

In Kerry Tribe's Artworks, Forgetting Leads to Creating

Posted on **April 7, 2015** by **Alex Teplitzky**



Aphasia is a little known disorder that, according to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 1 million people suffer from in the United States. The disorder does not affect a person's intelligence, but rather, causes difficulties in speaking, listening, reading and writing—though the symptoms are largely unique to the individual. Kerry Tribe (2012 Visual Arts) has spent her career examining notions of memory and subjectivity through art works, and was naturally drawn to aphasic community as a way of continuing her practice. After receiving support from Creative Capital, Kerry spent time with and interviewed three individuals who struggled with aphasia and turned their story into a powerful video and installation. This series of works, called [The LOST Note](#), will debut at [356 Mission](#) in Los Angeles April 10. We spoke to Kerry about her upcoming exhibition.

Alex Teplitzky: Can you describe the manifestation of the project a little more in depth?

Kerry Tribe: *The LOST Note* includes a number of works that have been percolating since I received a grant from Creative Capital in 2012 to make a body of work about a communication disorder called aphasia that makes it difficult for people to understand or

produce language in its many forms.

The central work in the exhibition is a three-channel video installation called *The Aphasia Poetry Club*. It is roughly half an hour long and plays across a massive wall constructed to bifurcate the 10,000 square foot warehouse-turned-gallery. Much of the film was shot at 356 Mission, and the space makes a series of increasingly surreal and spatially confusing appearances over the course of the film.

The film is narrated by three aphasic individuals: Chris Riley, Laura Romero and Dale Benson. I got to know them each over the course of a couple of years attending an aphasia support group that meets weekly at Cedars Sinai Hospital in Los Angeles. That group, which has been meeting regularly for over a decade, spun off a second group, the “Aphasia Book Club” in 2014. We meet weekly at the Echo Park Public Library and discuss books and poems that group members collectively select.

The films’ three subjects are never named or pictured directly, but their voices drive the project. The footage we see when each speaks combines with their words to produce what I think of as a looser, more abstract, more phenomenological and possibly more accurate portrait than a talking head in this instance ever could.

They say that if you’ve met one person with aphasia you’ve met one person with aphasia. While most people with aphasia have had strokes, no two individuals experience the impairment in exactly the same way.

Chris Riley had a stroke at age 43 and five years later is still working hard to produce the words he needs to express himself. But he’s clearly very intelligent and his optimism and humor shine through his efforts to describe the cosmic nature of consciousness.

Laura speaks more fluently but tells us she has lost 50% of her auto processing—her capacity to comprehend incoming information. She muses on whether this makes her “half” of herself. She can “speak at a rate that’s much faster than [she] can process,” meaning that people aren’t immediately aware of the extent of her disability. Her aphasia is less obvious but equally affecting.

Dale, meanwhile, speaks intimately of his memories and aspirations in a way that at first sounds perfectly fluent but is riddled with neologisms and nonsensical grammatical constructions. It’s hard to tell if he’s saying what he means. Dale tells of his life as a Navy S.E.A.L. serving in Vietnam, his reinvention as Hollywood producer in the 1980s and his idea for a musical children’s cartoon he has been trying to make ever since. Dale’s voice accompanies footage of what appears to be a jungle in Vietnam and a series of cartoon characters (first a canary, then a seal, then a leech) who eventually, in the film’s ecstatic animated climax, come together in festive, animated song.

On the opposite side of the wall that splits the gallery is a sprawling installation of sculptures, prints and plants that reference the film's content and production—custom fabricated C-stands, apple boxes and light diffusing equipment often found on set but designed to function differently.



Film still from "The Aphasia Poetry Club"

Alex: Early on in the viewing of *The Aphasia Poetry Club*, lacunas in the narratives and vocabulary of the people being interviewed make it clear that following the story will be difficult, if not impossible. Yet, at least in my case, the viewer wants to string together some kind of story line. What are you trying to evoke through their telling of their stories?

Kerry: I think the three people pictured in the film are each quite extraordinary and I identify with each of them in different ways. Laura lives a few miles from my house. She's a year older than me but shares my birthday. We've read many of the same books, wear similar clothes, enjoyed similar upbringings. Chris, meanwhile, was an artist and photographer whose work traveled in circles similar to my own. His project on the Killing Fields in Cambodia, which he discusses in the film, is extraordinary and chilling, and represents to me a highly critical and intelligent way of dealing with the problem of how to represent loss. Dale, meanwhile, says of the cartoon he imagined (which I produced and which we see in my film), "My show is called 'The Loste Note.'" My identification with each of these three must be obvious by now. Stylistically and structurally, the film references much of my own work and in this way, too, feels vaguely autobiographical—to me anyway.

The invitation to both shoot and show this work at 356 Mission afforded an opportunity to place the viewer in the site of production. This move—from site of production to site of reception—also becomes something of a subject in the work. What’s meant by “the language centers of the brain” is generally two regions that are independently responsible for either the production or reception of linguistic representation. Cinema, in all its forms, is of course, a visual language, and doublings related to this move occur throughout the show.



An excerpt of “Parnassius Mnemosyne” by Kerry Tribe

Alex: In all of your projects, memory failures, rather than hinder your subject matter, act as points of departure for artistic endeavors. They are topics you come back to again and again, repeating like the characters in your film *Critical Mass*. Is this just a topic you’re interested in, or do you think that art has some role to play, akin to science, in discovering some hard truths about memory?

Kerry: I’ve been interested in memory and language and how people relate to one another since I started making videos in college. The projects have become increasingly focused and more ambitious over the years to be sure, but the central questions are generally the same. I think sometimes it takes the anomalies in the system to reveal how the system works.

The inadvertent poetry spoken by the aphasic sometimes makes more sense than our best efforts to rationally explain what we think we mean. In that sense, the varied engagements I've made over the years with memory or consciousness or whatever you want to call it have few hard truths to suggest, but do, perhaps, provide space to consider something I'm not sure we'll ever fully understand.

Kerry Tribe's "The Loste Note" premieres at [356 Mission](#) in Los Angeles on April 10 and runs through May 31.



About Alex Teplitzky

Alex Teplitzky studies and implements tools for arts organizations and artists to express themselves on the web and through social media. He has worked for a wide variety of galleries and museums including the de Young Museum in San Francisco, Claire Oliver Gallery, the Jen Bekman Gallery, the Richard Feigen Gallery and Ray Johnson Estate. In 2010, Alex moved to New York to study at the Draper John W. Draper Graduate Program at NYU where he wrote his thesis on artists' visual deconstruction of the media's representation of terrorism and violence. He has written arts articles for Art F City, Hyperallergic, Eros Mortis and he manages an art blog called Tout Petit la Planète. He also DJs at various venues in New York City under the alias Nabocough.

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