

Suzanne Treister

## **From Fictional Videogame Stills to Time Travelling with Rosalind Brodsky**

**1991 - 2005**

From the mid to late nineteen eighties I spent several nights a week hanging out in amusement arcades in London's Soho with my boyfriend who was hooked on videogames. Over time, waiting around for him to finish so we could go and eat or see a film, I started to think about the games, their structures, their objectives, their themes, their addictiveness. I started to consider their cultural subtexts, antecedents, the effect they may have on society and how they might develop and connect to other mechanisms, developments and fantasies or projections of the future.

At the time I was a painter working with appropriated imagery from history and popular culture to describe hypothetical narratives, or possible ways of reading the world. An early series had used themes and imagery relating to the USSR/Russia whilst later works related to other geographies, referencing literature, art history, war and religion in the mapping of imaginary scenarios, intentionally open to interpretation by the viewer. On one level much of this work originated from a desire to negotiate my family history, specifically the issues and historical events surrounding the relocation of my father from Poland/France to the UK during WWII.

The artworld context I was working in at the time was that of high Post Modernism and much of the work mine was included in exhibitions with denied the possibility of subjectivity or narrativity, its strategies of re-presentation and appropriation deriving instead from, for example, Roland Barthes' ideas of the death of the author. Many artists were wary of working outside the framework of this and other post modern theoretical discourses. This is obviously an over simplification and also may say more about the critical writing of the time than the attitudes of individual artists who are far too numerous to mention in this essay. Most of them seemed to be based either in London or New York, the Germans and Italians having been mostly thrown out with the demise of the new expressionist movement of the early 80s and everyone else seemed to be in the category of 'other', waiting in line for the effects of Post Colonial theory, other more inclusive discourses and a new global paradigm.

My own relationship to all this theory was complex. Since my rebellious membership of a politically extreme youth group in the 1970s I had been wary of subscribing wholeheartedly to any ideology or doctrine, although much of this I found fascinating, especially that related to psychoanalysis and paranoias of the future. So although I found my work contextualised with much of this often illustrative theory driven work, I never felt comfortable within those parameters and would say so, feeling more at home with the work of artists who (I assume) wanted their work to also investigate the world more directly, in the UK, artists such as Susan Hiller and Mark Wallinger for example, who seemed to be able to see outside of the box.

By the end of 1987 my paintings had begun to develop a more repetitive visual structure, images such as books spines, candles, metal bolts and fluorescent lights were repeated in rows, blocks or mazes, housing other images or scenes. These works sometimes referenced ludic structures as ways of mapping space and encouraging the viewer's interaction in a psychological sense.

Given the nature of my painting practice it felt natural for me to pick up on a new cultural development such as videogames as reference material for my work and in turn for this work to begin to comment on the phenomenon of videogames themselves.

In 1988 I made the first videogame paintings, substituting the characters or forms found in arcade games for historical characters or living persons and everyday objects.

'Koons Kiefer Videogame' (fig 1.) made in 1989 represented the US artist Jeff Koons as a kitsch toy horse about to enter the space of German artist Anselm Kiefer, depicted as a virtual forest of birch trees made up of end to end painted book spines. The inclusion of 'Videogame' in the title aimed to provoke an anticipation of a goal oriented narrative at play, and in the case of the painting, and other related works to come, the development and outcome of this narrative was to be projected by the viewer.

The second painting in the series was titled, 'Videogame for Primo Levi' (fig.2). Levi was an author I admired, writing about his survival of the Holocaust. I set up the structure of the painting/game as a maze of bolts and hinges through which clusters of green light bulbs had to make their way. The painting was stylistically overtly kitsch, but monumental in scale and reference, highlighting the problematics of artistic representations of history in relation to the corresponding horrific actuality of events, and in turn commenting on the anaesthetising effect of the video game narratives, which were based for the most part on the idea of continuous killing or destruction in the pursuit of an ultimate and singular goal.

Over the next couple of years I continued to develop these works which became more abstracted and more often used objects rather than figures to investigate and re-present a diverse range of propositions. Soon I was beginning to feel that the medium was not appropriate for the language I was developing and that I needed to experiment working directly with the medium of the games themselves, i.e. the computer, rather than one burdened with the entire history of art, or more specifically with the baggage of painting. This was not an easy decision to make, but a necessary and exciting risk I felt at the time.

One Saturday morning in 1991 while I was half way through reading William Gibson's 'Neuromancer' I finally made up my mind and rushed into town, to the cut price electronic shops of Tottenham Court Road to buy an Amiga computer. It came with no internal hard drive and half a megabyte of RAM.

Over the following six months I made a series of fictional videogame stills using Deluxe Paint II software. They were similar to the recent paintings but now incorporated digital effects, text and inevitably resembled far more closely the games themselves.

Below is a list of titles of the early Amiga works:

Are you Dreaming?

Dream Monster. (fig.3)

Easyworld 5.

Examine the Evidence.

Have you been sentenced to a fate worse than death? (fig.4)

You have reached the Gates of Wisdom - Tell us what you have seen. (fig.5)

Incidents reported.

Do you know?

Lost in Space.

Blinded by the Text.

Monster Visions/Song Titles.

Identify the Murder Weapon. (fig.6)

Mutant Territories-Grand Prix.

Quiz 2.

No Quiz.

Quiz - 10 Questions.

Some works contained only text instructions, e.g. in 'Easyworld 5' in front of a royal blue curtain appeared the words:

Determine your position on the screen and proceed at an even pace. So long as you know where you are you will be ok. Wait until you have decided where you want to go first. When you have made your decision move player 1 into a vacant box. Then the curtain will open slowly to reveal the object of your dreams. Wait for a few seconds and then press "EXIT". You will have arrived at the scene of a crime. Welcome to Easyworld 5.

Text was able to enter the works in an organic sense, in that the computer screen was a natural site of text; word processing, text messages, programming. All these manifest text on the screen and I could play on this directly in the works whilst intimating broader subtextual narratives and readings.

I photographed these early Amiga works straight from the screen, the effect of the photographs perfectly reproducing the highly pixilated, raised needlepoint effect of the Amiga screen image. Conceptually this means of presentation was appropriate in that it made it

seem like I had gone into a videogame arcade and photographed the games there, lending authenticity to the fictions.

I showed this series of photographs in a solo show at the Edward Tootah Gallery in London in 1992, printed up as 20" x 24" cibachromes mounted on aluminium, floating out from the wall in a line running around the whole of one floor of the gallery. The floppy discs I had stored the works on became corrupted a few years later but scans of the photographs are online at <http://ensemble.va.com.au/Treister/Ampages/Amenu.html>)

On the other floor of the gallery I also showed a series of paintings I had made after spending six months solely on the computer. The transition back and forwards to painting had been extremely stressful but necessary for my practice. I needed to see what implications the transition to digital media would have on my approach to painting. The main issues were the increased speed of working on a computer, especially in duplicating repeat images, which had made the laboriousness of the painting process feel ever more redundant. The other issue was output, I was used to making paintings on a large scale which had an automatic (subjective of course) authority based on their art historical lineage, whilst the Amiga works were small and more graphic looking. Although this made sense in terms of their referencing the videogame console screen it reduced their sense of presence on the wall which is often a quality valued by painters and a hard thing to face the possibility of losing when switching media.

I decided to just go with the flow, do whatever I felt like and these new works marked a radical shift away from my previous paintings. Having enjoyed working with text in the Amiga works I decided to explore different ways of working with painted text, utilising paint's inherent potential rather than worrying about its limitations. This resulted in a series of large works of composed phrases similar to those I had written for the computer works but rendered mostly in expressive brushstrokes calling upon a wide variety of typographical styles and cultural references. The background to the texts was either monochrome flat colour or a hybrid of textured abstract repeated marks, somewhere between Jasper Johns' criss crosses and the kind of effect you could get on the computer in Deluxe Paint II if you drew with a 'brush' made of a small cropped pixellated area from an image.

There was a mixed audience reaction to the show. Feedback from the gallery suggested that art students were flocking in droves and very excited by the new digital videogame works, as were people from the music industry, whereas older generations seemed unsure how to read them. No one seemed to know what to make of the new direction in my paintings, especially in relation to the computer work, except the British writer/curator Andrew Renton who wrote a great review for Flash Art (May/June 1992), but over the following years I detected (maybe coincidentally) their influence in younger artists' work.

At the time of making these first digital works I felt quite alone. In 1991 when fellow artists came to my studio and I showed them for the first time my Amiga computer humming on the paint stained workbench they would ask worriedly, 'Of course you'll only be using it to work out your paintings, won't you?' I was severely warned by many artists of the dangers of being 'taken over' by the machine, not that they had been near anything more complex than a fax machine to know, but we had all watched the movies.

I was conscious of where else this attitude was coming from; there seemed to be a couple of artists around who had made work on computers and it was either illustrative work or the early kind of 3D special effects slick fractal looking stuff, low on content as we knew it. But there was also this misconception that the computer actually made the work rather than the artist and this could be blamed on the term 'computer generated' which seemed to have mysteriously entered the language.

I would explain that I'd be going in there armed with a knowledge of art, art history and the experience of my own art practice, I wouldn't be getting seduced by the gimmickry and be using the slick effects programmed in by software designers. The idea was to engage with technology to talk about the here and now, where we were at, where we were going and in doing so not forget where we've been, so history and literature and ideas and all these things would of course be incorporated into the new language to become a commentary both on the future and on the past.

I wasn't particularly seduced by video games or computers at the time, but I felt I had to deal with them as they were not going to go away. I had been however, since childhood, seduced by science fiction, from the British TV series 'Doctor Who', 'The Tomorrow People', 'Adam Adamant Lives', to the writing of George Orwell, H G Wells and J G Ballard. These, along with writers who interested me several years later, for example Bulgakov, Bassani, Umberto Eco, Borges, Bruno Schulz and William Gibson, plus my interest in psychoanalytic theory and obsession with the Holocaust and Eastern Europe, all these I would say in one way or another, however oblique, contributed to my move into the new media world, and within that, more explicitly, to a belief in the idea that narrativity and 'reality' was becoming fluid and mutable within these new technologies and to a suspicion that somehow the 'interactive' video game was an early embodiment of a whole new paradigm which needed to be interrogated.

From the time of my first involvement in videogames - from 1988, until 1992 - I was not aware of any other artists using them as a medium or as source material, nor did there seem to be any interest in the subject from within academia, although this changed abruptly a few years later alongside the expansion of the cultural studies industry. There was also, at the time, no 'new media' art scene in the UK to speak of; in London the notion of using computers to make

art was considered with disdain and even currently the term new media often translates solely as video. Now, at the time of writing, the Arts Council of England has a new media funding board and has recently produced a book, just at a time when 'mainstream' artists have begun (often oblivious to politicised new media discourses) to incorporate all forms of technology into their hybrid practices, merging the distinction between fields and rendering the category in many ways redundant.

It wasn't until I moved, for personal reasons, to Adelaide in South Australia in early 1992 that I came upon a community of artists engaged in digital media, Francesca da Rimini, Julianne Pierce, Josie Starrs and Virginia Barratt of 'VNS Matrix', who revolved within the orbit of ANAT (the Australian Network of Art and Technology) which had been set up in 1984 by da Rimini under the umbrella of Adelaide's Experimental Art Foundation. These artists were engaged in a form of techno gender war using accusatory phrases in their work such as 'Big Daddy Mainframe' in attempts to subvert the male dominated technosphere and the boysy shoot-em-up mentality of video games. Although I didn't share the overtly feminist focus of this group I was encouraged by their energy and drive and by the realisation that Australia was way ahead of the UK in the field. There was already a discourse going on from Adelaide to Sydney and all around the country with workshops set up by ANAT twice a year training artists in new skills. Reasons for this may have been partly due to the distance/exclusion factor of being an artist in Australia but would also have been encouraged by the combination of a lack of art market and highly developed alternative culture in Adelaide, aided by forward thinking attitudes and processes of constant reinvention prevalent in the country at the time.

Throughout my first six months in Australia I continued working largely on text paintings as I had no computer access and also developed a collaborative project (a fictional detective agency) with local artists and writers. In late 1992 I returned to London for three months where I produced a series of paintings describing a route through a virtual castle. I also worked on a new Amiga based series which presented stills from a single imaginary videogame. This piece played on the phenomenon of computer system messages counterpoised with the cultural fear/fantasy of a technological future paradise. Individual texts read in sequential order:

Would you recognise a Virtual Paradise? (fig.7)

Not enough Memory for operation (fig.8)

Presume Virtual Breakdown

You have entered a Virtual Wilderness

Software Failure...

Error finding Question

No Message – Proceed

Between 1993-94 in Adelaide was spent largely working on an extensive series of fictional software boxes, each cardboard box and disc label painted to describe an imaginary game or piece of software where various things may happen, where a whole range of virtual experiences could be possible.<sup>1</sup> (fig.9) These can be seen online at:

<http://ensemble.va.com.au/Treister/paintpages/Software1.html>

On my regular return trips to the UK I noticed the occasional development in the field, in particular the advent in 1993 of Mute magazine (<http://www.metamute.com>) founded by Simon Worthington and Pauline van Mourik Broekman, whose highly engaged relationship with digital media and later on with the politics of the net was on the front line alongside international cultural developments in the area. As with many new media based organisations the move into politics by the mid 90s went hand in hand with the expansion of the internet and a disappointment for the most part in the art produced in the name of technology, although the rhetoric remained important.

In terms of videogame based work in the UK, later on in the nineties the driving-game works of Julian Opie gained some attention in the mainstream artworld and an ex student of mine, John Paul Bichard, artist and videogames writer for Mute, began to work with the medium. In 1996 Bichard invited me, along with half a dozen UK artists to contribute to a videogame style cd rom, *On a Clear Day*, which was largely produced by himself as most of the participants had no computer experience but were selected for their work and ideas. It featured a navigable landscape where one entered each artist's zone through, for example, a helicopter (Fiona Banner), a caravan (Georgina Starr), a forest (Clio Barnard) a barn (Adam Chodzko, Matthew Higgs and Keith Tyson), a road sign (Peter Anderson) and in my case a castle. The cd rom, housed in an arcade sized plain MDF videogame console, toured from the bar of the ICA in London to regional venues in Cambridge, Southampton, Colchester, Southend, Oldham and Middlesbrough.

A year earlier in 1995 in Australia I had had the opportunity to make my first web project. It consisted of a tour through a series of interconnected rooms in a distorted and paranoid version of King Ludwig's castle, Schloss Neuschwanstein in Bavaria. In the same year I began working on a new project, currently ongoing, entitled 'Time Travelling with Rosalind Brodsky'. This project had its origin in the castle in this website, in that Brodsky - who could be considered as an alter ego, avatar or heteronymic identity - had made her home in Schloss Neuschwanstein, in 2005.

The Brodsky project, preceded by imaginary videogame stills, works negotiating ideas of a technological paradise, hypothetical software packages suggesting possible functions and paintings describing scenes through virtual spaces and scenarios, went on to inhabit those spaces, to create a subject and histories inside them.

Rosalind Brodsky, with whom I share Anglo/Eastern European/Jewish roots, was born in London in 1970 and survived until 2058. Her first 'delusional' experience of time travel supposedly occurred while she was in the middle of a session with the psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva in Paris, at the moment she noticed the similarity of Kristeva's face to the photographic portrait of her Polish-Jewish grandmother who had been murdered in the Holocaust. By 1995 Brodsky is a delusional time traveller who believes herself to be working in London at the Institute of Militrionics and Advanced Time Interventionality (IMATI) in the 21st century. IMATI is a 'controversial' government funded organisation which develops equipment and carries out time travel research projects whose results are for use primarily by the military and other government research organisations. Established in 2004 its mission is to carry out interventional historical, anthropological and scientific research through means of time travel. Working with virtual technologies which render the users' bodies invisible in their own time and space the Institute develops virtual simulations of key moments in history. Researchers at the Institute then carry out simulated interventions/experiments within these virtual times/worlds. In academic circles there is controversy as to the validity of this form of 'anthropological' research, but there are many who suspect that IMATI has actually found the secret of authentic time travel.

I began in 1995 by constructing three of Brodsky's time travel costumes (to visit respectively the Russian Revolution, the 1960s and the Holocaust) (fig.10) and a group of time travel attaché cases. In 1996 the work expanded onto a web site; <http://ensemble.va.com.au/tableau/suzy/> where I developed an extensive time travelling diary which documented many of Brodsky's journeys.<sup>1</sup>

This is a text about a semi-autobiographical film supposedly made by Rosalind Brodsky, about an incident at the Institute.

In 2017 the Institute celebrated the centenary of the Russian Revolution by sending all its employees, including Brodsky, to a virtual simulation of Moscow in the year 1917. Due to overloading of the equipment there is a technological dysfunction and Brodsky's body rematerialises in the year 1995. Her body, aged forty seven, walks around in a seemingly trance like state, passing easily through cars, people and architecture within a certain area of London. Brodsky is unaware of being in London as her eyes are reading digital information which tells her she is moving around a simulation of Moscow in the year 1917. This drifting body is inevitably sighted and photographed by journalists and members of the public, one of whom turns out to be Rosalind Brodsky aged twenty five. Brodsky stalks this/her own body and maps the paths taken, noting abrupt turns, the mounting and descending of stairs where there are none, the places of interaction with invisible others, the 'opening' of doors, the



boundaries of the area traversed. Brodsky is in no doubt that there is a parallel space being negotiated. She constructs a map of this parallel space and after much research identifies it as the space within the Kremlin at the time of the Russian Revolution.

From 1997-99 I developed, in line with the developing games industry, and with major funding from the Australian Film Commission, an interactive cd rom which in many ways echoed the structure of quest games such as *Myst*. The cd rom journey takes the form of a tour organised by IMATI in memory of Brodsky's contribution to time travel research. In the introduction to the cd rom there is an announcement of a demonstration of armed academics taking place outside the institute, threatening the building, staff and visitors within. You the player now risk remaining in suspended time travel for the rest of your life. The aim is to survive by navigating the space of Rosalind Brodsky, with escape eventually only possible via her satellite spy probe from where a shuttle transports you back to earth, to an underground home in the mining town of Coober Pedy in South Australia, in the present day.

The tour uncovers biographical and historical data focussing on much of her life, work and personal interests. During her lifetime Brodsky carried out major research in areas of film, TV, music, architecture, genetics, the history of Eastern Europe, the Holocaust (fig.11), the 1960s and the Russian Revolution as well as contributing to the research and design of a range of time travel equipment. From Brodsky's study, concealed behind a memorial wall, you are able to travel to her home in Bavaria, journey from there to her Satellite in outer space (constructed from Christo's wrapped Reichstag teleported by IMATI from Berlin in 1995), access her electronic time travelling diary, her feature vibrators and discover the time travelling costumes and attaché cases in her wardrobe. The wardrobe conceals the entrance to a lift which takes you down to the Clinics (fig.13). The Clinics is an underground laboratory where stressed time travellers, due to the decline of psychoanalysis in the twenty first century, can travel to the homes of Jung, Klein, Lacan and Kristeva for analysis in the twentieth century. Brodsky's case histories with these analysts are documented as are recordings of her time travelling cookery TV show and the music videos of her band (fig.12), who were popular in Eastern Europe in the 2030s.

I wrote at the time, 'This work attempts to negotiate issues of insanity and humour, fetishism and sexuality, identity and technology, in relation to personal histories/fictions and histories of the twentieth century...Brodsky fetishizes history. She becomes a necrophiliac invader of spaces containing the deaths of her ancestors, through the privileged violence of technology.'

In 1995 I had visited Los Angeles for the first time. I stayed with friends for a week and barely left the house. I spent almost the whole time killing and escaping from the Nazis and their dogs in the videogame 'Castle Wolfenstein'.

The cd rom was completed and published with a book in 1999<sup>2</sup>. After the launch at the Freud Museum in London I began work on a video called 'Sightings' in which people I knew around the world imagined/revealed their meeting and interaction with the fictional Brodsky. I also started developing the range of IMATI time travel equipment and worked on a series of Brodsky's delusional watercolours and stamp designs. Various other projects and installations developed after the cd rom and these led me to realise what was still missing from the project.

In 2001 I began working on the first of a series of projects documenting and displaying, in installation, web and dvd form, the *IMATI Time Travel Research Projects* which had supposedly been carried out by Brodsky at the institute<sup>3</sup>. (fig.14)

This first project entitled *Golem/Loew - Artificial Life* explores the myth of the Golem, an artificial man made out of clay, created in 16th century Prague by Rabbi Yehuda Loew (1520 -1609). Tracing the descendants of the Loew dynasty alongside manifestations of the Golem name/legend through history to the present day and into the future, the intention of this project is to test whether an ability and/or desire to create artificial life is a function carried in the DNA.

The second IMATI time travel research project was titled *Operation Swanlake*. Utilising the harnessed energy of a black hole located in the constellation Cygnus (the Swan) *Operation Swanlake* began in 2028 as an attempt to develop a language capable of communicating with the universe. Hypothesising a connection, sonic components were developed using retrieved recordings of swans from specific historical periods and global locations and from first performances of Wagner's *Lohengrin* at the Hoftheatre, Weimar in 1850 and Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* in 1895 at the Mariinsky Theatre, St Petersburg. Renamed the Kirov Theatre in 1935, after Sergei Kirov, the murdered rival of Stalin, the name was also given to a series of Soviet missile cruisers. In 2028 the last of these ships, the *Pyotr Velikiy Kirov Class Project 1144.2 Heavy Missile Cruiser*, was decommissioned and purchased by IMATI as spare parts for the sonic missile *Swanlake* which in 2029 was constructed at Cape Canaveral, Florida. In November of the same year *Swanlake* transmitted a series of complex audio frequencies into outer space. (fig.15)

Often people ask me if I have a problem living with two identities. This always surprises me as the Brodsky project is just a means of expressing how I feel and think about the world, through stories, just like a writer would, and using narrative to explore new ideas and possible ways of looking at the world. Ultimately I see it as commentary, in the sense that first there was the law and then there was commentary, in the biblical sense. Mostly I don't see it as art at all, or videogames.

*In 2004 Jean Wainwright wrote of Operation Swanlake, 'Operation Swanlake is a multilayered installation – its references lie in the extraordinary relationship between Treister's past work such as No Other Symptoms: Time Travelling with Rosalind Brodsky (Treister's alter-ego) looped with her desire to unravel contemporary digital culture with a layered visual marriage between various referents both past and present. In our hyper-digital age different worlds can clash semantically and it seems to be that this is the model that fits Treister's work: like following a complex computer game, Treister's fantasy trip challenges viewers, propelling them into associations which will take them as far as they are hypothetically prepared to travel.'*<sup>4</sup>

Suzanne Treister 2005

#### Notes

1. The early stages of the project were shown in the exhibition 'Pretext Heteronyms' in 1995 (curated by Rear Window) in London at Clink St.Studios, at 'Heteronymous' in Rome (curated by, Achille Bonito Oliva and Anna Maria Nassisi) at San Michele a Ripa and at the ICA in 1996 as part of the 'ICA/Toshiba Art and Innovation Commission' exhibition. From 1997 onwards it was shown in various stages of completion at new media festivals around the world and upon completion as part of installations alongside more recent Brodsky projects in museums and galleries. In 2002 the entire project to date was shown at the 2002 Biennale of Sydney. Recent time travel research projects have been shown in London at Annely Juda Fine Art; Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; Gallery Skuc, Ljubljana; Magazin4 Vorarlberger Kunstverein, Künstlerhaus Palais Thurn & Taxis, Bregenz, Austria as well as new media festivals in Germany, Russia and Brazil.

2. Treister, S., *No Other Symptoms - Time Travelling with Rosalind Brodsky*, 1st edn, London, Black Dog Publishing, 1999. 124 page full colour hardback book with cd rom. ISBN: 190103366X

3. See: [http://ensemble.va.com.au/tableau/suzy/TT\\_ResearchProjects/TTRP\\_menu.html](http://ensemble.va.com.au/tableau/suzy/TT_ResearchProjects/TTRP_menu.html) for web versions and further projects.

4. Jean Wainwright, Suzanne Treister, Annely Juda Fine Art, London. Art Monthly No 278 July-August 2004.