

# Into the abyss

*Kerry Tribe's exhibition finds meaning in the gaps of memory, says* **Brian Dillon**

"The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack between two eternities of darkness." The opening sentence of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography 'Speak, Memory' was a motto of sorts for Kerry Tribe's temporally intricate and formally subtle exhibition 'Dead Star Light'. The LA-based Kerry's videos, films and installations have long described the lures of collective and individual recall, but rarely has her memory-soaked art come into such clear focus as here, in a show comprised of an audio installation, two expanded films and one video.

It's the lapses that are most instructive. In her black-and-white 16mm film 'Parnassius Mnemosyne' (2010) – named after a favoured butterfly of Nabokov's, reproduced in 'Speak, Memory' – it's at first impossible to say what one's looking at: luminous grey forms roil as the Möbius film loop describes a giant X, tethering the projector to the gallery ceiling. The images are, in fact, derived from a microscopic view of the wings of the insect itself, looming uncertainly like distant nebulae or enigmatic patterns on a radar screen. If the work partly recalls Stan Brakhage's 'Mothlight' (1963), where insect wings were pasted on to the celluloid, this film is more fundamentally an exercise in teasing the viewer with possibility: each time the loop recurs, one is a little more daring but a little less certain whether these soft, steely forms are living or dead, animal or mineral.

In that sense, 'Parnassius Mnemosyne' is a spectral analogue of the looping, forgetful fate of one Henry Gustav Molaison, subject of

Tribe's twin-screen film 'H.M.' (2009). In 1953, Molaison had an operation to cure his epilepsy; most of his hippocampus was removed, leaving him with anterograde amnesia – he could recall events before surgery but now had a memory of no more than 20 seconds. 'H.M.' is a documentary of sorts, based on his doctor's recollections, with Molaison played by an elderly actor... Or so it seems, as the film is riddled with aporias: Molaison seems to recall events from 20th-century history, but when corresponding images flash up on screen, the dates are wrong. More than this, the twin screens show the film 20 seconds apart, long enough for the viewer to lose track and imagine that the second is an alternate take.

It's these holes in memory that intrigue the artist, none more significant than that suffered by Sergei Krikalov, subject of Tribe's video 'The Last Soviet'. A Russian cosmonaut stranded aboard the Mir space station while the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, he returned after almost a year in space to find the cultural-political world he knew had fallen into the dustbin of history. Tribe's video plays devious games with this history, mocking up the empty Mir interior, complete with objects floating in zero gravity.

The same blurring of fiction and fact is evident in the installation 'Milton Torres Sees a Ghost', based on a US pilot's account of engaging an apparent UFO over East Anglia in 1957. Here, Torres's words emerge from a length of reel-to-reel tape that hugs two gallery walls, trembling and flickering as it goes, bearing a story that has only lately escaped the redactions of official history.

■ 'Dead Star Light' is at the Camden Arts Centre, London, until 10 July



Two heads are better than one: Tribe's twin-screen film about an amnesiac, 'H.M.'

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