

# frieze

## Remember Me

Human cameras, fortune tellers, fake archives, unreliable memories – in **Lindsay Seers'** films and installations, the truth is not what it seems

### Explanatory note

All characters featured in this narrative are completely fictional. Any resemblance to any person living or dead is purely coincidental. No similarity to any person either living or dead is intended or should be inferred.

M. Anthony Penwill, *It has to be this way* (2009)

Before I began this text, I asked Lindsay Seers whether I might borrow DVD copies of her films *Extramission 6* (2009) and *It has to be this way* (2009), which I'd seen a few weeks earlier at Tate Britain and Matt's Gallery, London. It's a common enough request from a writer to an artist, and one that's usually granted in pragmatic recognition of the temporal gap between encountering a work in a gallery space and writing about it later – a gap in which all sorts of misrememberings might take root and strangely flower. Seers' first instinct was to refuse, a decision that wasn't so much about the inevitable losses involved in transposing her films from her sculptural viewing environments to the screen of my yellowing laptop, as about recollection, and even mis-recollection, as a methodology for experiencing her work.

## About this article

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By *Tom Morton*



Lindsay Seers, *Extramission 6* (2009), DVD still

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Conventionally, the highest-value engagement with art is that which occurs at the empirical level. The further away we travel from a work (in space, and also in time), the more

unreliable we become as witnesses – is the film we watch in our mind's eye the same as that which beamed from the gallery's projector? Did the voiceover say 'I love her', or 'I loved her', or 'You could say I loved her', and what difference might such shifts in tense or qualifiers make? In *The Way by Swann's*, the first part of Marcel Proust's immense novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27), the narrator describes a moment, just after reading a paragraph and before falling asleep, when he imagines himself to be 'what the book was talking about: a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V'. Move away from art, and art becomes our experience of it, which is to say something that's hard to distinguish from the self. Seers did, finally, lend me the DVDs (their slip cases sit on my desk, like police files) but what feels valuable right now isn't the ability to verify the facts of their contents, but rather the memory of watching them in a time now past, and their slow development in the darkroom of my mind.

Narrated by, among others, (an actor playing?) the artist's mother Alicia, a woman described as 'Tusse Silberg: Psychosynthesis Practitioner' and an unseen man who seems to be an art dealer, and screened in a hut based on Thomas Edison's first commercial film production studio built in 1893, Seers' *Extramission 6* is part of a series of five films which, alongside the publication *Human Camera* (2007), purport to offer a progressive biography of the artist. The piece relates how Seers, whose mother had been told by a fortune-teller that she had experienced 'some trauma at birth', possessed an eidetic, or photographic, memory as a child and did not speak until she was nearly eight years old. Her wordlessness came abruptly to an end when she was presented with a photographic portrait of herself causing her to ask 'is that me?' (The back of the photo bore the stamp of Fred Wöhrnitz, great-grandson of Ferdinand Wöhrnitz, a plantation owner and friend of the pioneering photographer Louis Daguerre who introduced photography to Seers' childhood home of Mauritius in order to record his native workers.) Given her previously perfect visual recall, a 'gift' that renders the difference between past and future, and self and not-self, difficult to parse, the encounter with this image was experienced as a kind of second birth trauma, and following the loss of her eidetic abilities, she was forced to inhabit, and communicate within, a new reality. Uprooted from Mauritius, Seers began to obsessively take photographs of her immediate environs, before deciding to transform herself into a camera, throwing a black sack over her head, inserting a piece of light-sensitive paper into her mouth, emerging to make the exposure through the aperture of her lips, and then returning to the sack to develop it. The results of these ingestions are bloody, veiny, spittle-flecked and decidedly amniotic images of the inside of Seers' mouth, printed on small circles of paper that resemble communion wafers (what's transubstantiated, here, is the cool machinery of the photographic process into something warmly biological). They also had the effect of pissing off those who

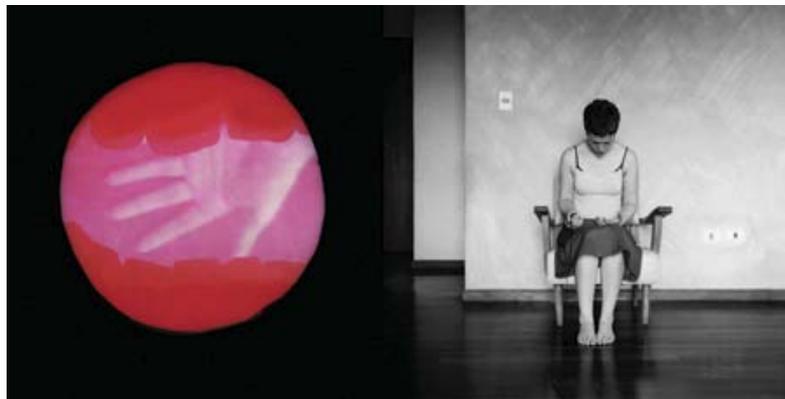
knew her. As an art dealer recounts 'it was very difficult to have a solid relationship with her as a friend [...] Her work was a compulsion'.

Returning as an adult to Mauritius with her mother, Seers seeks out her childhood home – a place she could not remember, but felt was somehow associated with her 'blockage'. The island, though, has undergone drastic change since she left it, and her mother is unable to identify the house in which they once lived, a fact that leads Seers to swap her attempt to become a camera for an attempt to become a projector. Influenced, perhaps, by Plato's extromission theory of vision, in which 'fire' emitted from the eyes illuminates objects, she straps a light to her forehead, and lets its beam fall on the world, a 'healthy escape', as the art dealer has it, from 'the passivity and melancholia associated with being a camera'. The film ends with an image of Seers' eyes burning with white luminescence, as her mother's voiceover hopes, a little against hope, that 'for Lindsay now things will be more positive and she can look forward instead of dwelling in the past and the unhappiness some periods in her life had'.



Although much of *Extramission 6* is filmed in the manner of a documentary, it constantly calls its own veracity into doubt, whether through the omission of information (the 'art dealer' is never named), or simple misinformation (surely Tusse Silberg is not a 'Psychosynthesis Practitioner' but rather the star of the 1984 film *The Company of Wolves*, an adaptation of a 1979 Angela Carter short story in which metamorphosis figures heavily?). Seers' point is not to relate the past as-it-was, but rather to create a representation of somebody who, having lost a sense of the oneness of time, space and everything they contain, attempts to recover it through the very act of representation. The double trauma of birth and the loss of eidetic memory are re-enacted, along Freudian lines, in the act of becoming a camera, a device that insists on the cleaving of one thing from another, and is then seemingly eased by that of becoming a projector. If the eyes, as Plato has it, set fire to the world, then surely everything that flames, including the eyes themselves, are one and the same? I don't know how much, if any, of *Extramission 6* reflects Seers'

actual lived experience (did she really remain silent all those years? did she ever set foot on Mauritian sands?) but the film has a richness and a truth that far exceeds the image-making of the type practiced by Ferdinand Wöhrnitz, the film's historical spectre, in which the lens neither recorded the interior self, nor illuminated the world, but rather functioned as an instrument of separation and control.



Early on in W.G. Sebald's novel *Austerlitz* (2001), the narrator, an architectural historian and childhood refugee to Wales from Nazi-occupied Czechoslovakia in the process of discovering his Jewish parents' past, contemplates 'how little we can hold in mind, how everything is constantly lapsing into oblivion with every extinguished life, how the world is, as it were, draining itself, in that the history of countless places and objects which themselves have no power of memory is never heard, never described or passed on'. Seers' recent exhibition at Matt's Gallery, London, 'It has to be this way', took this draining as its subject, telling the tale of the memory loss and disappearance of the artist's (possibly fictional) stepsister, Christine, a scholar and emulator of the 17th-century Queen Christina of Sweden, through (again, possibly fictional) archive material arranged into three films and a publication, edited by one M. Anthony Penwill, an (once more, possibly fictional) individual who also contributed to Seers' *Human Camera*. In what is perhaps the central event in this fractured, sometimes self-contradictory narrative, Seers' mother visits Christine in hospital following the scooter crash with her lover which caused her amnesia, bringing with her a box of photographs in an attempt to reconnect her stepdaughter with her personal history. Not recognizing any of these images, Christine transforms them into a makeshift tarot, employing visual mementoes of the past as an instrument with which to divine the future, or rather multiple possible futures – a tarot deck, after all, will give a different reading with each shuffle. Later in *Austerlitz* (a novel in which a set of mysterious, uncaptioned photographs are scattered throughout the text), Sebald's protagonist remarks that 'I shall find that all moments of time have co-existed simultaneously, in which case none of what history tells us would be true, past events have not yet occurred but are waiting to do so at the moment we think of them, although that, of course, opens up the bleak prospect of ever-lasting misery and never-ending anguish'. Their different temporal

origins flattened out on the plane of her hospital sheets, Christine's photos are always in play. The Empress. The Lovers. Death. Then. Now. Forever.

To experience Seers' work is to experience snapshots, rumours, doubtful information – fascinating fragments that refuse to add up to a neat, narratively satisfying whole. To experience one's memory of her work is something else entirely. Recall *Extramission 6* on a Monday morning, and it's a story of childhood and exile. Recall it on a Tuesday night, and it's a meditation on Platonic optics and 19th-century methods of indexing and surveillance. Memory does its work, generating different readings, different histories, and different shapes for the viewer's future self to adopt. This is not art that insists on its own inviolable truth. Seers deals the cards, and lets them fall where they may.

### **Tom Morton**

Tom Morton is a contributing editor of *frieze*, Curator at The Hayward Gallery, London, and co-curator of The British Art Show 7.

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### **Frieze**

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