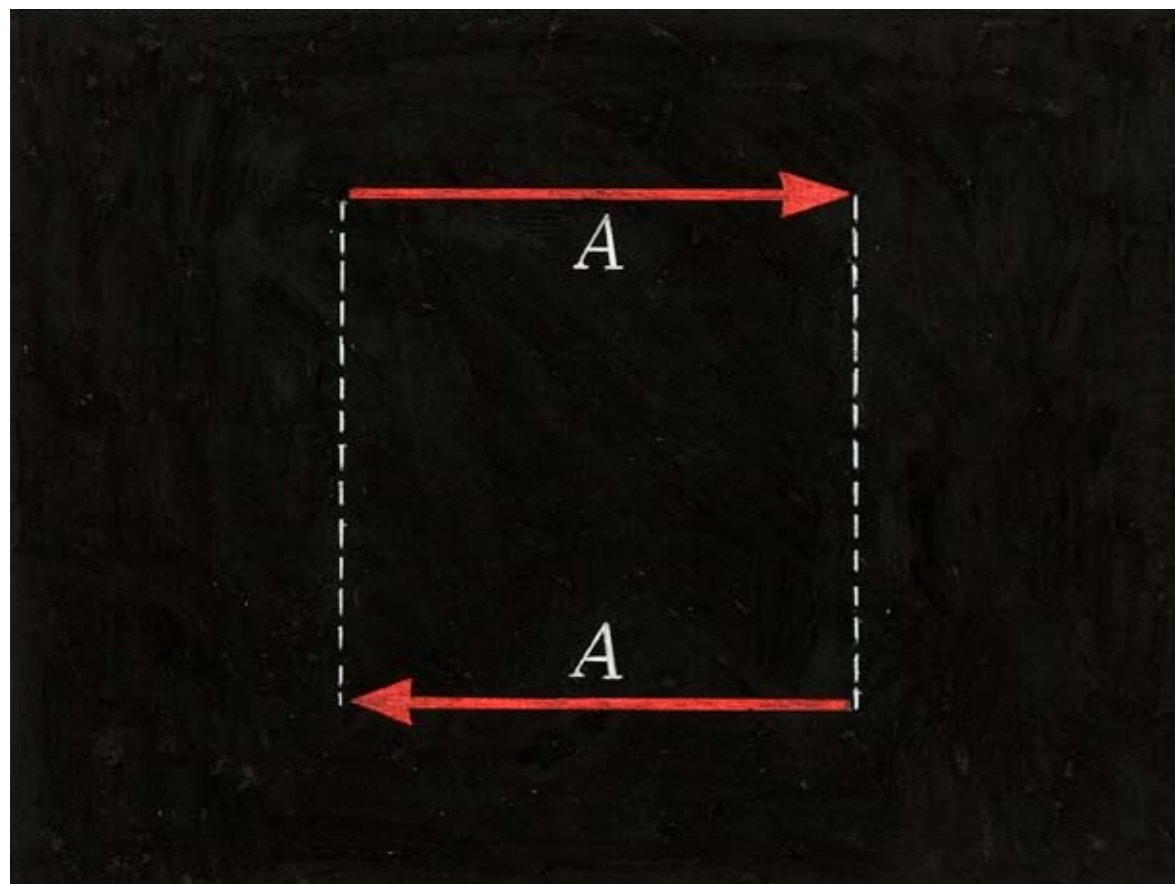


THE UNCERTAINTY PRINCIPLE

MARTIN HERBERT



Instructions, 2009
Wax crayon and oil pastel on paper

Things fall apart: first outside then inside, or maybe the other way round. You get older and your husband dies. You assess your options and move to Florida, God's well-lit waiting room, where you look back and look forward. And talk about it, because an artist with a microphone is asking. While recall has contours in its details – the cockroaches in your mobile home that you'd refuse to spray, for example – as a phenomenon it is ungraspable, being an infinite sprawl of private movie theatres. But it lends itself to metaphor and metonym, stand-ins that poeticise those measureless firings across the cortex and admit any such representation's provisional quality.

So memory is, say, a river full of fish. It's an emerald swamp, like the one surveyed in Kerry Tribe's installation *Florida* (2003) while Floridian interviewees talk in voiceover of the past, the present, the future. Her camera delves underwater, chasing in the sparkling depths, and the talkers talk of the afterlife and the peace of the river. The truth of the hereafter, if there is one, is perhaps merely the sum of people's hopes for it, shaped in turn by the swerves of their lives.

Tribe's art is structurally paradoxical, being a sequence of controlled mechanisms that stage their own collapsing into a sphere of doubt, of shattered holism. The reality we experience is filtered through the brain, but the brain is massively fragile, quixotic, and not available to be stepped outside of to reveal the angle of its tilt. That there's tilt at all is evident by comparison. For her book *North is West / South is East: 32 Maps of Los Angeles* (2002), individuals Tribe approached at the airport drew maps of the city from recall, turning it into a parade of slanted metropolises. For Shlomit from Israel, for example; Los Angeles consists of "you", the airport, "Richie" and a 7-11. Earlier, in *The Audition Tapes* (1998), the artist engaged 15 actors to play the roles of a mother, a grandfather and a pair of artist siblings, whose testimonies circle around some kind of traumatic, barely voiced family history. There has been abuse, or there hasn't but it felt that way. The grandfather's memory is slipping its moorings, heading into a thickening swamp: "I feel short-changed. I mean, as though I lost something I should have and don't have. Memory."

The hazy story is hazed again by the filmic process of conveyance, a speckling of false starts and blatancies of artifice, and the fact that each actor puts their own authorial spin on the character, warping it further while, ironically, bringing the artwork closer to its "true" picture of historical perception as radical relativism. Film has repeatedly been Tribe's materialist model of interiority. In *Here &*



Elsewhere (2002), for example, the dialogue between ten-year-old Audrey and her unseen, questioning father – the film theorist Peter Wollen – contrasts the latter’s Lacanian suggestions of selfhood as dualistic against his daughter’s predominant sense of herself as a coherent whole. The double video projection, meanwhile, persists in splitting her image, and in contrasting the Los Angeles interior where the discussion is set against views of the city, the outside.

In *Near Miss* (2005), based on an incident from the artist’s own life, film analogises memory in its unravelling, a mind looping over something and trying to recall it right. Three successive takes show a view through a car windshield as the vehicle drives through a changeably intense snowstorm, then slides off the road – meteorology as metaphor – while alongside the exhibited film of the faked event are contradictory texts by members of the production team regarding what happened: nudges towards vertigo. *Near Miss* would become part of a trilogy that continued with *Northern Lights (Cambridge)* (2005), a film of an Earl Reiback artwork owned by the artist’s parents that makes shifting light patterns resembling the aurora borealis, and concluded with *Episode* (2006) – an assiduous mimicry of a TV talk show in which Tribe and two old friends discuss their divergent remembrances of driving together across Idaho as teenagers and seeing what might

have been a UFO. Over 30 minutes of ping-ponging conversation, the stress shifts: they saw the Northern Lights; they saw alien life; they unknowingly entered a collective hallucination. Trapdoors open and veracity falls away, perception and memory appearing at once miraculous and downright treacherous.

Convening the directive materialism of *Here & Elsewhere*, the cortical fragility of *Episode* and *Near Miss*, and the pseudo-documentary style of *The Audition Tapes*, in 2009 Tribe produced *H.M.*. The double-projection 16mm film reconstructs the story of Henry Gustav Molaison, who in 1953, in the course of experimental brain surgery for severe epilepsy, had most of his hippocampus bilaterally removed and consequently suffered anterograde amnesia, losing the ability to make new episodic memories. Until his death in 2008, H.M. could access memories of events before his operation, but had a working memory of twenty seconds for the period after it. He did not know his own age, did not know the scientist who had worked with him since 1962.

H.M. takes its own detours from truth, sifting the story through the character of the actor playing Molaison (Tribe told him to act like her grandfather, whose own memory loss was an engine of *The Audition Tapes*) and introducing animations and texts. The film begins by alerting the viewer to the fact that it *is* a film; and at certain points, when images of historical figures and incidents that H.M. can’t remember flash up onscreen, the dates don’t match the events, and in these sequences the burden is shared by the viewer: do *we* know who these people are? More explicitly though, *H.M.* uses technical means to place us in something analogous to its subject’s benighted position. The film is threaded through two projectors placed side by side at a specific distance so that it appears twice on the wall, the twin versions of the film playing with a twenty-second delay between them. That turns out to be about the amount of time we can remember too. By the time the footage reaches the second screen it’s already fading, and we wonder if we’re seeing alternate takes.

The past exists only through organic hard drives – human minds, which contingently interpret and fail and fade – and those mechanisms we’ve developed to keep the vanishing world alive outside ourselves, such as film and photography. What is remembered by the race is distorted, to a greater or lesser extent, by these technologies. So it is perhaps no surprise that Tribe, while

making her work, has lived for a long time at least partly in Los Angeles, where Hollywood continues to shape images of present and past. Nor that she chose a Los Angeles intersection to plant her sign *Historical Amnesia* (2002-3). Nor that *Episode* was filmed in Berlin, where the past's relation to the present is necessarily vexed.

Tribe is careful not to push the implicit parallels too much, not to overstep what she feels she can speak about. Following the model of Roland Barthes, she does the work that she's in love with, larger implications arising as they will. Still, it's notable that *The Last Soviet* (2010), which orbits around the story of Sergei Krikalev, the Russian cosmonaut who was on board the space station Mir when the Soviet Union collapsed, is not only an exercise in "faking" the past – via video footage of a mock-up of Mir's interior, complete with convincingly simulated "floating" objects (a banana, for example) – in a parallel to the USSR's airbrushing of official history. It deals also with a story that isn't well remembered in Russia (and a regime which, while disliked at the time, has grown rosy in the memory of its citizenry as Russia has transitioned uneasily to capitalism), and with the privacy of perception. Krikalev, from his perch in the blue, seemingly couldn't grasp the consequence of changes happening in Russia. Up there, he inhabited universal time.

As the low-fidelity look of *The Last Soviet* infers, our instruments of discernment and recall are "lossy", dropping information while they record and deliver a partial story in playback – and, furthermore, open to post facto interference and degradation. If *The Last Soviet* links obliquely to *H.M.* via a brief photograph of American astronaut John Glenn in a "famous faces" test, *Milton Torres Sees a Ghost* (2010) connects to the double-projection film by spatialising the past, running a magnetic audiotape recording through a succession of listening stations. And if in *H.M.*, celluloid, which can only be recorded on once, feels like a prospective analogy for a hippocampus that can't be rebuilt, re-recordable tape here adumbrates the rewriting of the past and memory.

Interviewed by Tribe, Torres – a former American jet pilot, now a celebrity in the world of ufology – narrates a story kept concealed from the public until late 2008: his 1957 encounter with what he believes to be a UFO while flying over East Anglia, UK. Torres' story, to be set against that of the governmental "spook" who came to tell him to keep quiet, and that of naysayers who assert (despite the fact that the dates don't match) that the pilot had encountered

a CIA initiative called Palladium to produce "phantom aircraft" as a weapon in the Cold War, is one subjective angle on what was up there. Redoubling ambiguity, his recounting turns cloudily reflexive at times. It's not always clear if he's describing the past or the apparatus his story is being threaded through. The tape, meanwhile, is moving across a set of erasing heads: depending upon where you stand, you hear the whole story or a redacted version, strafed by the sonic equivalent of thick black marker.

This project and *Episode* notwithstanding, Tribe is not a UFO obsessive. Extraterrestrial life functions here as a locus for radical subjectivity, for what can't wholly be determined or known, and what becomes even less knowable when filtered through memory, recitation, and the interference of technology. It is a model for the lopsidedness of knowledge, in which objective correlatives substitute for the workings of cognition, perception and memory. (It's no accident that all the works in this commission are keyed to the motif of flight. Here airspace and cosmic space overlay with mental space. Thought, in the interior realm, is a kind of flight: a wondrous and wayward one subject to all kinds of crosswinds.)

In her early film *Double* (2001) an actress playing Tribe says this: "Honestly, my biggest fear is having my work misread... it's a control thing; I'm a control freak." One side effect of wanting control might be a profound sensitivity to the places where it's easily lost, where what's knowable dissolves into what isn't: when, for example, we attempt to firmly grasp our immediate reality, or the past, in objective terms. In Tribe's art, you sense that coherence is the thinnest of masks over chaos, that Audrey Wollen's unified perception of the world is a dream that fades and that "reality" is Gertrude Stein's *Oakland*, merely the tally of subjective perceptions flowing through innumerable diverse brainpans, all imperfect and decaying, their baseline reality cued by images of the past that are skewed in multiple ways. Tribe's work, so knowing about what can't be known, aims not only to have a viewer recognise this intellectually, but *feel* it: feel the marvellous and terrifying intricacy of our mental processes, the faultlines below our feet, and the uncertainty that binds us together.

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