

Fictive Art in New Media

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“Curiouser and curiouser!” —Lewis Carroll

My first encounter with the work *No Other Symptoms—Time Travelling with Rosalind Brodsky* by Suzanne Treister (<http://ensemble.va.com.au/tableau/suzy/>) occurred at a small gallery in Sydney in 2000. At first glance the astonishing collection of articles, photos, pictures, drawings, and written descriptions seemed intriguing but incomprehensible. Yet I wondered, Who is Rosalind Brodsky? Luckily there was a CD-ROM to take home accompanied by a beautifully produced booklet that introduced the extraordinary fictional character of Rosalind Brodsky and her time travel episodes.

Both the CD-ROM and the booklet purport to be an archive or a sort of museum tour of the research done by Brodsky for an imaginary institution of the future—the Institute of Militronics and Advanced Time Interventionality (Imati). This

institute now holds records left by Brodsky (see Figure 1), which you can peruse on the CD-ROM. For example, Brodsky seems to appear in case history notes from some of the 20th century’s top analysts (such as Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Julia Kristeva). Readers can peruse detailed notes from these analysis sessions. Brodsky also has time travel costumes from each of her trips. One trip she traveled back through time to rescue her grandparents from the murderous concentration camps of Nazi Germany. Another trip was to visit Russia on the eve of the Russian Revolution. She seems to have even shown up on the movie set of *Schindler’s List* (see Figure 2). Included in the CD-ROM and booklet is an eccentric recipe for a Polish pierogi made exclusively from a German black forest cake—backwards. That is, Brodsky dismantles the black forest cake and uses the ingredients to recreate the Polish pierogi.

Rosalind Brodsky is in fact a sort of alter ego of the artist Suzanne Treister. This complex work exists across all sorts of different media as an installation, CD-ROM, music CD, and Web site. It weaves a hilarious web of fictions and nonsense that nevertheless make remarkable sense. It’s an excellent example of something we can loosely identify as *fictive art*.

Fictive art

Most people are familiar with role-playing games on the Internet. This is where people enter a made-up or virtual world to play or build more worlds, usually appearing as an avatar of their choice. Players control and develop their avatars over time as well as gaining new skills and collecting weapons to fight both other avatars or monsters within the game. In networked role-playing games (RPGs) players can also socialize with other players. Common RPGs are *EverQuest* or *Quake*.

However, another form of game exists involving fiction that’s proliferating on the Internet and in art installations and CD-ROM. This form of fiction-as-game isn’t as well known as RPGs but

Figure 1. Rosalind Brodsky singing on the boardwalk at Brighton Beach, New York, 2000.



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has a long history stretching back to early works of fiction like *Gulliver's Travels* or *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* through 20th century modernism and postmodernism in both art and literature. It's here that I would place Suzanne Treister's work.

So why is this sort of work appearing within the new media arts? And what is its relationship to earlier fictive artwork? In 2002, Antoinette La Farge called for papers for the annual College Art Association Conference's panel titled "Fictive Art." I was immediately struck with how appropriate this term is for this form of fiction that I had become interested in. The call for papers requested "works in which artists deliberately combine textual and visual strategies to produce works that straddle the boundary between art, fiction, and history" (see the complete call for papers at <http://www.english.upenn.edu/CFP/archive/2002-04/0087.html>). These works use narrative and fictions to create made-up worlds, imaginary situations, and odd conjectures which transgress boundaries and create nonsense.

One such work is *The Museum of Jurassic Technology* in Los Angeles. Curated by David Wilson, this strange yet compelling "museum" purports to be an "educational institution dedicated to the advancement of knowledge and the public appreciation of the lower Jurassic" (see the museum's homepage at <http://www.mjt.org/index.html>). This so-called museum is in fact a fiction. Its exhibits fall somewhere between natural history, social history, and the fantastic, "inserting the visitor into the interstice between wondering-at and wondering whether."¹ Christian Bök has compared the museum to a medieval *wunderkammern* (miracle chamber) with cabinets of curiosity and detailed dioramas of strange animals. It offers an extremely detailed history of the life and creations of the Jesuit scientist and alchemist Athanasius Kircher.

Along similar lines is *Sputnik: the Odyssey of the Soyuz 2* (<http://www.telefonica.es/fat/esputnik.html>) by Joan Fontcuberta. This photographic installation details the life of Ivan Istochnikov, noting that he is

a Russian cosmonaut who, we are told, disappeared during the flight of Soyuz 2 in 1968 and was then removed from history by the Soviet bureaucracy. Photographs of Istochnikov were retouched to remove his likeness, his family was moved to Siberia, and his friends and colleagues were threatened.

(Fontcuberta's work is also available at the online catalogue *False Witness*; see http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/David_Winton_Bell_Gallery/false_witness.html.)



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Figure 2. Rosalind Brodsky (in her electronic time-traveling costume) attempts to rescue her grandparents from the Holocaust. She mistakenly ends up on the set of *Schindler's List*. Krakow, Poland, 1994.

edu/Facilities/David_Winton_Bell_Gallery/false_witness.html.) The exhibition uses archival footage and photos as if they're real. They're in fact photos of the artist himself, and the images are either manipulated or completely false. The exhibition's attention to detail was so successful that when first exhibited in Madrid in 1997 the Russian embassy registered its protest.

The term *fictive* comes from literary anthropologist Wolfgang Iser. In his book *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), Iser outlines a theory where fiction and reality are no longer binary opposites. Iser's theory suggests a triadic relationship to understand the fictionalizing act, which he states comprises the real, the fictive, and the imaginary. For Iser the fictive is an act of boundary crossing where the referential world is disrupted and doubled—where the act of fiction becomes an act of transgression. The important word here is act. In other words, fiction is no longer defined against an idea of the real, nor is it tied solely to the literary.

'Pataphysics and its influence on art

To understand these electronic and new media works in relation to earlier fictive artwork, we must briefly look at art history. We usually associate modern art with abstraction and with the rejection of representation as well as any form of figuration. From Cubism to Abstract Expressionism, modern art—which generally means painting and sculpture—is usually described as engaged in a subjective investigation

of perception. Beginning with Cubism and its break with previous pictorial modes of representation, and moving on to the later investigations of the medium itself (like Pollack's drip paintings), the story of modern art has been seen as a progressive development or natural evolution of abstraction. However, parallel to this trajectory of modern art was another development—linked to the avant-garde movements in Europe—that could be characterized as engaged with fictions, narratives, and made-up worlds.

Mimesis was considered more appropriate for photography or film. Given that film and photography seemed to depict "reality" more efficiently, other arts became less concerned with accurately depicting appearances and more concerned with the nature of artmaking. However, parallel to this trajectory of modern art was another development—linked to the avant-garde movements in Europe—that could be characterized as engaged with fictions, narratives, and made-up worlds.

An important contributor to this other trajectory is the invention of 'pataphysics, an imaginary science created by writer Alfred Jarry. At the turn of the 20th century the character Ubu burst onto a Parisian stage shouting "Merde!"² At the time this caused quite a riot, as *merde* had never before been uttered onstage. Professor Ubu was Jarry's creation, and Jarry's neologism, 'pataphysics, is a play on metaphysics. While metaphysics is placed above physics, 'pataphysics seeks to sit beside it, separate but parallel. 'Pataphysics studies the exceptions to the rules, the anomalies, where "a difference makes a difference."

The artistic strategy of 'pataphysics has occupied a paradoxical place in the art history of the 20th century. Its existence has been almost invisible, yet its influence has been profound and extensive, informing most of the century's avant-garde movements—for example, Dadaism, Surrealism, Italian and Russian Futurism, as well as major artists like Marcel Duchamp with his imaginary creations of machinic love. (See, for example, his major work *The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even*, which is also known as *The Large Glass*).

Corporate interplay

It isn't difficult to link the present appearance of fictive art to earlier 'pataphysical patterns. Just as 'pataphysics plays with the logic and reason of science to create a pseudoscience where rationalism is taken to its extreme, the Internet artwork *Airworld* (<http://www.airworld.net>) takes the logic and discourse of corporations to an extreme. *Air-*

world is a Web-based art project by Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, commissioned by Gallery 9/Walker Art Center in Minneapolis. It began in 1999 as banner ads for a commercially based company called Doubleclick.com. *Airworld* used the Doubleclick.com network to distribute one million banner ads over one month, starting mid-August 1999. Doubleclick.com didn't inform the sites on which the ads appeared that they would host a conceptual art piece—in fact, the banner ads appeared randomly. The ads were like an ode to corporate blandness, with clean design and meaningless slogans such as "welcome we are air" or "business as usual." If a Web surfer clicked on an ad, it then displayed the *Airworld* site.

The *Airworld* site feeds on the text content of these corporate sites much like crawlers, search engines, and bots. It uses software that creates a database based on parameters set by the artists. The program then combines and collages corporate speak into meaningless but intelligible text that appears in the *Airworld* skin. This imaginary corporation is consistently bland and yet disturbing at the same time. The text—sampled from all sorts of different corporate sites—combines together seamlessly, reflecting the current flattening and dulling of language in the commercial world. Like many of the current Web art projects, *Airworld* uses an algorithm for generating content. With the advent of global real-time computer networks, businesses are finding it more efficient to create content dynamically. Artwork like *Airworld* imagines a future that's already upon us, where content is generated automatically through machinic algorithms. It's as if we're living in a strange 'pataphysical world first imagined more than 100 years ago.

Another project mimicking the corporate structure of the contemporary global economy is the *International Corporation of Lost Structures* (ICOLS). Suzanne Treister founded ICOLS (see <http://www.icols.org/>) in November 2000 and shortly afterwards Bronia Iwanczak joined as codirector. It humorously mimicks the contemporary corporate structure with department titles such as Department of Global Disenchantment, Department of Revolutionary Nostalgia, Department of Future Projections, Local Unit of Missing Links, and so forth. Collaborators post their ideas and exist in virtual departments as part of the corporation. It also includes exhibitions, installations, media events, newsletters, and email postings. The project is a collaboration between international artists who enter a fictive world ini-

tiated by Treister and Iwanczak. The lost structures in the title evoke both the loss of the Soviet bloc as well as the ideals and dreams that many Westerners projected onto the world behind the Berlin Wall. But lost structures could also mean the possibility of being found again, lost but not gone. Maybe there is hope after all.

Spiraling toward the center

Down, down, down. Would the fall never come to an end? "I wonder how many miles I've fallen by this time?" she said aloud. "I must be getting somewhere near the centre of the earth."³

In February 2002 I was invited, along with my collaborator in *Out-of-Sync* (<http://out-of-sync.com/>) Norie Neumark, to participate in a new media residency on Maria Island, off the coast of Tasmania, Australia. As a result of our stay on the island, we created the work *Journey to the C/enter* (<http://out-of-sync.com/journey/>), which also involved the collaboration of other artists on the island. The work follows the investigation by Doktor Rumor and Professore Rumore, both rumorologists, following a rumor that Jules Verne traveled to Maria Island (see Figure 3) sometime in the 1860s in search of the entry to the center of the earth. The work itself plays with recent Web forms like vogs (video), blogs (Web logs), and what could be a new Australian form called *flogs* (field logs). Flogs are a fabrication, acting as if they're a daily log of events. Unlike blogs and vogs, which are usually a diary posted daily to the Web through programs like Blogger, our flogs are made in Flash. Flogs aren't only text based, but incorporate video and sound to create an experiential space. Flogs play with the tension between the personal/public diary—which blogging has unleashed on the Internet—and the reporting of empirical data from the field (that is, field notes). These two forms couldn't be more different—one a personal and subjective account, the other an objective account used for scientific analysis. Using flogs, the work creates a made-up world of rumorology and a journey into scientific anomaly.

Conclusion

Are we now seeing a 'pataphysical world where scientific anomaly is the concern of scientists as well as nonscientists, and where the convincingly portrayed worlds are as compelling as so-called reality? Perhaps the proliferating worlds of fictiveness owe something to the nature of new technologies which allow for seamless "alterations," endless

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play, and algorithmic inventiveness. Programs like Adobe Photoshop, for instance, allow anyone to play with reality, limited only by their imagination. Only last week I received a Web picture showing a friend standing as if in the center of an erupting volcano. In the hands of fictive-minded artists, these new technologies are opening a whole new set of 'pataphysical strategies. **MM**

Figure 3. A photo from Maria Island, where Norie Neumark and I made Journey to the C/enter (see <http://out-of-sync.com/journey/>).

References

1. C. Bök, *Pataphysics: The Poetics of an Imaginary Science*, Northwestern Univ. Press, 2002, p. 3.
2. A. Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, Théâtre de l'Oeuvre, 1896.
3. L. Carroll, *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, Penguin, 2000, p. 13.

Fictive Art Sites

Here are some other fictive art sites that might be of interest:

- *World of Awe: A Traveller's Tale*, <http://worldofawe.net/index.html>
- *Magnus-Opus*, <http://www.magnus-opus.com/index1.html>
- Janet Cardiff's *The Dark Pool*, <http://www.banffcentre.ca/WPG/nmsc/DarkPool/index.html>
- *False Witness*, http://www.brown.edu/Facilities/David_Winton_Bell_Gallery/false_witness.html
- The Internet Wildlife Foundation, <http://iwlw.org/>
- US Department of Art and Technology, <http://www.usdept-arttech.net>
- Museum of Forgery, <http://yin.arts.uci.edu/~mof/>