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I N T E R N A T I O N A L

Kerry Tribe

1301 PE

In 2002, Kerry Tribe produced a book titled *North Is West/South Is East: 32 Maps of Los Angeles*, for which strangers, approached by the artist at LAX airport, drew maps of southern California from memory. The maps provided by local residents were generally rife with detail, emphasizing idiosyncratic or personal information; the maps drawn by tourists, on the other hand, were often amusingly—if understandably—confused, skeletal, or oversimplified products of the contemporary imaginary. As an example of the latter category, a map might consist only of Hollywood, Disneyland, and the beach—three nodes tenuously connected by freeways and a vast chasm of blank white space.

Similar gaps in recall pervaded Tribe's recent exhibition at 1301 PE, which focused on a historical subject, known solely by the initials "H.M.," who was unable to retain new memories following the removal of part of his temporal lobe, a "frankly experimental operation" undertaken to prevent his frequent epileptic seizures. The centerpiece of the show was the two-projector, 16-mm film *H.M.*, 2009. Eluding easy categorization, *H.M.* presents numerous codes—voice-overs, found stills, Godard-inspired intertitles (such as the quotation above), and animated sequences—all of which point to the documentary genre. But the "real-life figures" in the film, including the title subject and two neuroscience students, are in fact actors. In other words, the film is, more accurately, a "dramatic reenactment," that staged genre familiar to viewers of television shows like *America's Most Wanted*. (Tribe is no stranger to television's conventions—her 2006 video *Episode* adopts the form of a news and culture show.)

Two-channel films (as well as videos and slide shows) seem to be ubiquitous right now—surely an intensified, eleventh-hour reaction to the apparent obsolescence of the film medium, but perhaps also an effort to reshape a medium (or media) in flux. Whatever the case, Tribe's *H.M.* takes a novel approach to the format by presenting the same footage twice during the work's eighteen-minute run, the clips separated by a twenty-second delay—the maximum amount of time H.M.'s memories last following his surgery. Foregrounded in the installation were two projectors, the celluloid looping from one to the other, the footage on the left screen reappearing on the right. This provides a paradoxical viewing experience that doubles the moving image, but it also distracts the viewer's attention. Despite the single sound track, it's difficult to know which screen to follow; it's even more difficult to "read" the projections together, as one tends to do with two-screen films.

H.M. is a compelling but intentionally disorienting experiment, presumably imitating the subject's fleeting memories. The story is oddly affecting, even heartbreaking, but it isn't clear whether Tribe is interested in eliciting empathy from the viewer: Many of the artist's previous efforts, including a stylized re-creation of a car crash in the

video *Near Miss*, 2005, readily reveal the artifice of their production. When, in *H.M.*, images of the Ramones or Malcolm X unexpectedly flash on-screen, the viewer is reminded that the subject, who was born in 1926, is incapable of registering the immense cultural shifts around him. Of course, most of H.M.'s generation missed the Ramones, but with these inserted shots Tribe seems to frame a larger cultural condition of short-term memory. More intriguing is the notion, explained in the film's voice-over—and also represented by a simply animated tesseract, a two-dimensional diagram of the fourth dimension—of a being existing in space but not in time.

The film suggests such metaphorical possibilities, but these never clearly emerge from the quasi-documentary format. As part of Tribe's ongoing investigation of memory, *H.M.* stands as her most complex work, but also perhaps the least resolved. The film was accompanied by several photographs and scratchboardlike diagrams related to the looping cinematic apparatus as well as a series of elegant letterpress prints of crossword puzzles devoid of letters, numbers, and clues. According to the film, H.M. loves crosswords because he can often solve them using his intact vocabulary and pre-1953 history. In what may well be stand-ins for the film's own open-ended metaphors, the puzzles, like the Los Angeles maps Tribe solicited, are riddled with lacunae of pure potential.

—Michael Ned Holte

Kerry Tribe,
H.M., 2009,
double projection
of a 16-mm film,
18 minutes
30 seconds.

