

PORTRAIT **Suzanne Treister**

Crafting an alternative history of the twentieth century through cybernetics, psychedelia, and tarot, Suzanne Treister's sprawling research-based projects trace a vertiginously networked world where everything is connected and nothing is meaningless. Here reality is not yet real, sorcery a mode of escape, and magic a form of pragmatism.

By Lars Bang Larsen

Casts a
Circle

66

67

There is a sin, which consists of using the magic of modern automation to further personal profit or let loose the apocalyptic terrors of nuclear warfare.

– Norbert Wiener, 1964

Due to pressures external and internal, historical space is now foreshortening, in so many ways bringing concepts and practices that were segregated by modernity into close contact. The compression of history is getting much denser than the oft-mentioned comparison between the 2010s and the 1930s: in politics, elected oligarchs nibble away feudalistically on the democratic and the social order. In science, ether theories that Einstein put to rest at the beginning of the twentieth century have been reintroduced thanks to the discovery of the Higgs boson. In the field of ideas, symbiotic modes of thinking are countering forms of discursive hygiene established to keep the human subject autonomous and sovereign. Our epoch is one of churning contradictions and unexpected renegotiations of difference, and it is in these dim regions that Suzanne Treister long has deployed her work.

A place to start would be cybernetics. Even if it is outdated – it is no longer to be found in the US government’s lexicon of research topics eligible for federal funding – its presence in our hyper-looped digital reality is as pervasive as only spectres can be. Derived from the Greek *kyber*, to steer, it was a computer science before computers as we know them. Both its transdisciplinary ethos and its initial research objects in analogue computing, such as radar systems, were refined by the military during World War II. And yet it would be deterministic to view cybernetics as an extension of wartime technology to the civilian domain.

Treister’s suite of works *HEXEN 2.0* (2009–11) includes drawings in the form of diagrams and a full set of tarot cards, as well as a video and manipulated photos from a spiritualist seance. The project’s point of departure is the Macy Conferences, which were held in New York between 1946 and 1953 and had the aim of establishing cybernetics as a “general science of the workings of the human mind”. While cybernetics never managed to become part of the bedrock of modern science, it had a profound impact across culture in the coming decades as a blueprint of sorts for both hegemonic technological development and alternative worldviews that sought to separate technoscience from the tendencies of a patriarchal, capitalist, industrial society

In Treister’s deck of cards, the main players of cybernetics have replaced the tarot characters – with the father of cybernetics, Norbert Wiener, as the Chariot; Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead as the Lovers, and so on. Treister gives post-war history a reading in her signature style which brings to mind Robert Crumb grogging on the *Encyclopedia Britannica* somewhere down the rabbit hole. As unexpected connections proliferate, truth, morality, and common sense cease to be of navigational use: while some cards trace covert CIA operations, others connect the dots of underdog histories of modern technology through movements such as anarcho-primitivism and techno-Gaianism. Treister’s genealogical rhizome also encompasses the anti-totalitarian thinker Hannah Arendt; Mesopotamian scientist al-Jazari, who in the twelfth century invented the first analogue computer; and Timothy Leary, who, in spite of his ostensibly countercultural engagement with cybernetics, will perhaps rather be remembered

as somebody who paved the way for an oxymoronic spiritual entrepreneurialism. In addition, the five historical diagrams of *HEXEN 2.0* employ the tentacular reach of cybernetic connectedness to kaleidoscopic effect. Via people and intelligence services, the diagram *From ARPANET to DARWARS via the Internet*, for instance, annotates military development and the application of networked computing in what looks like a vast war-room map of a militarised earth. In the spirit of the holistic nature of cybernetics, individuals and substances cede to ecologies according to a logic of distributions and hook-ups in systems that are evolving and ultimately imponderable.

Counterintuitively rendered in the ludic and a-rational informational architectures of the tarot deck and the diagrammatic cosmogram, Treister’s work reminds us how cybernetic history at its most mundane was a branch of control engineering (jinxed from the outset, perhaps, by profit and war); and how, at its most radical and speculative, it became a new paradigm for research across the sciences, and for thought and action off the grid of philosophy and doctrinaire politics. A complex system cannot be fully accounted for because it is embedded within other complex systems. To acknowledge that reality is in this way always in the making explodes a positivist vocabulary: thus cyberneticist Heinz von Foerster noted that cybernetics describes a kind of magic because it knows that “things protect themselves against explanation.”

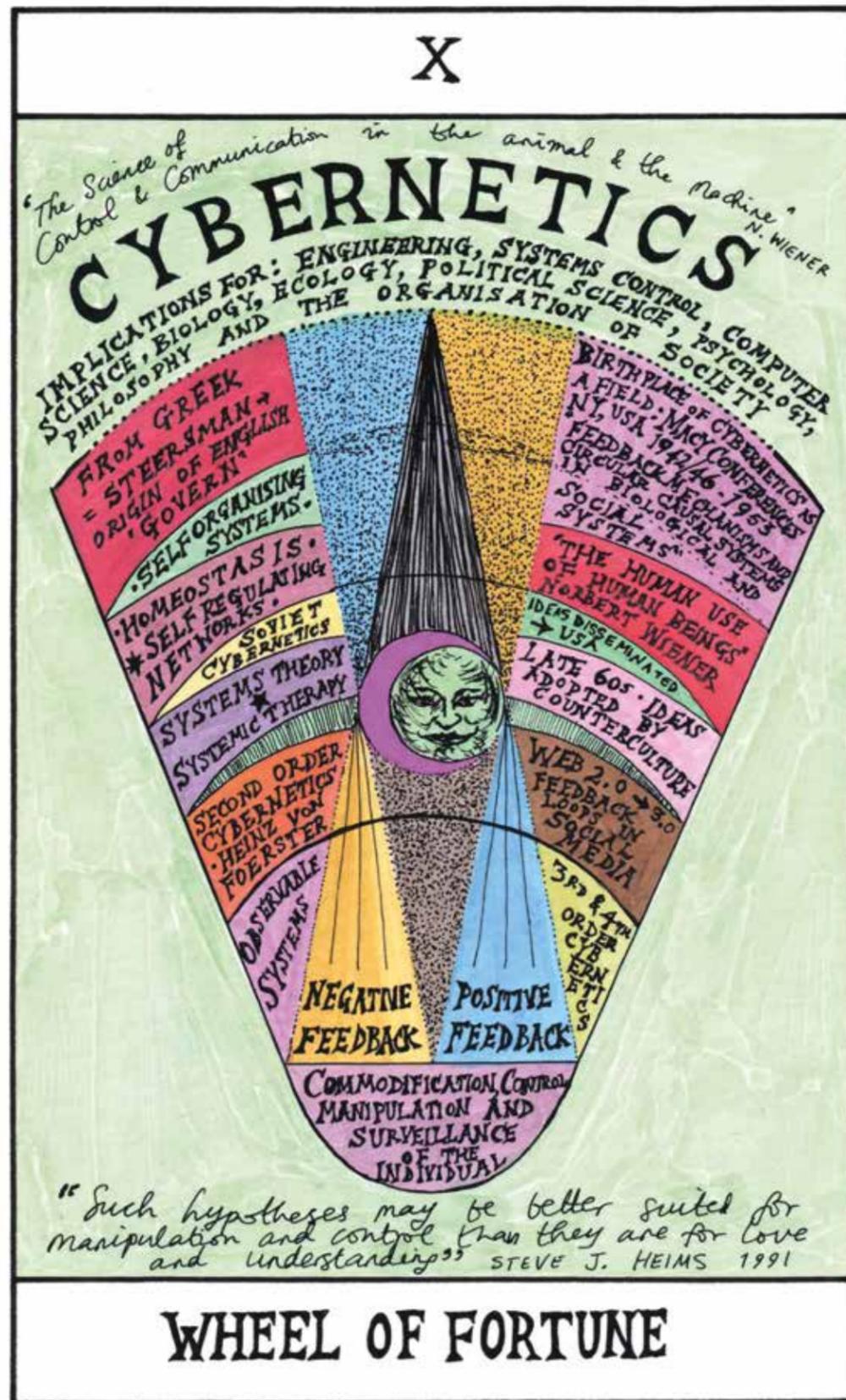
Veering off into new media after some initial systemic explorations of painting, Treister worked in relative isolation in the UK in the 80s, in what she describes as an institutional landscape that was not in general susceptible to artistic experimentation with technology. During a

decade-long stay in Australia in the 90s, she found a more precocious scene there. New media art – to use that term for her work – was not always as commercially and institutionally acceptable as the smooth ubiquity of so-called post-internet art may lead one to think today. If Treister’s early and late works share a distinct common feature it must be their insistence on a view of the world as made up of relations, and relations of relations, which is then as now approached with a playfulness that connects the body of her work like a snake that bites its own tail. This is evinced by her catholic tastes in media deconstruction: in lieu of other available output modes, the juicily pixelated, needlepoint-like *Fictional Videogame Stills* (1991–92) are produced on an Amiga computer and photographed straight from the screen. “Conceptually,” she notes, “this means of presentation was also appropriate, in that it made it seem like I had gone into a videogame arcade and photographed the games there, lending authenticity to the fiction.” Non-existing games here give notice that reality is not yet real.

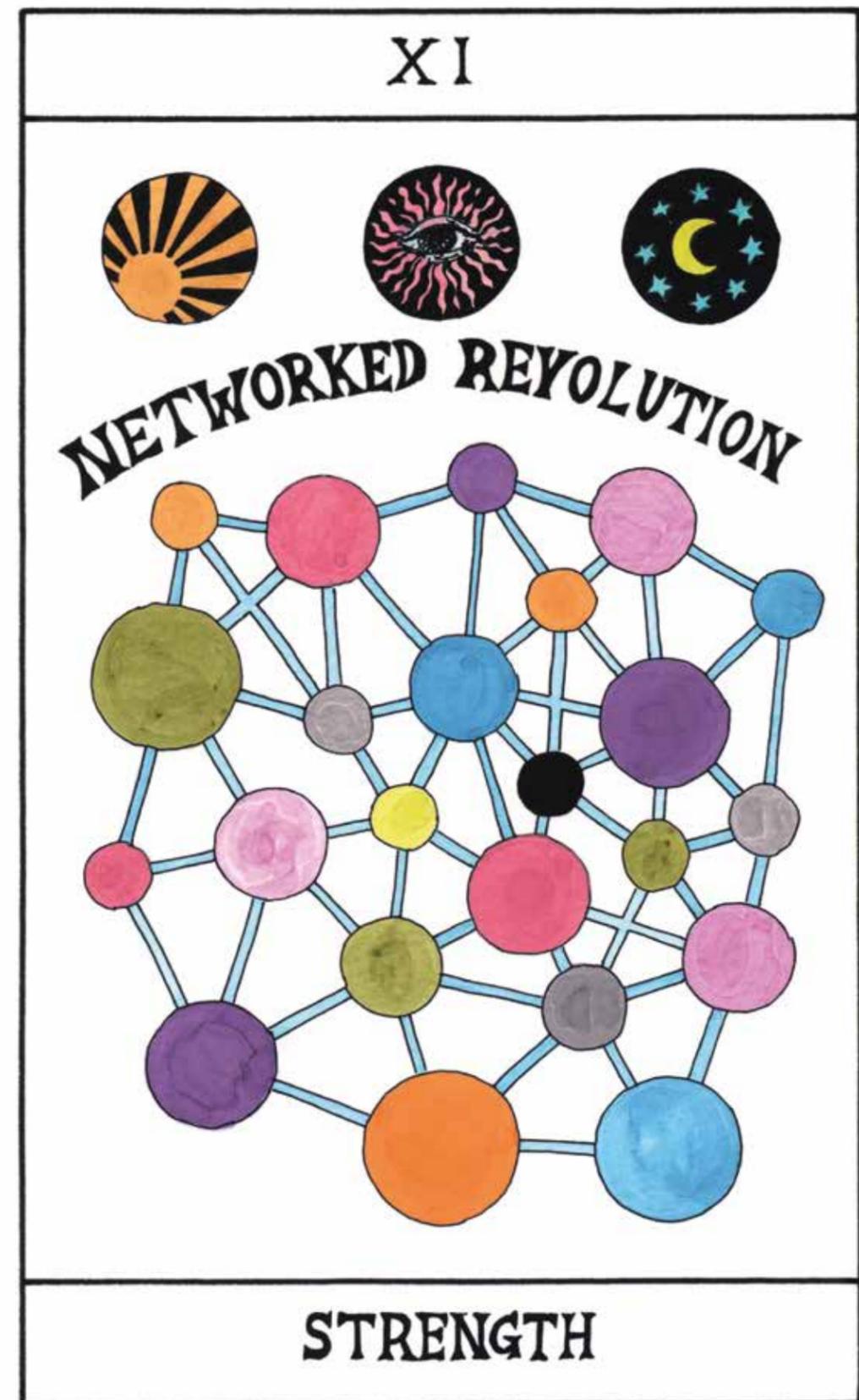
A turn to magic in our contemporary situation must be problem-oriented; to see it as a quick-fix of the persisting dialectic of Enlightenment would be infantile. In the twenty-first century the Earth is not only fully illuminated, as Adorno and Horkheimer once noted: life itself is dreamlessly occupied by capital. There really is no enchantment left. So how does magic enter the fray, other than as a description of certain epistemological challenges? We cannot confront the present state of affairs with objective, scientific knowledge in the Marxian style. Instead magic lets us know that we ought to know better, and differently. Sorcery might become a constitutive mode of escape.

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and differently. Sorcery might
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Treister’s works have the air of invocations
that pull together sense-making forces to create
the event of a becoming.



HEXEN 2.0/Tarot/X Wheel of Fortune - Cybernetics, 2009-11
Archival giclée print with watercolour on Hahnemühle paper, 29.7 x 21 cm



HEXEN 2.0/Tarot/XI Strength - Networked Revolution, 2009-11
Archival giclée print with watercolour on Hahnemühle paper, 29.7 x 21 cm

SOLANDRA BREVICALYX

TRADITIONAL USES

MOST LIKELY USED RITUALLY SINCE PREHISTORIC TIMES BEFORE PEYOTE, THE HUICHOL OF MEXICO WORSHIP & FEAR SOLANDRA AS A GOD NARCOTIC, KIELI (THE GOD OF WIND AND MAGIC), A POWERFUL AID IN SORCERY. SOME HUICHOL SAY THE PLANT OPENS THEIR MIND FOR THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF ENLIGHTENMENT, AS A SPIRITUAL GUIDE INTO MYSTICAL DOMAINS

EFFECTS: HALLUCINOGENIC

PREPARATION

A TEA IS MADE FROM THE JUICE OF THE STALKS. THE DRIED FLOWERS AND LEAVES CAN BE SMOKED ALONE OR AS PART OF A SMOKING BLEND

HEBREW: סולגדרה ברביכלי'נם

GEMATRIA: 709 → 16 → 7



COMMON NAMES

KIELI • KIERI • ARBOL DEL VIENTO • BOLSA DE JUDAS • CHALICE VINE • COPA DE ORO • HUEIPATL • CUP OF GOLD • GUTAQUATZITZQUI • FLORIPONDIO DEL MONTE • GOLD-KELCH • HUEYTLACA • ITZUCUATZIQUI • LIPA-CA-TU-HUE • NDARI • PERILLA • TECOMAXOCHITL • TETONA • TIMA'WITS • TREE OF THE WIND • WINDBAUM • XOCHITECOMATL

CHEMISTRY

HYOSCYAMINE • C₁₇H₂₃NO₃

SCOLOPAMINE • C₁₇H₂₁NO₄

NORTROPINE • C₈H₁₀O

TROPINE • C₈H₁₅NO

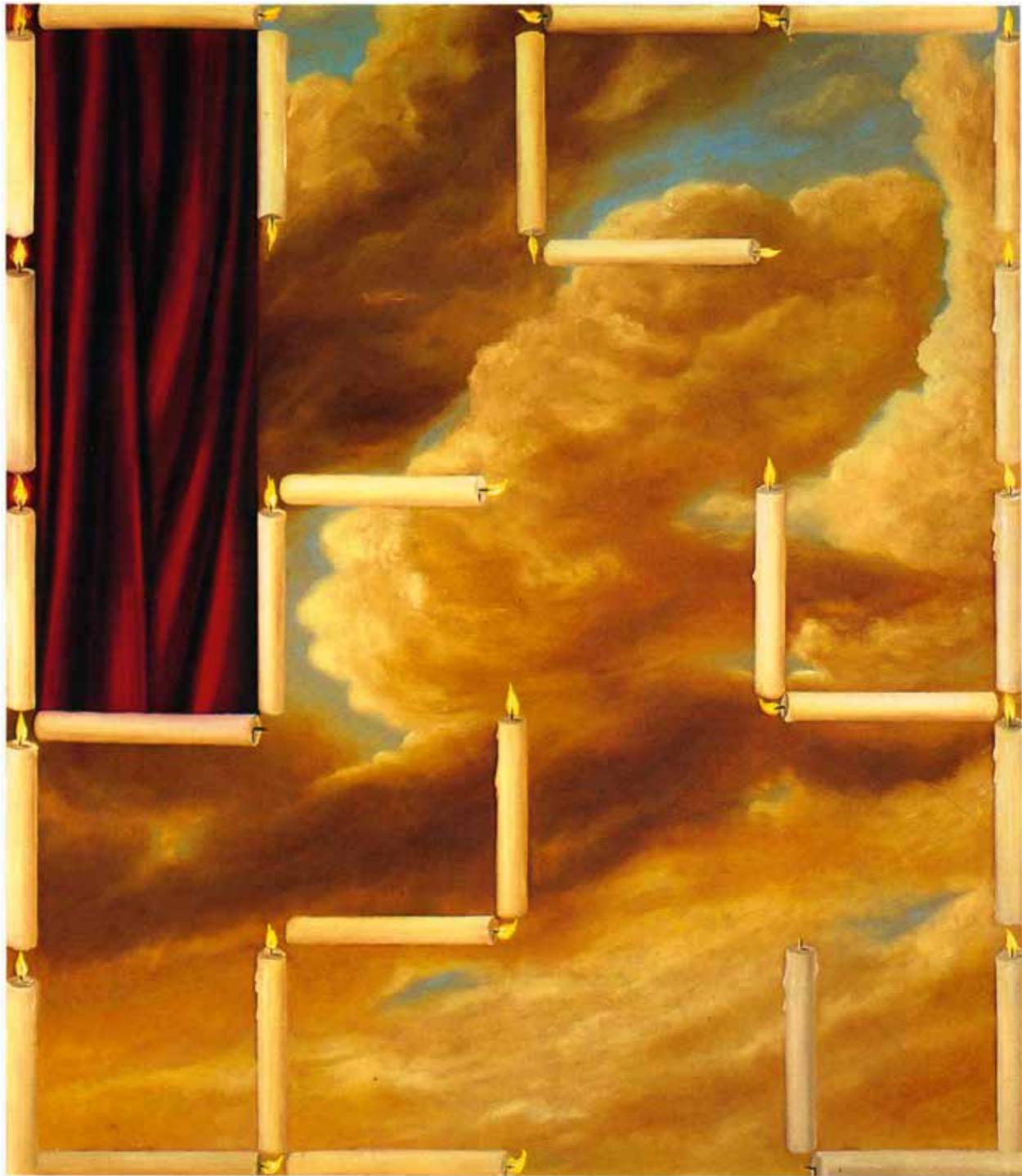
SCOPINE • C₈H₁₃NO₂

CUSCOHYGRINE • C₁₃H₂₄N₂O

FT GLOBAL 500 COMPANIES 2014 RANK

16 • PETRO CHINA • CHINA • OIL & GAS PRODUCERS

7 • WELLS FARGO • US • BANKS



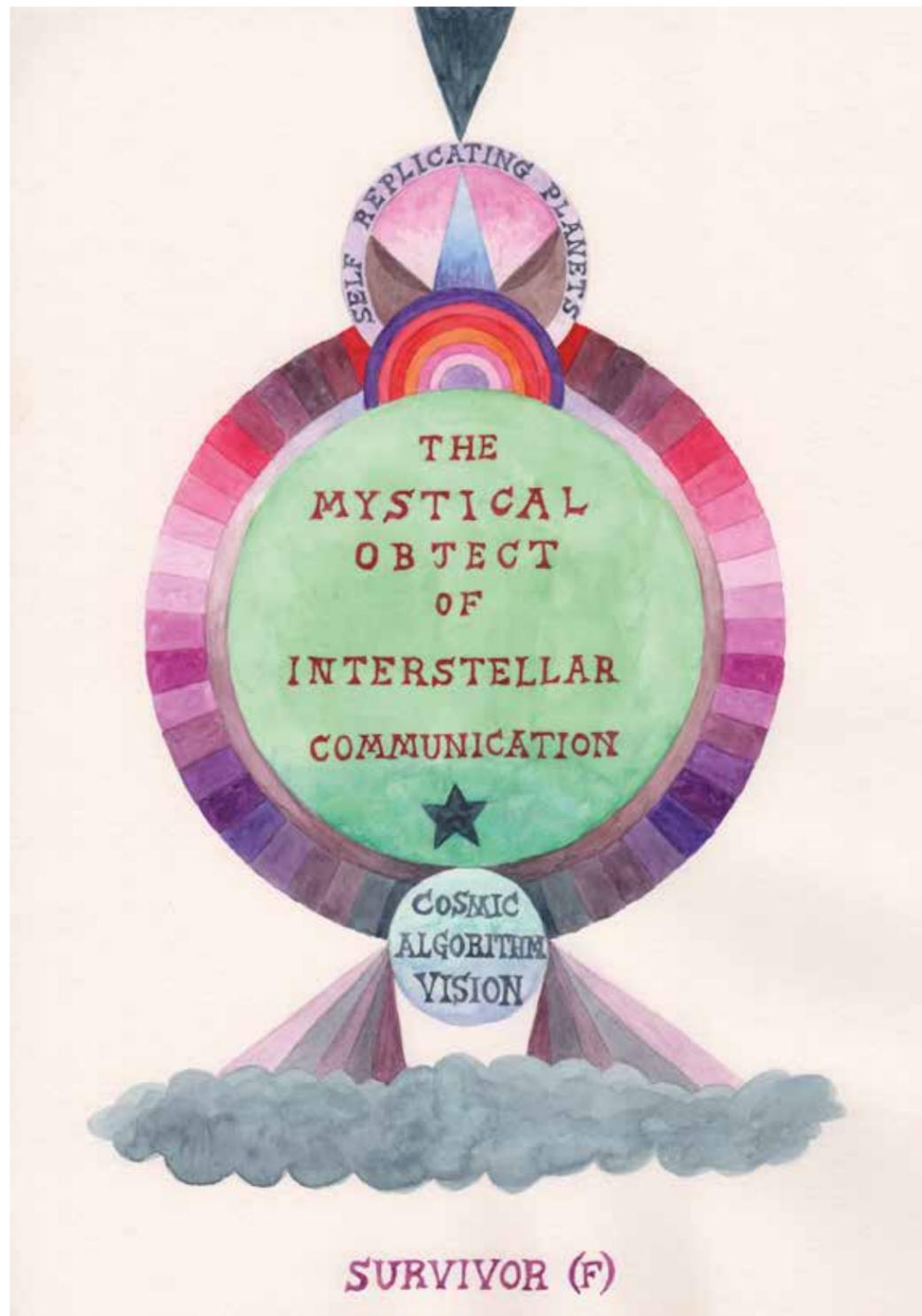
A Simple Maze, 1988
Oil on canvas, 213 x 183 cm

Courtesy the artist, Annely Juda Fine Art, London and P.P.O.W., New York



Koons-Kiefer Video Game No. 1, 1989
Oil on canvas, 122 x 107 cm

Collection of Centre Pompidou, Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris, France



SURVIVOR (F)/Self Replicating Planets, 2016–18
Watercolour and pencil on paper, 29.7 x 21 cm

Courtesy the artist, Annely Juda Fine Art, London and P.P.O.W., New York

Alchemy (2007–2008), which transcribes the front pages of international daily newspapers into alchemical drawings. All of her work is collected on her wormhole of a website, created with an anarchist's sense of autonomy. It is no coincidence that a favourite presentation format is the book, given its unconditional existence outside of the exigencies of the exhibition space.

A recent tome is *HFT the Gardener* (2016). The acronym in the title stands for both the job description and name of the protagonist, the high-frequency trader Hillel Fischer Traumberg, who is a latter-day incarnation of the exemplarily mediocre twentieth-century anti-hero Hans Castorp in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain* (1924). After Traumberg gets sacked from his lucrative job in the City for having inserted the molecular formulae of psychoactive substances into his trading algorithms, he goes deeper in his psychedelic research and starts making visionary drawings of psychotropic plants and the stock market. According to Treister's fiction, the watercolours compiled in the book are Traumberg's delicate

botanisations of a delirious reality, a kind of outsider art created by a former insider trader who lost the plot and wrote himself a new one, embedded in a narrative that involves gentrification, finance capital, Hebrew mysticism, and the London art world, all framed by the question of consciousness.

What people mean by magic, Gregory Bateson wrote, is "the fact that ideas may influence events". Such powerful ideational effects can describe a certain mind-manifesting dynamic in Treister's work, too. Here the desegregation of binaries, and the resulting ambiguation of things, does not spell the end of critique. The artist's serial, networked procedures are not a fetishizing of connectivity in the style of actor-network theory's all-encompassing sets of shifting relationships, but a cognitive mapping of antagonisms and contradictions that aims to go deep into reality's fabric of representations, allowing map and territory to unwind each other.

LARS BANG LARSE is an adjunct curator at Moderna Museet and a guest professor at the Royal Institute of Art, both in Stockholm.

SUZANNE TREISTER lives in London, where she was born in 1958.

Recent solo exhibitions include "Le voyage à Bordeaux de Suzanne Treister – Histoires parallèles et récits excentriques", CAPC musée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux; "Works from SURVIVOR (F)", IMT Gallery, London; "HEXEN 2.0", Fig-2, ICA London; "Rosalind Brodsky's Electronic Time Travelling Costumes and Cookery Shows", Kunstverein München. Among other group shows, she participated in "Magic Circle", Kunstraum niederösterreich, Vienna, in 2018; "Spiritualized", Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin; "Alien Ecologies", Transmediale, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin and "Postcards from the Edge", Metro Pictures, New York, in 2017. In 1997 she was included in Documenta 10.

Suzanne Treister is represented by Annely Juda Fine Art (London) and P.P.O.W (New York).