

Kerry Tribe

Arnolfini

The title for the UK edition of Vladimir Nabokov's memoir, *Speak, Memory* (1951), was originally intended to be *Speak Mnemosyne*, but Nabokov was dissuaded by his publisher who warned him that 'little old ladies would not want to ask for a book whose title they could not pronounce'. In Kerry Tribe's film *Parnassius Mnemosyne* (2010), presented at the Arnolfini as part of 'Dead Star Light', the American artist's first solo show in the UK, a magnified butterfly wing is projected from a suspended Möbius strip of 16mm film. (Nabokov was of course also a renowned lepidopterist, with a genus of butterfly named 'Nabokovia' in his honour.) In the silent looped film, the wing's grainy, latticed structure emerges and fades, the image inverting every 40 seconds as the film flips, though the change is slight, almost imperceptible. You doubt not only what you see but what you remember having seen – an effect that is indicative of much of Tribe's smartly researched practice.

Encompassing earlier films (*Here & Elsewhere*, 2001, and *Northern Lights [Cambridge]*, 2005), more recent works, such as *H.M.* (2009), which was shown in this year's Whitney Biennial, as well three specially commissioned new works, 'Dead Star Light' was spread across all three floors of the Arnolfini (the show will travel to Camden Arts Centre, London and Modern Art Oxford next year). On the ground floor, you encountered the two projectors screening *H.M.* before seeing the projection itself – indeed, throughout the exhibition, obsolete or outmoded media insisted on the gap between material records of an event and how it is recounted. *H.M.* involves the famous case study of a patient who, in 1953 at the age of 27, underwent experimental brain surgery to cure his severe epilepsy. The operation resulted in instantaneous and permanent amnesia: at any given moment H.M. was only able to remember the previous 20 seconds of his life. Tribe's two-screen film, which is based on a series of interviews that tested the patient's recall both before and after the operation, mimics this process with a 20-second delay between two projectors.

The inaccuracy of memory and its fragility over time is

About this review

Published on 28/09/10

By Paul Teasdale



[Back to the main site](#)

explored via a similarly curious case study in a large-scale sound installation: *Milton Torres Sees a Ghost* (2010), the account an American fighter pilot who claimed to have encountered a UFO while on light manoeuvres over the east coast of Britain in 1957. Magnetic audio tape (the invention of which dates from the time of the sighting) runs the length of the gallery wall between two reel-to-reel audio players and oscilloscopes (which act both as listening posts and as monitors for the visualizations of the soundwaves). At one listening station Torres' speculative account of alien technology can be heard (oddly sounding as though he is describing the technology on view), while at the other is only the crackle of static – the silence of an erased story. The work also incorporates recently declassified documentation relating to the encounter, which includes conflicting testimonies, and Torres' own account many years after the event. What first appears to be an investigation into the veracity of Torres' claims is really more concerned with the natural degradation of a story, how events become embellished, smudged and left out – each memory a new remembrance.

The Last Soviet (2010), another new commission, is an 11-minute video based on Russian cosmonaut Sergei Krikalev's unintentionally lengthy stay on the Mir space station, stranded in orbit as the Soviet Union collapsed. Two narrators, a woman speaking Russian with English subtitles and a Russian-accented man speaking English with Russian subtitles, talk over the footage that flips between static-filled shots from an on-board camera in the space shuttle and news reports showing the social unrest in Moscow. The deliberate unmooring of the narration from the images – as well as accounts of dead cosmonauts being scrubbed out of photographs and of *Swan Lake* being broadcast on state television whenever there was civil unrest – nods both at the disinformation tactics of the time and Tribe's investigation into rediscovering those little-known facts that wait to be remembered.

Tribe doesn't give some critical account of truth as representation; her concern is with the personal systems of memory. In the trio of new works presented in 'Dead Star Light', her focus is more specifically on the memory's movement through time and media. Indeed, it seems that Tribe's exploration of the fragility of memory, its lapses and inaccuracies, is dependent as much on the materiality of the media as the invisible yet corrosive force of time itself.

Paul Teasdale

Frieze

3-4 Hardwick Street, London EC1R 4RB, 020 7833 7270