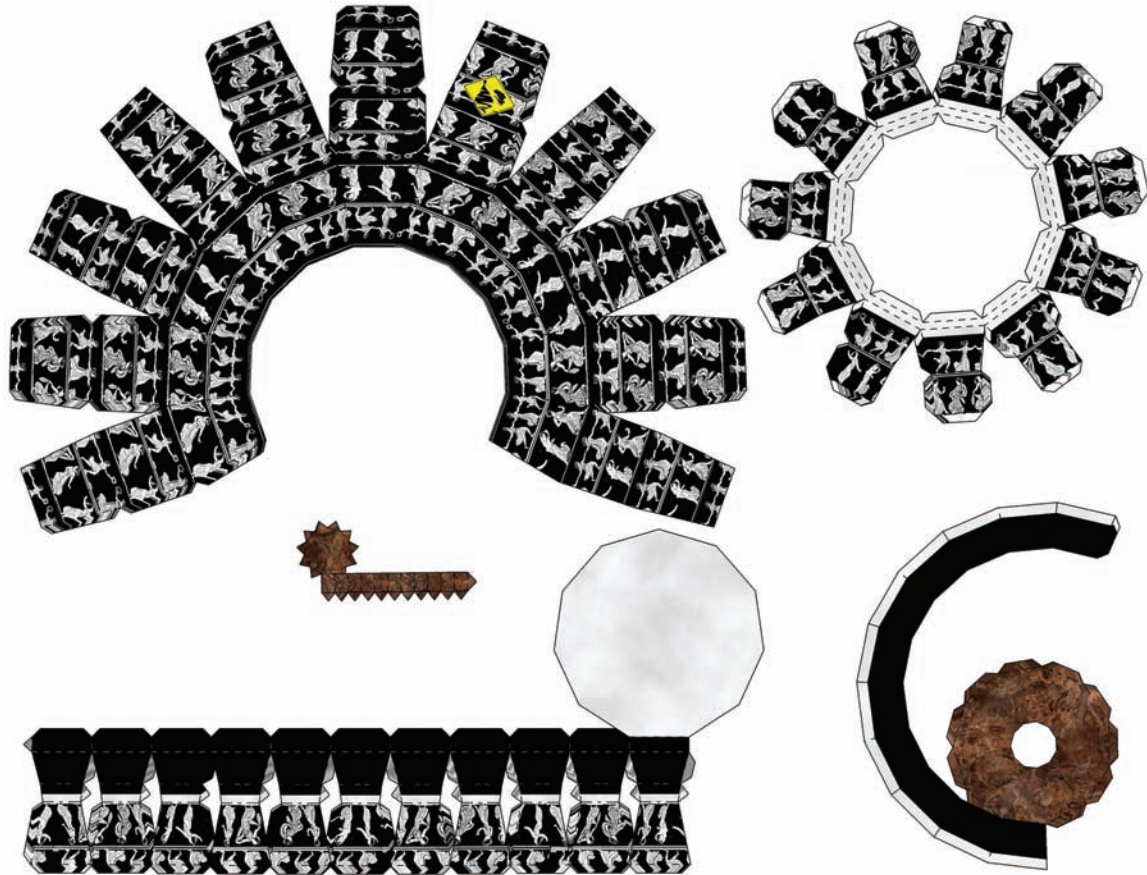
Toronto

New World Evolutions: *Transmute*

Within the history of new media Second Life (SL) is a surprisingly recent phenomenon. This virtual platform for a parallel world was created in 1999 by Philip Rosedale, former Linden Lab CEO. The verb created is intentional here for the emergence of SL is ongoing as its participants/users evolve the cyber-world they inhabit. Coming a long way from its first iteration where most of the activity was comprised of bombing buildings and landscapes with grenades, SL now includes not only fantasy worlds, but also institutions

that complement real world sites. With the advent of university campuses in SL, it seems reflection on activity in this cyber-world community is warranted.¹

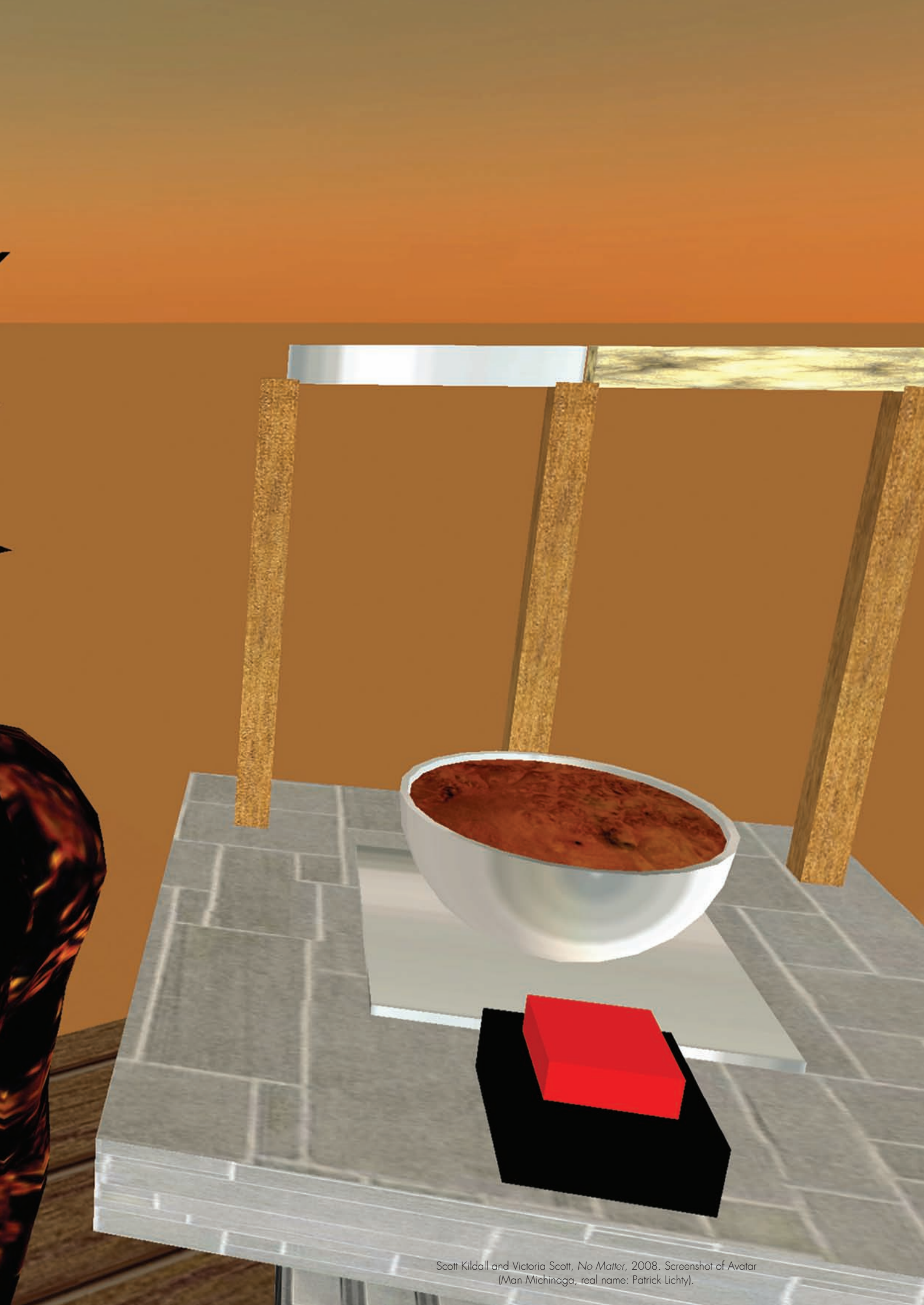
Camille Turner's exhibition *Transmute* at the University of Toronto Arts Centre, in conjunction with the Subtle Technologies Festival in June 2009, focuses on SL as a space of potential creativity, collaboration, and production. This is not necessarily a new notion. Since online communities have been in place artists have utilized virtual space for art practice. Anachronistic performance artworks peppered the landscape of



Scott Kildall and Victoria Scott, *No Matter - Paper Tiger*, 2008. Paper sculpture (inkjet on archival paper and glue). Photos by Peter Harris.







Scott Kildall and Victoria Scott, *No Matter*, 2008. Screenshot of Avatar (Man/Michinaga, real name: Patrick Lichty).





Everquest; released in 1999, the online game which was addictive enough to be referred to as “evercrack.” However, despite its “dungeons and dragons” aesthetic, the devotion of its players proved that we would invest both our real-world time and money in virtual worlds.

On first reading, Turner’s exhibition appears quite spare, with only three artists, two of whom are collaborators. However, the works themselves prove dense as multiple layers of possible engagement reveal themselves to the audience. Lynn Heller’s performance *Dancing with Myself* examines her relationship with her SL avatar Nar Duell. It is incumbent on me to stop and comment on this canny artist’s

choice of name for her avatar since the surname, or might I say species name, is provided by Second Life, but the first name, or genus, is chosen by the user. Heller’s choice of Nar to precede Duell provides a glimmer of the transgressive potential of life in this virtual world. However, *Dancing with Myself* is hardly a racy performance despite the title’s reference to eighties bad-boy, pop star Billy Idol. Instead Heller, also a trained dancer, performs with her digital doppelganger whose dancing image is projected on three walls of the gallery. Twirling and dipping, Nar Duell effortlessly flits across the walls, while Heller attempts to mimic her movements and keep up. By allowing her avatar, who has been moderately programmed by the artist, to dictate the choreography Heller transfers agency, bringing into relief the complicated relationship between the user and their avatar. Sitting somewhere between Dr. Frankenstein and Geppetto, the user/participant creates their avatar, but relinquishes control as they confront previously unknown situations in SL. It is difficult to navigate this virtual world wherein behind each avatar is someone languishing before a computer. For all the activity and fantasy enacted by the avatars, there are sessile users clicking away. This image brings to mind Tom Sherman’s video work *HALF/LIVES* (2001), where solitary women and men sit staring at screens while a male voiceover, drawn from an answering machine, laments having missed the machine’s owner. With that in mind, one might consider Heller’s dancing as somewhat cautionary. During the performance the artist is at pains to keep up with the eternally youthful Nar Duell. She eventually tires and the performance comes to a halt, whereas we know the avatar can go on ad infinitum, at least until the plug is pulled or the battery dies.

Scott Kildall and Victoria Scott’s contribution to *Transmute* is the collaborative work *No Matter*, a thick, analytical project that both celebrates and critiques the potential for creative production in virtual communities. For this project Kildall and Scott commissioned SL builders to construct “imaginary objects.” *Pandora’s Box*, *Kryptonite*, *Trojan Horse*, *The Maltese Falcon*, and *Red Herring* are just a few of the objects which likely have as many possible representations as readers. Construction was at the discretion of the builder and once completed the works were simultaneously premiered — online at the *Ars Virtual Gallery* in SL and at the Huret & Spector Gallery, Emerson College, Boston. It was an inspired decision on Kildall and Scott’s part to manifest these objects in the real world. To achieve this each object was deconstructed into a flat plane and then, as a real world image, printed out as paper cut-outs with tabs for reconstruction. This enabled two iterations of these objects, the first as flat prints and also as reconstructed paper objects, which are eerily reminiscent of their virtual counterparts.

Scott and Kildall capture and bring forward the spartan nature of the SL world. Char Davies, an artist who is alone in her mastery of virtual reality as a medium, has suggested that “resolution is

over-rated” and I tend to agree with her.² When presented to us on their faux-wood shelving units and plinths these imaginary objects embody the joie de vivre of SL inhabitation. While the labour involved in this construction has been documented for online audiences in both hours and cost — the builder was paid in Linden dollars which currently has an exchange rate of 250 Linden dollars to one US dollar — most of the works required far less investment than would their real world counterparts. This is the charm of the imaginary objects. Quick and naïve, they capture the infantile aesthetics of children’s toys, particularly as paper renderings. The *No Matter* website documents the scope of the project, taking an instrumental approach to the economics of constructing numerous artworks by builders from across the globe — Chicago; Mexico City; Paris, France; Jacksonville, North Carolina; Amsterdam; Scotland, among others. An ironic scaffolding to the folded paper objects in *Transmute*.

When developing his theories of evolution Charles Darwin referred to the process of species change most often as *transmutation*, as described in the *Transmutation Notebooks*.³ During the nineteenth century, transmutation, transformation, and evolution meant more or less the same thing. Turner’s astute titling of this exhibition draws the viewer back to the nineteenth century with its high degree of innovation on the part of scientists, theorists, and artists. Heller, Kildall, and Scott share the spirit of curiosity prevalent during that prolific period of change where scientists were theorizing our connections to our environment. The scrutinization of SL which Heller, Kildall and Scott undertake hearkens back to their romantic counterparts who critiqued the age of mechanization and intellect they lived in. *Transmute* brings into relief the complexity of the new world of SL, which, if it continues on its present rate of change, is with us for a while.

CAROLINE LANGILL

Caroline Seck Langill is an interdisciplinary artist, writer, and curator living in Peterborough, Ontario. Educated at Ontario College of Art with an MFA from York, and a PhD in Canadian Studies from Trent University, her research spans the fields of science and art. As a researcher in residence at the Daniel Langlois Foundation in 2006 she explored the history of new media art in Canada, noting the pioneering nature of much of the work produced by Canadian artists working with electronics and computers in the 1970s and 1980s. She has extended this project into new research on the preservation of new media, knowledge migration, and machine/human behaviour. Her most recent publications include chapters in *Place Studies in Art, Media, Science and Technology: Historical Investigations on the Sites and the Migration of Knowledge* (VDG 2009) and *Leonardo’s Choice: Genetic Technologies and Animals* (Springer 2009). She is currently Acting Associate Dean, in the Faculty of Art at Ontario College of Art and Design in Toronto.

NOTES

¹ In April 2009, Ontario College of Art and Design celebrated two years of its campus in Second Life.

² From a talk by the artist given at *Gender, Subjectivity, Embodiment, and the Transformation of Cinematic Practice in Contemporary New Media Art: Exploring the Interactive Work of Char Davies, Toni Dove, and Zoe Beloff*. Symposium on Feminist New Media Art. Université de Montréal, Montréal, Québec, April 2004.

³ Richards, Robert J. *Darwin and the Emergence of Evolutionary Theories of Mind and Behaviour*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.