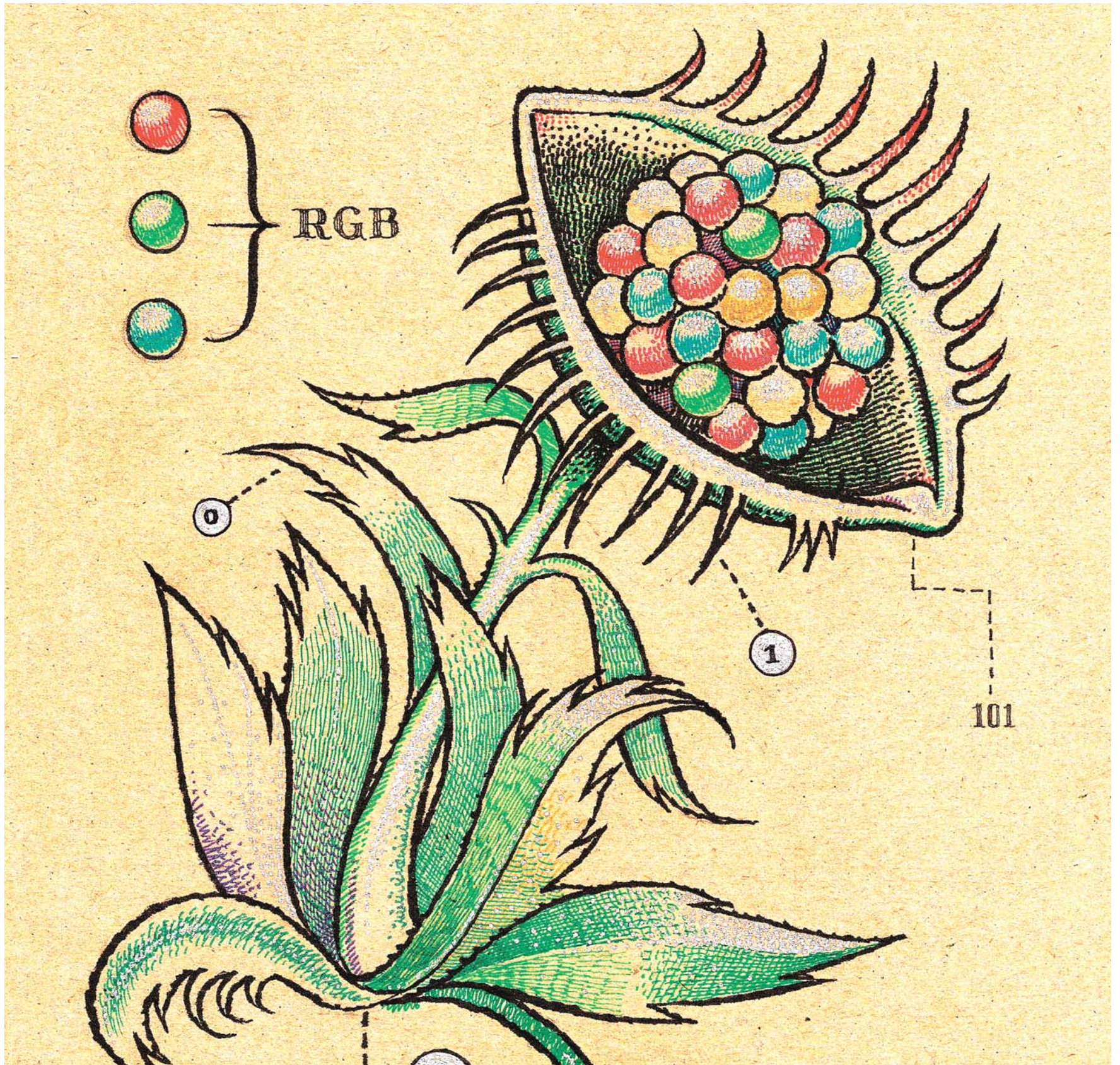


Volume 3, Issue 43
WEEK OF 2 NOVEMBER
TO 8 NOVEMBER 2006
Inside: Music,
Film, Art and Events

**FREE EVERY
WEDNESDAY**

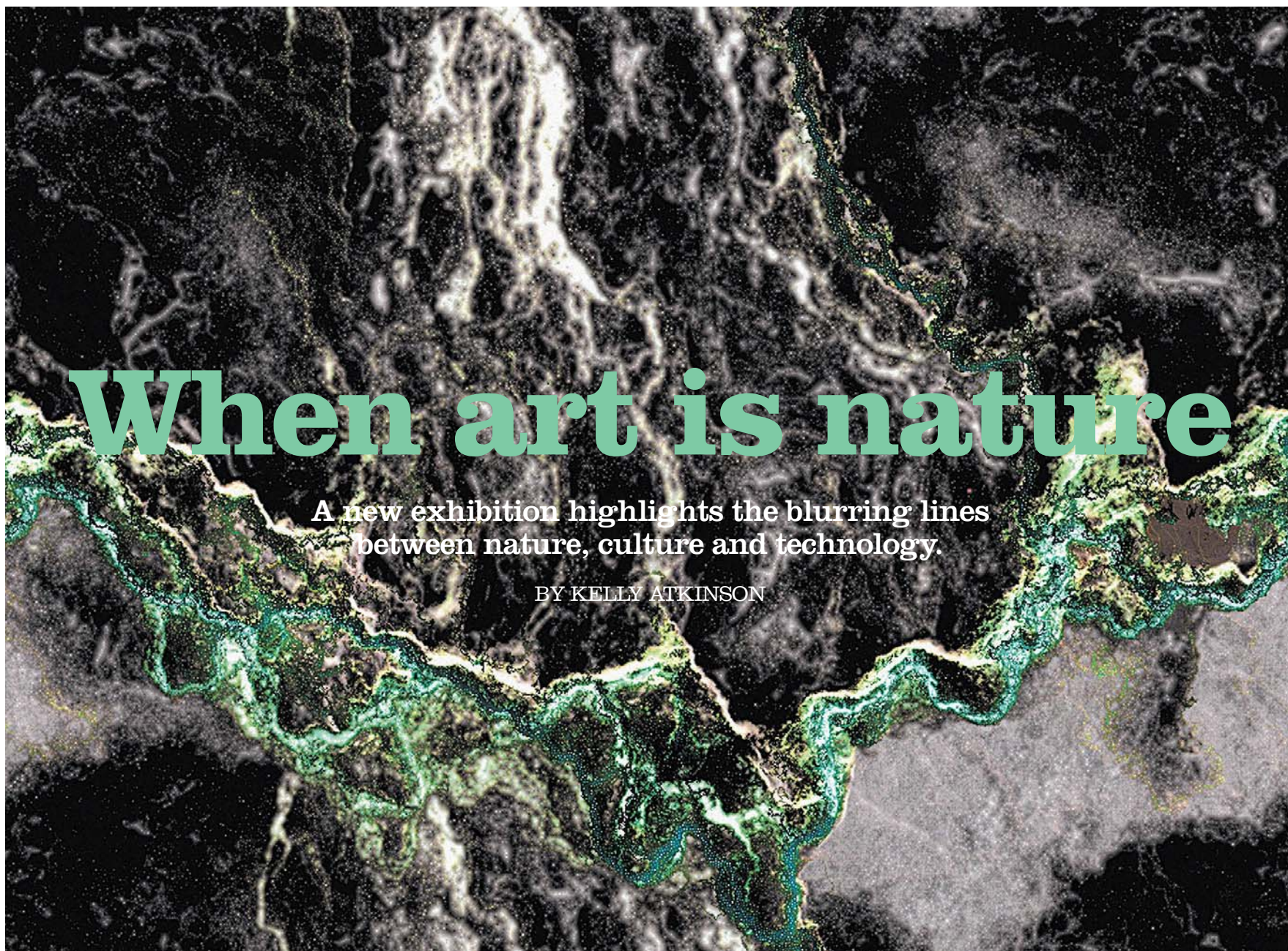


**Plug into our
Museumnacht pull-out**

ART ⁰ versus NATURE

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When art is nature

A new exhibition highlights the blurring lines between nature, culture and technology.

BY KELLY ATKINSON

Although Amsterdam has 28 parks within the greater city area, it's often easy to feel disconnected from nature as you go about your daily life. Even in some of the greenest parts of our city—the Vondelpark, Oosterpark, Rembrandtpark, Park Frankendael—the plants grow on land that has been cultivated for centuries. As trees are felled on streets like Singel and—perhaps—Bilderdijkstraat in the name of widening roads, and as increasingly efficient building techniques mean that indigenous birds lose their traditional nesting places in open gutters and crumbling walls, even the smallest signs of the natural world are being removed from the city landscape and pushed within the boundaries of the parks. This has produced a strange series of cultivated nature reserves to which city-dwellers can go to experience the 'natural' environment. This modern paradox of the borders, boundaries and overlaps of nature, culture and technology is the subject of *Natural Habitat*, the newest exhibition at the Netherlands media arts institute Montevideo/Time Based Arts.

Set to launch just a few hours before the official beginning of Museum8, the exhibition gathers together works from more than 10 different artists and art groups, from countries as varied as Russia, Iceland, the UK, France and the Netherlands. The wide variety of works all have one thing in common: they examine nature. But the question, of course, is how do we define 'nature'? Artist, scientist and

mastermind behind nextnature.net Koert van Mensvoort explains how he began thinking about the topic. '[It] started with a story about a young girl who grew up in the city. She washed her hair regularly with pine-scented shampoo. Then one day, when she went for a walk in the woods with her father, she said, "Daddy, the woods smell of shampoo!"'

The Next Nature movement is based on the idea that nature need not be something that is pre-formed and static; instead, like culture, it can also be something that develops and changes along with society.

Van Mensvoort continues: 'Nowadays the average child recognises more logos and brands than bird or tree species. In the Netherlands, prehistoric woods are being laid out at locations designated by politicians; our image of nature is being carefully constructed as a recreational simulation. I started wondering: do we still have genuine experiences of nature? Or are we living in a picture of it?' These thoughts led Van Mensvoort and Mieke Gerritzen to launch the 'Biggest Visual Power Show' at Paradiso last year, with various artists and other creative types giving presentations on 'culturally emerged nature' and the increasingly blurred lines between nature and culture. The Next Nature movement organise events, make movies and write texts examining the topic.

Alongside a collection of Next Nature images, the artistic team of Erwin Driessens and Maria Verstappen will present two contrasting works. *Frankendael* is a collection of nine short films, each

composing a dreamy merging of photographs taken in the park of the same name. Driessens and Verstappen took one photo each week for 12 months, taking care to place their camera in exactly the same position each time at the various locations they chose around the park. Later, using self-designed software, they merged the pictures to give a slowly changing view of the transformation of the landscape throughout the year. The result is a subtle, barely perceptible journey through the seasons. Just as in nature, if you stare closely it doesn't seem like anything much is happening—but look away to look back later and the changes are obvious and dramatic.

Driessens and Verstappen say that one of the big problems they had with making the *Frankendael* works was that the landscape changed so much in some of their chosen locations that they turned out to be inappropriate for the films. 'We started in winter,' Verstappen says, 'so the trees were quite bare and the grass was brown.' But by the time summer came, some of the areas were so overgrown that the camera saw nothing but green. The changes had been so striking that they rendered this reproduction of the supposedly 'gentle' changes in nature implausible.

I make my own trip to Park Frankendael in Watergraafsmeer, along with agricultural engineer Willem Van haecke, to see the city's 'nature' for myself. In the 18th century, this was a remote area where the wealthy built country houses and got away from the hustle and bustle of town. But

E-volver. *Breeding natural images?*

that was more than 200 years ago. Today, the park mostly seems to consist of rich green lawns, as smooth and flat as only reclaimed Dutch land can be. If we could somehow turn the sound off perhaps it would be relaxing, but the noise of the traffic seems to be even louder against the peaceful appearance of the surroundings. Over the treetops, the unmistakable shapes of the RAI and the Delta Lloyd building are visible in the distance. On the far edge of the park, the Klein Dantzig *volkstuinten* provide locals with a little piece of nature to call their own, as long as they follow the rules: all paths must be kept clean and tidy, about 20% of the garden space must be used for ornamental plants and shrubs, the rest must be kept free of weeds. Through the window of one of the little allotment houses I catch sight of a man pouring a cup of tea. Getting back to nature, city style.

On the other side of the *volkstuinten* we see the *Insectenkring*, a series of small curved brick walls nestled between two larger semi-circles. It turns out that not all bees are social insects—who'd have thought it?—according to Van haecke; instead, many of them live alone and raise only their own young rather than taking care of a hive. These solitary insects used to live in the rough places on tree bark or brickwork. But trees are getting few and far between in town, and the nooks and crannies in mortar are not nearly as common as they used to be, due to the modern building products.



and nature is art

'There are some kinds of flowers that are only pollinated by solitary bees, not by social bees,' Van haecke tells me, 'so when the solitary bees disappear from the urban environment, so do some of the plants we have as well.' Artist Agnes van Genderen designed the piece to serve the purpose of artwork and environmental aid in one.

As we head back through the main park we approach the former *stadskwekerij*, a building left over from the days the property was owned by Gemeente Amsterdam and used as the breeding ground for all the seedlings needed for the city's parks and gardens.

Van haecke says that there is nothing new about human growing and harvesting of plants. 'People have been cultivating the earth for thousands of years. It's hardly something you could call "unnatural."'

Truly nature repurposed as culture now, the enormous glasshouse has become the acclaimed high-end restaurant De Kas, with its own herb garden and vegetables growing outside. The *stadskwekerij* has moved elsewhere, as we city-dwellers need this park for 'nature'. I can't see any birds apart from pigeons, but the park benches are decorated with enormous white swans on each side.

But a different kind of *kwekerij* has been developed by Driessens and Verstappen. The E-volver is a *beeldkwekerij*, or 'image-cultivating machine', which takes inspiration from the methods of evolutionary biology to produce colourful, ever-changing images. 'We did a lot of different experiments, also with physical

algorithms and processes, and we used the computer to create virtual processes,' explains Verstappen. Tiny creatures on the screen travel around interacting with the pixels, which are each pre-programmed to react in various ways according to their surroundings. The viewer selects a number of variables, such as colour and basic pattern, and the result is an unpredictable, uncontrollable image that is constantly and rapidly changing.

When the work is in action, it's uncanny how much some of the resulting images resemble patterns that occur in nature. One output looks exactly like spores of mould, growing so fast it's as though they are seen under time-lapse photography. Another of the images could at one point be mistaken for an aerial view of a mountaintop, complete with craggy outcrops and snow caps. Yet another 'painting' produced by the E-volver looks like a satellite photo, showing the earth from a distance. No two illustrations produced by the machine are alike, and Verstappen says that many viewers have difficulty believing that the images are computer-generated because they bear so much resemblance to scenes that we might see in nature. 'When they see a print produced by the E-volver, a lot of people cannot believe that it was made by a computer,' she says.

I began to wonder if these images were the future of nature in the city, but Driessens didn't think so. 'I think that there will always be interaction with nature, because nature is just the world around us,' he told me. 'So, even if you're in the city, that's also nature in a sense. It's not

nature like rural places... but to be confronted with things you cannot really control, that's nature.'

If that is true, then many of the works at *Natural Habitat* are in fact 'nature'. Like Driessens and Verstappen, the UK duo Vicky Isley and Paul Smith, collaborating as Boredom Research, have produced a computer-based work that in a sense is able to take on a life of its own, uncontrolled by its creator. Their 2005 project, 'Biomes', consists of six 'computational artworks' each using a small screen that can be either wall or table mounted. The screens, only about the size of a television, provide the windows to six different virtual worlds of about a mile in circumference. This means that just a tiny part of the world is visible at one time. Small bodies of various types, some looking like colourful fish or bugs, others more abstract, are visible as they pass by the screen window before disappearing into other areas of their virtual environment. As with the E-volver's pixel creatures, these bodies have evolved over time in ways that the creators could not have predicted.

'When [the biomes] were first launched,' says Isley, 'the bodies that inhabit the space were bland and unmarked. It would have been fair to say that all bodies were basically a single-coloured gel-like blob. Within the space of an hour, this was no longer true as some had developed simple lines and coloured bandings.' As time went on, the bodies developed increasingly complex markings before their evolution began to level off.

Frankendael. *An unnatural park.?*

The biomes are quite addictive, and Isley reports that they often see viewers walking away from the screens and then checking back to see what else might be coming into view. '[W]e're keen to develop works that are rewarding to just watch and therefore you don't have to read a manual to understand how they work,' she says.

Isley hopes that exhibitions like *Natural Habitat* are not going to be the only way that city-dwellers will interact with nature in the future, although she admits that even though she lives in south-west England's New Forest, she often finds herself only viewing nature through windows. 'We do attempt to capture some of the magic of [nature] but prefer to see this as an extension rather than an alternative. It would be a sad day indeed if our systems were considered a city-dweller's alternative to the natural world.'

At least, until that happens, we still have places like Park Frankendael. In our crowded city, it's hardly surprising that our version of 'back to nature' is relatively contrived. It seems that it's enough to have a little green space around, a home for bees and possibly even a garden hut of one's own nearby, in what is arguably Amsterdam's alternative to the natural world. **W**

Natural Habitat opens 4 November, 15.00, until 16 December, Montevideo/ Time Based Arts (Tue-Sat 13.00-18.00), Keizersgracht 264, 623 7101, www.montevideo.nl