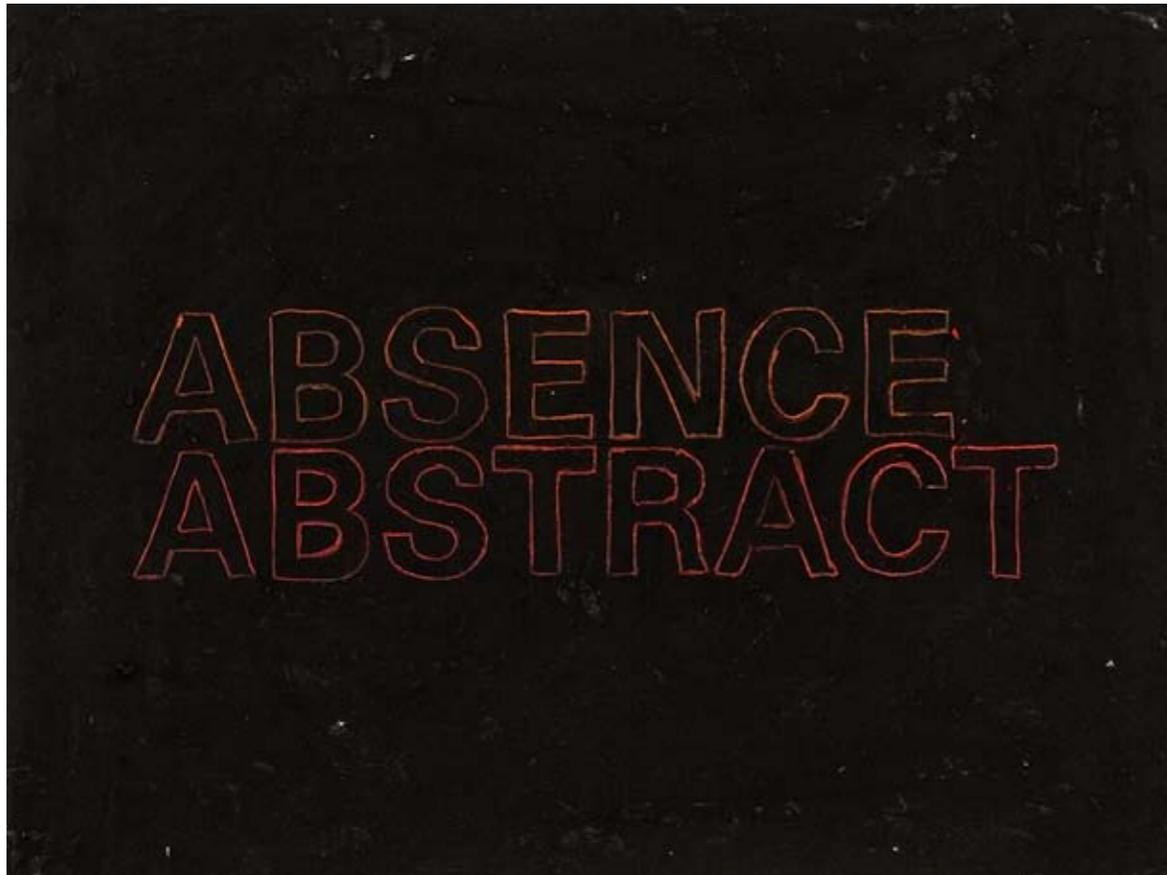


ON CONSCIOUSNESS:

KERRY TRIBE'S PERFORMATIVE AESTHETICS

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Absence/Abstract, 2009
Wax crayon and oil pastel on paper

Psychoanalysis regarded everything mental as being in the first instance unconscious; the further quality of 'consciousness' might also be present, or again it might be absent. This of course provoked a denial from the philosophers, for whom "conscious" and 'mental' were identical, and who protested that they could not conceive of such an absurdity as the 'unconscious mental.'

- SIGMUND FREUD ¹

Ever since Freud discovered the unconscious – in the nascent moment of the Vienna Circle – a fundamental polemic between positivism and psychoanalysis has persisted around the concept of *thinking*. Orthodox positivism argued that the sovereignty of conscious reason – based upon direct observation of the world – constitutes the entirety of one's knowledge. Psychoanalysis, while employing key tenets of positivist logic, asserted that unconscious drives – derived from pre-verbal sensations – form a subject's conscious experience of the world. This hegemonic divide regarding cognition – between what we *know* and what we *don't know* – finally collapsed in the early 90s with the introduction of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) of the brain's neurological topography. This technology unearthed a preconscious world of cognitive activity that dovetailed with Freud's concepts of libido, drives, the unconscious and repression. As Christof Koch, a leading neurobiologist, puts it: "[Are] you conscious of your inner-most thoughts, plans, and intentions? Most people would reflexively answer yes. Most would assign consciousness to the top of the processing pyramid that starts with the eyes, ears, nose, and other sensors and ends with the 'conscious me' as the endpoint of all perception and memory... I think this view is wrong, that it's a cherished chimera."² That said, most agree that thinking is performative. On a conscious level, thinking is the act of *doing* something with the images and words stored in our brains that represent to us our experience of the world. On an unconscious level, there is a set of neuronal events and mechanisms in the brain jointly sufficient to produce a specific conscious percept, what Koch calls the *neurological correlate of consciousness* (NCC).

So, what would an artwork on cognition – one equally mindful of the insights made by philosophy, metapsychology and neurobiology – look like? Or rather, what would it *do*? Perhaps it would make us think about memory and narrative, our conscious and unconscious relation to history, and our subjective experience of space and time.



Enter the work of Kerry Tribe, whose interdisciplinary project about memory paradoxically centres on what we *don't* know – the act of *forgetting*. Her signature use of double projection isn't meant to reaffirm a given image through its repetition. Rather, this platform presents a series of images that continually dissolve into nothingness – staging a game that Freud called “fort-da” (gone/here or here/gone). There's a key moment in *Here and Elsewhere* (2002) when a pan of the Los Angeles landscape is double-projected. Because the pan is mirrored in both projections, an identical, inverse set of images moves toward the centre's vertical seam. As we track the movement of a (doubled) palm tree towards the seam, there's a conscious expectation that the two will coalesce into one when they meet. However, since the pan *actually* indicates the camera's movement, not the landscape's, the trees disappear into the seam at the very moment they meet. The voiceover for this scene, Peter Wollen interviewing his daughter Audrey in a loose reprisal of Jean Luc-Godard's *FRANCE/TOUR/DETOUR/DEUX/ENFANTS* (1978), underscores the double movement of time in the process of remembering something:

“Try to remember something. Close your eyes... are you remembering?” Wollen asks.

“Yes,” Audrey responds.

“When you remembered just now, where did you go?

Did you go back in time?

Or did the thing you were remembering come forward in time to meet you?”

“I think they came forward in time,” she explains.

“So do you think memory happens in the present or in the past?”

“Um... both.”

This verbal exchange parallels the visual operation of the filmed landscape. In both cases, there's an impasse between what we see and what we know. For instance, we *know* that the trees – moving both forward and backward in the double projection – will never coalesce, but we're disturbed none-the-less when they disappear. What we consciously see deceives because it represses what we unconsciously know: that as much as we value the truth of our perceptual experience of the world, there remains a foundational undertow of the repressed knowledge that we are never solely present *as ourselves* within time because we are mediated by the workings (or failings) of memory. Tribe's performative film installation about the storied amnesiac H.M. marks a recent chapter in this query. Now, however, her signature use of double projection further evokes Koch's concept of the NCC. First, the case study: in 1953, H.M. consented to the excision of a substantial portion of his medial temporal lobes – the forebrain structure involved in the consolidation of conscious memory and emotional processing – in order to control his massive epileptic seizures. While H.M. suffered no perceptual deficiencies as a result of the surgery, he was severely amnesiac for events that occurred after the operation. His short-term and procedural memories were left intact, but he could not commit new events to long-term memory.³ His consciousness, or what H.M. *knew*, was reduced solely to his short-term memory – the ability to remember information for only a brief period of seconds. As Koch recounts, “He forgets events as soon as they are out of his sight and mind. He can, with effort retain a three-digit number by continued rehearsal. When he is distracted, the number is gone. When a person leaves a room and reenters a few minutes later, H.M. can't recall having met them before.” H.M. lost the ability to remember the quotidian events that constructed the narrative of his life. Instead, H.M.'s life consisted of 20-second moments of consciousness [that were] anchored to a memory of a past that day by day grew increasingly distant and outmoded. Tribe's 16mm film recounting H.M.'s story is a breakaway work, at once a narrative documentary, a structuralist film and a surrealist contemplation. Towards this end, the work's physical apparatus is vital. For the film's “real” location shots, Tribe used a Bolex camera with a hand-cranked motor that produces only a 20 second wind, which meant that portions of her subject were filmed within the temporal confines of working memory. The film's three visual

components – documentation of worldly sites pertinent to H.M.’s journey; experimental animation and appropriated imagery; and reenactments of studies at MIT – were subsequently edited into a single film and presented as an installation. Before seeing the projected image, we encounter two synchronised projectors spooling the single filmstrip between them, left to right, with a 20-second delay. First the image or event appears in the left projection. 20 seconds later it reappears in the right projection. And yet, even though we see and thus *know* the operation of the film’s apparatus – metaphorically the film’s “NCC” – we don’t always *consciously* see the image twice because it gets locked into our ephemeral working memory. Therefore, if the image on the left doesn’t make a cognitive impact on us, it’s because we would swear that it was seen *first* on the (duplicate) right projection. Like H.M., we can extend our ability to think and remember things within this 20-second span if we concentrate very hard, but it is nearly impossible without a script or a storyboard to really *know* this on its own. Tribe’s installation literally (or procedurally) *demonstrates* H.M.’s condition at same time as the narrator’s voiceover describes his story – an allegory for the simultaneous operation of unconscious operations (working memory) and conscious derivation (long-term memory) that characterises the involuted state of cognition.

As the film concludes, the voice-over ponders H.M.’s atemporal state:

What would it be like to live without recourse to the past? To lose the fourth dimension of time and live in the three dimensions of space alone? Perspectives would flatten, and one could only guess at what these signals from another dimension would mean. In this way, time would not be linear and fixed but liquid. Malleable.

It is here that we *retrospectively* glean the larger, cultural critique of Tribe’s homage to H.M.. The film’s narrative is periodically punctured by historical events represented as static photographs, including the construction of the Berlin Wall, the Kent State riots and Women’s Rights demonstrations. Standing in front of *H.M.* as it concluded, I couldn’t help but wonder who among the viewers saw those historical images twice – once on each side of the double projection – because the depicted events elicited a strong emotional response? Who else saw those images for the first time on the right side because they were either too young to recall the

original events or because they didn’t know or care about the civil rights era? Certainly these events resonate strongly in today’s so-called collective conscious. But, for some, the same events have been relegated to procedural memory, wherein one’s response to current civil rights debates unconsciously repeats responses from the past – witness the recent return of the angry mob, McCarthyist rhetoric and debates over Miranda rights that dominate the current American political landscape. Within this anomic state, historical perspective flattens out, leaving one to wonder – just like H.M. – what these signals from another dimension mean.

For those informed both by 60s aesthetic tactics and 80s psychoanalytic theory, Tribe’s work – equally poetic and political – doesn’t lecture us about anomic consciousness. Rather, the *mechanism* of forgetting is laid bare – and in such a moving way – that a real, productive conversation about historical memory and the role of art-making can begin.

1 Freud, Sigmund. “An Autobiographical Study.” *The Freud Reader*. Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989. 19.

2 Koch, Kristof. “Further Speculations on Thoughts and the Nonconscious Homunculus.” *The Quest for Consciousness: A Neurological Approach*. Englewood: Roberts and Company Publishers, 2004. 296.

3 There are four categories of memory, as Koch explains in his glossary to *The Quest for Consciousness*. Long-term memory is a set of processes that retains information over days, months and years. Most notably, while it includes declarative memories for autobiographic details and facts, long-term memory also includes the unconscious – that is, the implicit or procedural memory – of sensory-motor skills such as playing music or riding a bike. Short-term memory is the temporary storage of information over tens of seconds. Working memory – the memory module that stores information needed for ongoing tasks (such as recalling a phone number) – is a subset of short-term memory.

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