

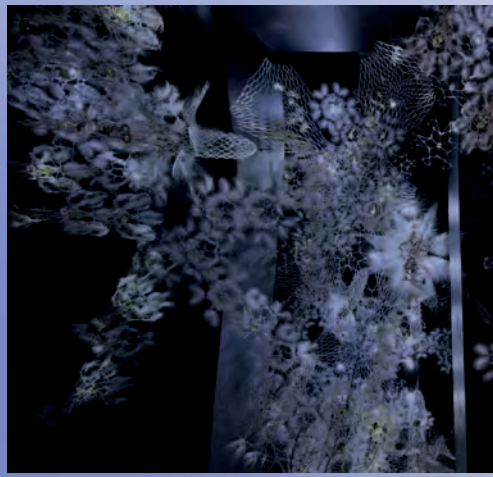
Philip Beesley
City Gallery
Wellington
19 April — 10 June

10am — 5pm
citygallery.org.nz

Hylozoic Series

VESICA

19 April—
10 June 2012



VESICA

Philip Beesley Hylozoic Series: Vesica

“The work is an empathic organism that interacts with individuals entering its space, creating the sensation of a responsive architecture that might begin to ‘know’ and ‘care’ about us, that might start, in very primitive ways, to be alive.” — Philip Beesley

Philip Beesley creates immersive interactive environments; uniquely responsive ecologies that exist somewhere between sculpture and architecture, between machine and living organism, between this world and another.

These environments are constructed from an intricate framework of transparent acrylic links and many thousands of digitally fabricated interactive components fitted with sensors and microprocessors. Human movements trigger an ongoing sequence of reactions and counter-reactions, inviting the viewer into the process of making. The work mimics organic structures and human biological functions as it retracts, contracts, relaxes, and opens in response to human presence.

Vesica is the latest iteration in an ongoing series of collaborative installations under the collective title *Hylozoic Series*. Referencing ‘hylozoism’ – the ancient belief that all matter, whether natural or artificial, has life – Beesley’s work examines how inert materials can be transformed into living forms through emerging technologies. The work contemplates the broad implications that these transformative processes might have for our relationship with our environment, and for the way we may live in the future.

The defining qualities of these environments are at once tangible and imperceptible. Our physical encounter is mediated by computer-programming; the system powered by the open-source computing platform Arduino, developed to provide public access to software-controlled interactivity tools. The series considers a future for architecture and design led by individual human responses to built environments. There is a lightness of form; an almost ethereal quality to this space that is neither the architecture of immense foundations, nor one of endless concrete facades. Instead, its structural delicacy and transmutability displays a sensitivity to

form and movement. Here, we encounter a kind of living architecture where people are not distinct or external from their physical surroundings. Instead, the viewer is rendered part of a singularly expansive and interwoven structure.

The title *Vesica* refers to the art historical tradition of circumscribing holy figures within a luminous aura or halo; a visual manifestation indicative of a non-corporeal power or otherworldly enlightenment. Channelling this evocation of an enriched and fertile immersion, the work invites the viewer into a nurturing space of expanding and dissolving boundaries. In sacred geometry, used in the construction of religious structures, the term ‘vesica’ also refers to the intersecting zone within two overlapping circles; a transitional space symbolically located between Heaven and Earth. The visitor enters into this indefinite state, where individual bodies may become entwined within a complex system. *Vesica* draws on our desire to empathise with the environment that surrounds us. The project invites us to identify, understand, and engage with the external world on a physical, cognitive, and emotional level.

There is undoubtedly a particular intimacy at work here – we directly engage with this environment and vice versa, but our experience may be tempered by an underlying hesitancy to trust this encounter, to put our faith in something that might seem to violate a natural order. For many, these meticulously constructed environments might conjure up visions from possible science fiction narratives; where androids or humanoid robots rise up to threaten humanity’s existence. One particularly apt parallel might be found in John Wyndham’s post-apocalyptic novel *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), in which the world is imperilled by a bio-engineered and globally cultivated plant species displaying intelligent and aggressive characteristics.

Counter to the tragic fate of humanity often proffered by science fiction, *Vesica* undermines the established dichotomy of natural vs. unnatural and related associations of good vs. evil. It questions the sustainability and viability of these proposed binaries through the presentation of an intermediate and multifarious space; nurturing an encounter through which renewed, sensitive relationships with our environment might take shape. *Vesica* offers a way forward that is not tempered by fear, but by delight – exploiting the near-magical qualities of interactive technologies to highlight a magnitude of possibilities for how we might connect with each other and the environment within which we live.

Lily Hacking
Hirschfeld Gallery Curator

Biography

Philip Beesley is a professor at the University of Waterloo School of Architecture. His education includes a professional degree from the University of Toronto, a degree in fine art from Queen’s University, a diploma in technology from Humber College and an apprenticeship in instrument making.

Philip Beesley Architect Incorporated (PBAI) is an interdisciplinary design collective based in Toronto. Led by sculptor and architect Philip Beesley, the collective has produced major installations in Madrid, Linz, Enschede, Brussels, New York, Los Angeles, New Orleans, Mexico City, Copenhagen. In 2010 PBAI was selected to represent Canada at the 12th International Venice Biennale in Architecture.

DeSForM

Philip Beesley has been brought to Wellington as part of the 2012 *DeSForM Conference: Meaning, Matter, Making*, hosted by Victoria University School of Design in Wellington. The International Workshop on the Design & Semantics of Form & Movement, was conceived in 2005 as an international platform for the presentation and exchange of current research into new forms of digitally enhanced objects, interactions and experiences.

<http://desform2012.schoolofdesign.ac.nz/>
<http://www.philipbeesleyarchitect.com/>
<http://www.arduino.cc/>

“Philip Beesley’s interactive installations—part creatures, part environments; part mechanical, part biological—remind us that the cosmological point of reference for architecture has shifted from the human to the non-human: from the Vitruvian man inscribed in a circle and a square as the guarantor of universal validity, to the tangled web of creatures and environments within which humanity lives a promiscuous life.”

Detlef Mertins in Philip Beesley, *Hylozoic Ground: liminal responsive architecture*, Riverside Architectural Press, 2010, p. 7.

“The Hylozoic environment embodies some of the principles under investigation in the scientific study of the origins of life. The Hylozoic environment exists in a material reality and might arguably best be described through scientific narratives, while at the same time its complexity, scale, aesthetics, and sublime presence invoke other humanities-based disciplines that value poetics.”

Rachel Armstrong in Philip Beesley, *Hylozoic Ground: liminal responsive architecture*, Riverside Architectural Press, 2010, p. 136.

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