

KERRY TRIBE: THE INVENTION OF MEMORY

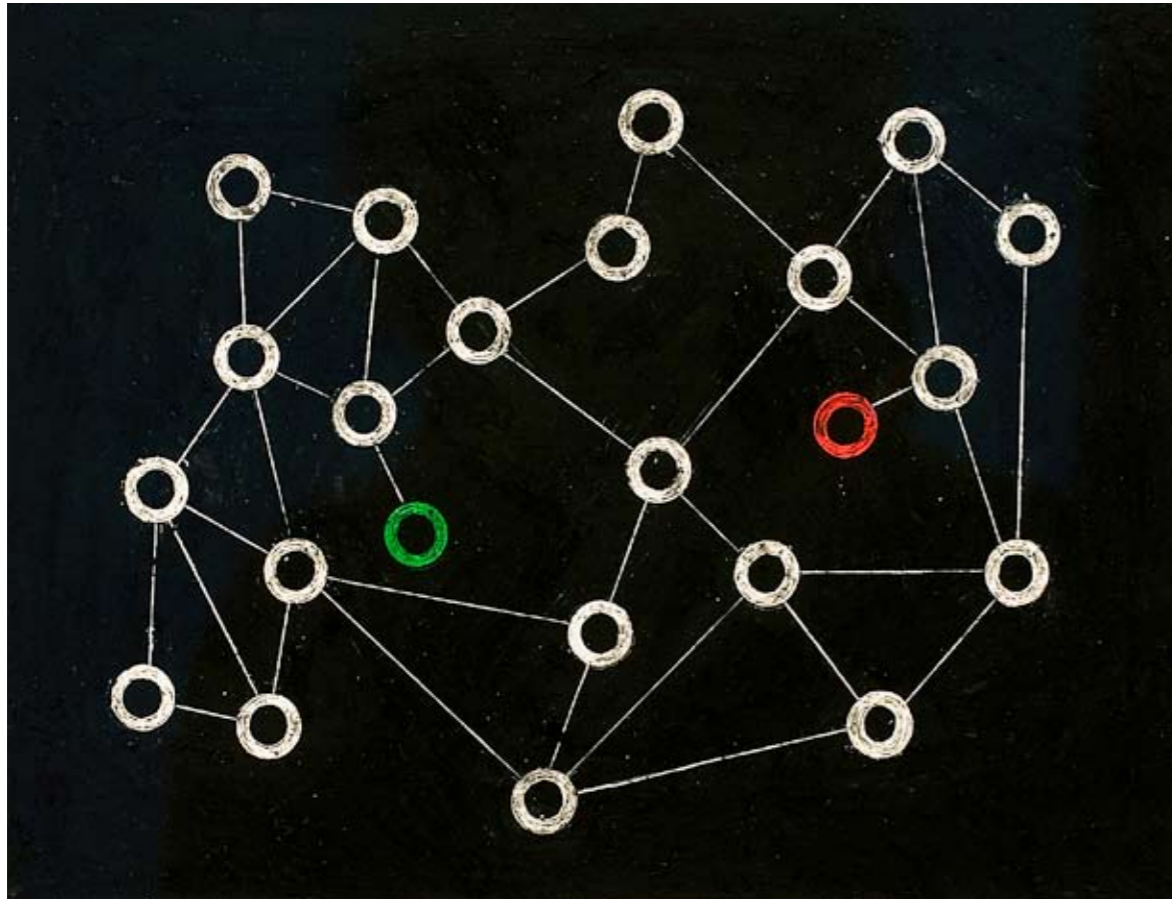
ANNE ELLEGOOD

The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack between two eternities of darkness.
– VLADIMIR NABOKOV, *Speak, Memory*

The concept in chaos theory known as “the butterfly effect” suggests that the smallest action – the mere flap of the delicate wings of a butterfly – can have an enormous impact on a sequence of events, across great distances, permanently altering the conditions and patterns of such things as tornados and hurricanes. The theory argues that the relationships between disparate elements in the universe are held in a delicate codependent balance so that the slightest occurrence can cause great change. But perhaps we don’t need the butterfly’s wings to set in motion monumental change. Perhaps strange things can be triggered – getting caught somewhere between our entrenched notions of time and space – through the disruption of a different type of delicate balance, that of history, politics and cognition.

One work in a new trilogy by Kerry Tribe, *The Last Soviet* (2010), creates the missing documentation marking a small poetic gesture that ostensibly occurred during a bizarre yet historically memorable event. The story revolves around Sergei Krikalev, a Soviet cosmonaut sent to the Mir space station in 1991, a few months before the collapse of the USSR. During this period of political chaos and transition, Krikalev was more or less forgotten – left in space until the resources to bring him home could be gathered. By the time he was brought back to Earth on March 25, 1992, he had been in space longer than any human being – 311 days. He became the last cosmonaut active in the Soviet Space Program, and the last “Soviet” before the realities of a new regime would alter his national identity.

During Krikalev’s many months in this gravity-free zone, supplies of food and other essential materials were sent to him via an unmanned freighter. It is rumoured that someone included a packet of autumn leaves among these essentials, which, when opened, floated weightless inside the Core Module. Tribe’s video features heavily degraded images of a miniature model of the Core Module alongside found footage of various archival materials: tanks in the streets of Moscow during the uprising, group portraits of cosmonauts, views of the Earth from space. Male and female voiceovers explain what we are seeing. The male speaks from the perspective of an “insider” with first-hand knowledge of the mission control room, who is able to describe the physical and technological components of the Core



R.U.L.I.T., 2009
Wax crayon and oil pastel on paper

Module and the daily activities of the cosmonauts. The female acts as an “outsider” speaking with the objectivity of a journalist who contextualises what happened to “the last Soviet” by describing the various archival images put before us.

The structure of *The Last Soviet* enacts the types of dissonance and disjunction characteristic of historical accounts that rely on fragmentary documentation and individual memory. Tribe borrows a structural strategy from Hollis Frampton’s film *Nostalgia* (1971) so that, as the archival images are presented on screen, the female voiceover (speaking in Russian with English subtitles) describes what is happening in the *next* archival image we will see. When that image eventually pops up on screen, we have to think back to the information provided earlier, triggering a cognitive exercise in memory that demarcates its natural limitations, while also setting up a dynamic relationship between personal recollection and collective historical memory.

Shared memories are inevitably an amalgamation of divergent perspectives cobbled together to form a semi-cohesive narrative. Our romance with the indexical nature of photography means that these narratives tend to solidify when accompanied by images; yet our awareness of the fact that mediums using mechanical or digital reproduction are vulnerable to acts of manipulation, has resulted in increased scepticism about the veracity of the photographic image. *The Last Soviet* reveals that these acts of manipulation are nothing new. We learn during the course of the video that a prominent figure in the Soviet Space Program – a Russian cosmonaut named Nelyobov – has been erased from the group portrait we are shown. Dismissed from the corps because of drunken and disorderly conduct, his photographic presence was eradicated by his supervisors as if he had never existed. We are also told that because Krikalev’s situation was so extreme (what kind of superpower leaves a man drifting in space for the better part of a year?) and because the satellite footage sent back to Earth was so poor, speculation ensued. Was he stuck in space indefinitely? Would he die up there? Was he already dead? The public started to doubt the evidence they were being provided of Krikalev’s prolonged space journey, and they started to create their own stories to accompany the photographs.

The malleability of interpretation – the way the visual footage is explained by individuals we presume are experts who nonetheless

remain suspiciously anonymous – is underscored in *The Last Soviet* by Tribe’s use of translation. While the female voiceover is in Russian with English subtitles, the male speaks in English with Russian subtitles. All these strategies accumulate to create a nagging distrust of what we are seeing and hearing. It is not so much the general historical outline of Sergei Krikalev’s story that is called into question. Rather, all the details surrounding the event become susceptible to the vagaries of distilling multiple memories, to the embellishments that accompany any good story, and to the exaggeration that the shared energy and enthusiasm of collective memory is often prone to. Yet Tribe won’t let us fall too easily into a cynical or simplistic position that dismisses all imagery as the propaganda of hegemonic powers or, conversely, as the fantasies of individuals. There is only one moment in the video where the image and text converge – when we see the autumn leaves spill weightlessly into the Core Module. For the re-creation of this highly speculative story, previously degraded footage becomes clear, disjunction and disorientation realign. The truthfulness of the event hardly seems worth debating. If it did occur, then it remains a private intimate memory. The beauty of private memories is that their susceptibility to slippages and retellings are innocuous – they move into the realm of the poetic. The distinction between private and public memory – between the Fall leaves and the fall of the Soviet Union – is made explicit in *The Last Soviet*. We become acutely aware of their key distinctions and their inextricable connections.

Questioning the official record is at the heart of another work in Tribe’s trilogy, *Milton Torres Sees a Ghost* (2010). This story also revolves around a man in flight. In this case, the man is American fighter pilot, Milton Torres, who encountered an unidentified flying object while in British air space in 1957. Sworn to secrecy by a government “spook”, Torres did not speak publicly about his encounter for over fifty years. Using audio of Torres’ first-person account of the event, Tribe edits the testimony so that his memory of the incident and description of his airplane’s technology could be misunderstood to be an explanation of the elaborate installation Tribe constructed to play the audio track. In other words, the verbal depiction of the airplane’s technology takes on a physical form in the work’s structure.

Occupying a substantial length of gallery space, the installation consists of an elaborate audiotape loop that moves between two



listening stations positioned at opposing ends of the available space, each fitted out with a reel-to-reel tape deck and an oscilloscope that visualises the soundtrack as waveforms. In the first station, Torres describes the day he was sent up to locate and shoot down a massive unidentified spacecraft. The adjacent oscilloscope becomes a visual surrogate for the radar screen that figures prominently in Torres' story. The tape then travels along the gallery walls to the second station, where the viewer struggles to hear an erased version of the original soundtrack. The audiotape blankly hisses and the nearly flat-lined oscilloscope mimics the empty radar screen in Torres' jet as the object he was tracking suddenly disappeared. The erased tape then traces along the gallery walls back to the first station, where the story begins again.

Like Tribe's earlier work *Episode* (2006), *Milton Torres Sees a Ghost* revisits a specific incident that cannot be explained, one that remains a mystery. *Episode* revolves around a road trip Tribe had taken with two friends many years earlier when they saw something in the night sky and feared they were about to be abducted by aliens. Tribe reunites her friends on the set of a German talk show where the host gently prods each of them to clarify what happened that night some fifteen years prior. There are discrepancies in the specifics of their memories, but it seems that their shared memories might somehow merge into one coherent narrative if they can only agree upon a plausible explanation. A consensus eventually emerges that what frightened them was in fact the Northern Lights. But for Milton Torres there is no consensus, no resolution to his story. He is emphatic in his retelling – what appeared on his radar screen that night was *not*

a ghost, it was real. It remains an *unexplained* flying object in part because his understanding of the size and speed of the spacecraft were unfathomable to him – this thing was not like anything he had encountered before. It also remains unexplained because Torres was left with his memory and nothing more. Why the British government chose to keep the event a secret for so many years is unknown – that is the nature of secrets – but their decision to do so has kept the mystery alive. Indeed, at the time it occurred, there was no real effort to explain the phenomenon, to give it a tidy narrative. As the sole keeper of the memory, Torres seems surprisingly cogent about what happened, even fifty years later. His testimony is that of a man who has been waiting to tell his story, to remedy the gap in the official record. Yet Tribe's temporal erasure of his memories through her customised apparatus reminds us of the physical realities of memory; how it inevitably fades and blurs over time; how it may be briefly revived by a person or a culture, only to fade again. Questions emerge: Can Torres trust his ability to recall? As much as we may want to believe him, is it possible that Torres' testimony is more interpretation than fact?

But let's not forget our butterfly. Tribe's short film *Parnassius mnemosyne* (2010) is named in honour of Vladimir Nabokov, an avid lepidopterist throughout his life who made numerous drawings of his beloved butterflies. Indeed, the endpapers of an early edition of his autobiography *Speak, Memory* included his original drawing of *Parnassius mnemosyne*. *Speak, Memory* is widely renowned for the author's enormous attention to detail, but what is particularly compelling about the book is how it transcends the conventional memoir to become a kind of model for the complexities of memory. Composed of several chapters that Nabokov wrote, and rewrote, individually for a variety of publications – usually periodicals – over a number of years and in different languages, numerous iterations and retellings of his memories exist. Rather than one holistic, intact “master” narrative of a life, *Speak, Memory* is an object lesson on the instability of memory itself.

Tribe's *Parnassius mnemosyne* is a gorgeous abstraction composed of delicate lines. Looking more hand-drawn than photographic, they are in fact laser microscans of the wings of a *Parnassius mnemosyne*. Tribe has taken a series of still images of the butterfly's wing and animated them to create a lyrical depiction of movement. As we are unable to recognise the source of the imagery, the microscopic imagery could be confused as something at the opposite end of

scale – a galaxy or constellation. As with the mystery of Torres’ radar screen or Krikalev’s autumn leaves, we don’t really understand what we are looking at. Tribe has transformed her brief 16mm film into a Möbius strip by turning over one end and splicing it to the other end to make a loop. The film plays normally on the projector since it is perforated on both sides, but the image the viewer sees flips with each 40-second rotation to produce a mirror image of the original footage, like the symmetrical wings of a butterfly. We may be unaware (or only unconsciously aware) of this flipping, a phenomenon that formally mimics the subtle slippages, jumps and turns that our memories regularly enact. Like Nabokov’s use of the butterfly as a symbol of his life, Tribe uses the butterfly to personify memory, just as its name “mnemosyne” suggests.

In each of Tribe’s new works, memory’s relationship to time is articulated through specific formal approaches. *The Last Soviet* participates in the re-enactment of historical events, drawing upon the tropes of the documentary format to recognise that shared memories are periodically reconstructed as an aggregate of subjective voices, each memory vulnerable not only to time but to the particularities of language, translation, and visual correlation. The erasure performed in *Milton Torres Sees a Ghost* creates a feeling of alienation from the language of memory. The duration inherent to the work – moving a soundtrack physically through space in order to degrade the audio so that it becomes incomprehensible – not only brings to mind the tenuous and inevitably eroded relationship memory has to time, but it enacts the very thing that was intended by suppressing Milton Torres’s account of that day – to delete it from his memory, to render it inert by cutting it off from language. Memory is inextricable from time. Yet time complicates memory, sometimes beyond recognition, inserting doubt and mistrust into the very act of remembering. Nabokov said, “I confess I do not believe in time.” After seeing Tribe’s trilogy of recent works, we might wonder whether anyone can.

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The Last Soviet (still), 2010

Over:
The Last Soviet, 2010
(Installation view: Arnolfini)
Single channel video with sound