

Palle Torsson

Evil Interiors, 2003

by Domenico Quaranta

The Swedish artist Palle Torsson might rightly claim to be one of the pioneers of Game Art. Back in 1996 he produced his first version of *Museum Meltdown*, a modified Half-Life which set the combats of the famous first-person shooter game in the rooms of a museum chosen for the occasion (there were various ones, the first being the Arken Museum in Denmark). Created in collaboration with Tobias Bernstrup, the work did not have the same clearly iconoclastic aim as *ars Doom*, the first "artist mod" in history, produced in 1995 by Orhan Kipcak and Reinhard Urban. Nor was the intention simply to wrong-foot the spectator by using this particular setting for a battle between monsters. As Torsson himself says: «We were astounded by the resemblance between the recently built museum that had both a superficial and a monumental architecture and the computer games. The interior had a lot of fake details, like big metal panels and doors that were already falling apart. This fake hi-tech style corresponded a lot to the computer game aesthetics. When we found the first-person shooter game Duke Nukem3D which had a level editor, we decided to reconstruct the actual museum space and turn it to a game environment». In other words, the work was the fruit of reflection upon real architecture, upon the fake "spectacular" quality of an actual building. This is important to remember because all of Torsson's subsequent work focuses upon architecture understood as a communicative medium, as a vehicle that conveys content. *Logo City* (2001) is a convincing example of this approach. The starting-point was again Half-Life. The game was stripped of all its action and violence, with the setting being maintained intact. However, now that setting was entirely covered with commercial logos (for Barbie, Nestlé, Coca Cola, Shell etc.). The player moved through a space that had become part of the mass media; every wall, door, floor – and even his clothes – advertised something for sale, encouraged him to buy. When you looked closely, this seductive enticement was no less violent than the gunfire that normally echoed around these spaces. Whilst *Museum Meltdown* seems to say that a contemporary art museum is so unnatural and fake a space that it makes a perfect setting for a videogame, *Logo City* invites us to look more closely at the space of our everyday lives, suggesting that the lures of consumerism and advertising can make it as dangerous as the setting of Half-Life. Indeed, a fantasy shoot-out is more "authentic". *Sam* (2001) only appears to break with this line of artistic research. Here again, Torsson uses Half-Life, but invents a new character for it. Sam is a depressed and frustrated five-year-old girl; and she is a killer. To make her believable, Torsson has to have her act in recognisable everyday settings: city streets, the metro, and then a bar, an apartment, an office and a school. «The city is her playground and she likes to play.» However, these spaces only appear comfortably familiar. In fact, they are riddled with a sense of alienation. The city is more than slightly responsible for the psychological trauma that has made Sam

into a killer; and the bodies that now litter its streets seem particularly at home in the setting. A bit like the corridors of the Overlook Hotel in *Shining*, these urban spaces are highly-charged with violence; it is they which generate Sam's homicidal rage.

It is no coincidence that Torsson would draw upon the Overlook's corridors – along with other settings that have become very *topoi* of cinematic violence – in his next work. *Evil Interiors* is a series of sixteen digital prints that depict the sets of some of the key scenes in film history: the home of the old man in *Clockwork Orange*, the hotel corridor in *Shining*, the empty warehouse in *Reservoir Dogs*, the motel room in *Psycho*, Hannibal Lecter's cage in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Using the editor in Unreal Tournament 2003, Torsson worked painstakingly on the architecture and on the texture of the various parts of the furnishings to make these polygonal reconstructions totally believable.

«This images points at the psychological dimensions of violence, at least those that are imprinted in collective memory. As we live in a society where violence is accepted and ritualized our own consciousness is full of images of violence which can be triggered by a digital architectural space. Violence is not actually depicted here, but it certainly exists in the eye and mind of the beholder», Torsson explains. The result is a sort of theme park, in which the theme is the media's production of fear. This "crossing" of the polygonal-based visuals of videogames with some of the classic images generated by a more consolidated medium means that the artist shifts our reflection from film to videogames. «The industry behind the games wants us to believe in specific stereotypes of architecture, sex or race. This is something we should be critical about, but at the same time these stereotypes play an inevitable part in the illusion and immersion of games. We are standing in a nested point. The game connects the illusion to the real and can display knowledge with the unreal.»

But *Evil Interiors* also plays upon another factor. The sixteen places depicted in this series of prints may be film sets, but they are also sites of shared memory. By faithfully reconstructing them as videogame scenes, Torsson seems to be reflecting upon our immersion in such games, when moments of play are transformed into moments of lived experience within settings that can become the stuff of dreams – or nightmares.

(English translation by Jeremy Scott)