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BOMB

Tacita Dean
Jeffrey Eugenides
BOMB 95/Spring 2006, ART



Tacita Dean, *Fernsehturm* (two stills), 2001, 16MM color anamorphic film, optical sound, 44 minutes. All images courtesy of the artist and Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.

Formidable!

This is a nickname. It is also a description. A few summers ago, I was in Paris during the run of a show by Tacita Dean. Many of the journalists I was meeting had seen the show and I asked them what they thought of it.

What's the opposite of a Gallic shrug? A shrug that indicates not resignation but amazement? This is what the journalists did. Lifting eyes heavenward, spreading arms wide, the journalists cried, "Tacita Dean. *Formidable!*"

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That was how Tacita got her nickname.

Let me tell you why it fits.

At 40, Tacita Dean has accomplished a lifetime's worth of work. At her upcoming retrospective this May in Schaulager in Basel, no less than 24 of her films will be shown. She has also exhibited chalkboard drawings, photographs, sound pieces and found-object installations. Though mainly a filmmaker, Dean is driven by ideas rather than a particular medium. Her talent is polygamous and prolific.

There is something formidable even about her hair. Its frizzy electricity puts you in mind of Golda Meir overseeing the Knesset. Her eyes exert a Rasputin or Madame Blavatsky force. (Meanwhile, her lips are forming a joke.)

Dean's Berlin studio occupies part of a warehouse alongside the Hamburger Bahnhof. Her fellow tenants are the artists Thomas Demand and Olafur Eliasson. Demand and Eliasson have huge, hangar-like operations. Tacita works in a cramped, second-floor office, alone, editing her spools of film.

She works long hours and always arrives late for dinner. She comes in smiling, and limping. For years now Tacita has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis. Her right leg is very bad, also her left wrist. I know this mainly from observation, because, though she's in constant pain, she never complains. It's difficult for her to walk, to climb stairs, to carry her one-year-old son (my godson), Rufus.

None of this slows her work or dims her humor.

I agree with the French.

"Tacita Dean. *Formidable!*"

She is an overpowering force and I cower before her in admiration.

JEFFREY EUGENIDES Hello there!

TACITA DEAN Hello.

JE This is rather awkward, but I think I think we should make clear under what circumstances this interview is being conducted. I'm in Chicago—where it's the morning—and I'm doped-up on cold medicine. And you are in Berlin, where—it's what, about six or seven o'clock?

TD Six-fourteen.

JE So we're not in the same country or time zone or, probably, mental health.

TD I've had longer to get worried about this than you.

JE That's true. I was just drinking coffee trying to get awake. I was going to start by bringing up the one thing in your work that I know has influenced my own work, which is the green ray, because I put that little bit of dialogue in *Middlesex* about people talking about a green ray, which I learned about from you, not having seen your film *The Green Ray*. I think you said that you got the green ray

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in the film, but it never appears in any single frame. But you can see it momentarily when the film is running. Is that right?

TD Yes. The film is 24 frames a second but you can't isolate a single frame that has it.

JE Describe what the green ray is.

TD In America they call it the green flash. When the sun sets, in a very clear horizon, with no land mass for many hundreds of miles, and no moisture or atmospheric pressure, you have a good chance of seeing it. The slowest ray is the blue ray, which comes across as green when the sun sets in perfect atmospheric conditions. It's the last ray as the sun recedes with the curvature of the earth. Like a pulse on the horizon. It's totally fractional, though it can last longer.

The bizarre thing is that I filmed *The Green Ray* in Madagascar, and then in the same month, I had to fly back from Washington for an exhibition. On my Lufthansa airplane back, while we were nearing the coast of Ireland, everyone else was asleep and I got up and looked out the window across three sleeping bodies, and just at that moment the sun rose above a very sharply defined cloud, and it was the most extraordinary green ray. I mean, not like the one I have on my film, I mean a real . . . and it lingered . . . a second of emerald before the sun rose. I was *so shocked*, having this whole wait for it in Madagascar and then actually getting to see it so vividly. To see such a full-blooded green ray—

JE Does it last longer if you're airborne?

TD Probably. People see it at sea. I think air pilots must see it more often. To see it from land is unusual.

JE Does everybody see the green ray when they see the film, or does it happen too fast?

TD No. That's what's nice about it, because otherwise the film would just be about a phenomenon. But in the end it's more about perception and faith, I think.

JE Did you always see it?

TD This is really interesting, because I filmed it on this beach in Madagascar, and there was this couple who were hanging around. They didn't see the green ray, and they'd videotaped the sunset to document it. Then they replayed their video to me for proof that it wasn't there. But I was absolutely convinced that I had seen it, so it had to be on my film, which was optical and analog. When I got the film back, it was very, very faint, and I had to really push it to get more color in the film, to bring out the green ray. But it's definitely there. It's not a fiction. Some people think the green ray is an illusion, but it's not.

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Tacita Dean, Installation Views, *The Green Ray*, 2001, color film, 16MM, silent, 2 1/2 minutes.

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JE There was a French filmmaker who spent weeks and months trying to film it and couldn't. Then you went down there and got it in a couple of days—

TD Eric Rohmer. But he faked it! It looks fake—it's terrible when you see it. They sent some camera guy to the Canary Islands for months—

JE (*laughter*) Just send your camera guy! Rohmer wanted it to be real, but he just couldn't do it, so he had to have special effects?

TD He must have done his in a very early form of digitalization. It's very heavy-handed; it's like this huge, green thing. I mean, the real green ray makes your heart miss a beat, because you look, you look, you look. And then you see it so suddenly, and it's gone. Somehow rapidity is part of its beauty.

JE When you're developing the film though, I mean, film is not an exact replica of reality, so the coloration of the film obviously isn't proof that there's actually *greenness* on the horizon. How do you know that it's not something in the solution?

TD It was *there* but it was very faint. You have a scope in which to process film: it's called grading, where you can change color. I grade my films warm. Most feature films are graded cold, so they have a greeny, colder light to them. I have a lot of trouble pushing my guys to go magenta. I like that warmth. For them, they just look at skin tones. When I have filmed people, the skin tone does have quite a high color! But with *The Green Ray*, it wasn't like it wasn't there. It was faint, and by pushing it slightly, I was just putting a bit more color in the film to bring it out.

JE Is it always people you like who see it?

TD (*laughter*) I don't know, that's a very interesting question. How the world divides.

JE I'm really eager to see it, if I see it. But I know it'll be like the Emperor's New Clothes—I'll feel very awful if I don't see it.

TD The film is only two and a half minutes long, and I just have it on a push button—you start the film and the sun sets. It was Madagascar so of course it sets very quickly, and it's in real time. But if you blink—

JE You miss it.

TD You miss it.

JE Like everything nice.

We're on the verge of talking about chance and coincidence—about your being on the plane and seeing the green ray after you filmed the green ray. I know you've had a number of experiences where chance played a role in your work, and sometimes your work has actually been about the role of chance. With your film *Girl Stowaway*, when you were filming on the coast of Devon, you camped out overnight and, while you were there, wasn't there a murder nearby?

TD How that whole story began was I found a photograph of this girl stowaway in a second-hand book at a flea market, *The Last of the Wind Ships*. She stowed away in 1928 on a ship called the *Herzogin Cecilie*, which was sailing from Australia to Falmouth in England, Cornwall. I was instantly attracted to this image of her so I bought the book. It was actually my first relevant flea-market purchase. Then I took it with me on a trip to Glasgow, Scotland, and in Heathrow Airport I put my bag, which had the book in it, through the hand-luggage x-ray machine, walked through the security arch, and then went to collect it, and the bag had just disappeared. It was extraordinary.

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Then quite mysteriously and strangely, a week later I got a phone call, while I was still in Glasgow, saying that my bag had been found going around and around the Aer Lingus luggage belt in Dublin Airport.

JE Was anything missing?

TD Nothing was missing, no. I picked it up at the airport on my way back to London, and at first I was trying to get some press attention on how unsafe it can be to put all your best belongings into that x-ray machine. But then I decided to write the newspaper article myself, telling the story of how my stolen bag containing the stowaway's picture had made its way to Dublin by this strange circuitous route. I made and printed it in the style of the British newspaper *The Guardian*. At the same time I wanted to make a parallel article in the style of the period that I imagined she had stowed away in. I had studied at Falmouth School of Art, so I already had a relationship to that town. I rang up the *Falmouth Packet*, the local newspaper, and told them I wanted to fabricate an article about the stowaway, and they actually had a record of her arriving in Falmouth on the *Herzogin Cecilie* in 1928; her name was Jean Jeinnie and she stowed away from Port Lincoln in Australia. So in my fake 1928 article, I had her stowing away in order to try to get to Dublin. So when you first encounter these two newspaper articles, you read that she was trying to get to Dublin but you don't know if she made it or not, but you do know her photographic self made it there nearly 70 years later.

After that, I decided to take it even further and I fabricated a film with a windup Kodak camera of her, I mean of somebody who looked a bit like her, aboard my version of the *Herzogin Cecilie*. She'd stowed away in 1928, and I found out the ship had wrecked in 1936. At that point I decided to go on a sort of pilgrimage to find the place where the real *Herzogin Cecilie* sank, off Bolt Head in Devon, the county up from Cornwall. It had been a calm night, but the ship hit a rock and let in a lot of water, and in its hold was grain, and grain when it meets salt water goes rotten very, very quickly. At that point the boat could still have been salvaged, but Salcombe harbor, which is protected on all sides by the wind, refused to let her in because the local council were afraid the stench of rotten grain might scare off their tourists, so they towed her into this little bay called Starehole Bay, which is exposed from the southeast, and the wind changed and the boat was immediately wrecked.

I went to Starehole Bay with a friend and camped above the wreck (which you can still see) which you're technically not supposed to do. We filmed the wreck of the *Herzogin Cecilie* the next morning on this beautiful July day, and then left. Then a day or two later, we saw that on the very day we were there, hours or even minutes after we left, a young woman had been raped and murdered in daylight. The whole thing became sort of uncanny and unpleasant because we became the last people who—the friend I was with in fact turned out to be the last person who had seen her alive and he also saw her murderer.

JE And the film you shot became evidence?

TD Well they tried, the police tried to impound the film, but there was literally no information on it. I had a show coming up, and I couldn't release it, but I was questioned in Brixton police station, my friend was questioned down in Cornwall. We had to make maps of where we were, and of course our maps just didn't match at all.

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JE (*laughter*)

TD The most extraordinary thing is that suddenly in *The Guardian*, there was a photograph of Starehole Bay showing the wreck of *Herzogin Cecilie*. And within my own narrative, you know, the whole thing began with me fabricating *The Guardian* article.

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Tacita Dean, *Girl Stowaway*, 2004, color and black-and-white 16MM film, optical sound, 8 minutes.

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JE I've probably told you about the strange coincidences that happened to me when I was writing *Middlesex*, and I don't want to go over them now, but I had a similar experience. I'm always wondering how to think about them. How do you feel about the story you just told? When something happens like that, do you feel that your mind is ordering the events and creating the coincidence, or do you think that there's actually a power in the universe that's somehow communicating to you? I mean, I know the latter choice is a step toward insanity, but the excitement about those moments is that you feel for a moment that the universe is essentially helping you, speaking to you. Even though you know that, rationally, that's crazy, it's impossible to let go of that feeling.

TD I think that being very open to coincidences, they happen more. I also have spells where I'm quite closed to them. But I sometimes feel quite panicked about mentioning this particular coincidence, because, you know, it worked very well for *my* own narrative, but—

JE A little hard to get excited about an artistic coincidence when the reality is that a murder has been committed.

TD Yes!

JE Right. My view on coincidences is this: I think that coincidences are always happening, but when you're focused on producing something, that attention makes you aware of them, and suddenly they start to cohere. I let myself believe in them to the extent that they keep me from despair over my work.

When they're happening, and it feels like the unseen powers are on your side, you actually have a better working day.

TD You have that many then?

JE I have them now and then, and if they happen I just let them sort of—

TD —take over?

JE Lift my mood. The other day I was writing about a section in my book about Calcutta, I'm writing about a flock of crows, and as I was writing about it, a bunch of crows appeared outside the window of my studio. I know it's obviously a meaningless coincidence, but at such moments I get a very primitive feeling that what I'm writing is manifesting itself in the world. I let myself feel that for the day, even though I don't really believe it. Do you ever use them as aids or as—?

TD —totally. For example, I'm just doing this research into old and deformed trees at the moment. I made a photograph for an edition recently for *October* magazine called *Fontainebleau Postcard*, and I had to phone them up to check the title, and it reminded me that I had found all these old postcards of The Forest of Fontainebleau when I was in Kitakyushu in Japan, and I remember thinking that's so strange, why would they have so many postcards of Fontainebleau? And then I went onto the internet and I looked up the Forest of Fontainebleau, which took me to the famous oak of Fontainebleau which in turn led me to look up old oak trees and then the oldest of trees in England, the yew tree. Before I knew it, the tiny village where I grew up came up as the place where there once was a 1400-year-old yew tree. I always need that tiny thread to get myself going. I'm now shortly off to photograph similar trees in the area for a new project.

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JE Well that's almost a methodology of producing a work, using chance. You decided to work in that fashion with the recent show you curated at the Hayward Gallery in London, *An Aside*.

TD Well, I didn't think, I'm going to create a show based on an objective chance, it was just totally associative. I started with a slide projection work by one artist, Lothar Baumgarten, who told me a story that led me somewhere else, and then that in turn gave me a thought, which was probably absolutely tiny, almost too embarrassing to express, but it made me think of something else, which in turn guided me to the next artist I included, and so on. A series of coincidences something like your crows, which are pretty small compared to some of your *Middlesex* coincidences.

JE Yeah, the crows are small, but the *Middlesex* ones are big. My old teacher, Gilbert Sorrentino, used to use these things he called "generative devices," which were ways of writing, taking away any kind of intention of what you were going to write. I guess it goes back to surrealism, in that he's trying to tap his unconscious. And write stories, write fiction without having any plan in mind, because he thought that a plan would inevitably end up as something tired. Does that strike a chord with you? I mean, I don't write that way at all, I get an idea and I plan it, and then I change the plan. I let things change all the time, but I never proceed in complete darkness.

TD I have definitely worked in that way. I tend to think that the work by other artists that I am attracted to works because you seem to imagine that they had no real sense of their destination when they started. And I think a lot of pre-imagined work can be quite inert.

JE There's a great poem by Frank O'Hara, of course I don't remember it, (*laughter*) but, he's trying to write about a fish, I think. And when he's finished, the poem has nothing to do with this fish, except the title remains "The Fish," because that's where his thought process began. So as O'Hara wrote the poem, it became something else, and finally had nothing to do with his original impulse. The title is the only sign. I find that quite true with writing. I'll have an idea and as I work on it, the idea changes until there's nothing left of the original idea. Nevertheless, while I'm writing, I'm aware of my basic narrative intentions. I don't give up my rationality, having so little, really, to spare. I proceed in a logical manner, but it always takes me to illogical conclusions.

TD And I proceed illogically. (*laughter*) But I'm very formal strangely enough. The final manifestation isn't chaotic, although the process is, I think.

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Top: Tacita Dean, *Pie*, 2003, 16MM color film, optical sound. Bottom: Tacita Dean, installation view, *Pie*, 2003, 16MM color film, optical sound.

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JE I think your films have a classical order to them. They don't seem chaotic to me in the way they're filmed or edited.

TD But the thing is, with film, I'm totally uneconomical. I cannot make decisions before the fact, so I actually film far too much. I never know where I'm going when I cut my films. And that's why I have to cut alone in a very solitary fashion; I need the actual medium, because I can't delegate or use a computer. I need to have the spools piled up beside me in order to work.

JE But a lot of your films are fairly static. For instance, *Pie*, the film about the magpies roosting in the tree outside your studio in Berlin, or even *Fernsehturm*, filmed in the revolving restaurant in Berlin's TV tower. You say that you don't know where you're going when you begin filming. But that's actually a fairly limited possibility if you're going to film a tree and just have the magpies coming and going.

TD So I have to make some decisions. With, *Fernsehturm* for example, I wanted to film a transition from day to night in the tower, which has a moving restaurant that rotates 360 degrees in half an hour. I made one strict rule that the only movement in the entire film would be the movement of this restaurant, that there would be no camera movement at all. So it looks like a slow pan, but the camera is still mounted on the moving platform, and the film cycles from day to night. It all happens in one evening, one sunset, and it takes part inside the restaurant so the view is not important, only how the diners react to it. The film begins in daylight when the windows are transparent, but as it gets darker they become more translucent as the lights get turned on inside, until by the end they appear opaque and the view is totally lost and the action very enclosed. So using the cycle of the day with the cycle of the restaurant's 360 degrees, that's already quite precise. It's just that, when I cut it, I didn't have any pre-imagined view of how it would be ordered.

JE How much film did you shoot for *Fernsehturm*?

TD We had three cameras when we filmed, almost continuously. We must have filmed six or seven hours of film for for the final edit of 44 minutes. Whereas *Palast*, filmed at the Palast Der Republik in Berlin was about 10 minutes, and I must have filmed at most double that. The smaller films which are not anamorphic, I film myself. Then the degree of unused material is much smaller. But for the bigger anamorphic films, I need a camera crew because I need more than one camera, and then the control is lost, so I have an enormous amount of material.

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Tacita Dean, *Palast*, 2004, film with sound, 10 minutes, 30 seconds.

JE *Fernsehturm* was the first thing that you did after you came to live in Berlin on the DAAD. And, am I right that you got the idea because you were at the Charité Hospital, and every day you would walk in a glass walkway and you'd see the Fernsehturm in the distance?

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TD No, I had the idea because in 1987, when it was still East Berlin and I visited the tower on a college trip, I remembered it and immediately wanted to return there after I arrived in 2000, in August in fact. And it was a beautiful evening with a full Harvest moon. That was the point when I thought: I have to film in here. And when I was editing—it's funny, I was thinking about this the other day and about how much Berlin has changed—I worked in this little cutting room I used to have right by Friedrichstrasse S-Bahn station. And in the mornings I was in this bizarre Poliklinik in Charité Hospital, very close by.

JE You would meet every day in a group to do physical therapy exercises, wouldn't you?

TD Horrible thing . . . they made me do these ludicrous dexterity exercises, making paper animals! And the thing about it was then, and this was in 2000, somehow the hospital was still so much the East. There were two sorts of day wards: one that was packed full of women from the East, and one that was just me and this other woman who was from Tempelhof in the West. So they literally segregated East from West, and foreign women meant West. Everyone had to rise hideously early. I had to be there at 7:15 for breakfast. But it was an incredible time because this was when the Florida presidential recount was going on, and I remember the only thing that made it alright was that I would get out of bed and put on CNN to find out what was happening, to wake me up.

JE Nothing more exciting than listening to the Florida recount—

TD It was so gripping at the time, all these cultural things that have already disappeared. Anyhow, there was this passageway between buildings in the hospital, which I just walked down this morning actually, where I could catch one last glimpse of the Fernsehturm before I had to spend all hours of daylight in this surreal environment. I used to call it my Bridge of Sighs. When the Poliklinik finished, I would walk in the dusk to the editing room, where I would spend my afternoons and evenings editing *Fernsehturm* which also felt very East. So the combination of it all made for a very powerful atmosphere. And at that point, even around Friedrichstrasse, the air smelled of that cheap coal. Do you remember that, how the East and West smelled different? That's gone now.

JE Yeah, I do remember it. In Schöneberg there are still people who burn coal, but less and less, you're right.

TD No, it was the smell of that cheap coal they used to have in the East. It's extraordinary how rapidly as a country or culture it's disappeared or changed. And now the Palast der Republik, an emblem of the East as the GDR house of parliament—they're supposed to be pulling it down.

JE So what's happening with that? I was just reading that they're still protesting the demolition, and I got the sense that they might do it.

TD The thing is, the German government is under huge pressure, but they have to do it. It keeps getting postponed though. Recently, the artists Thomas Scheibitz and Lisa Junghanss organized an exhibition of international and Berlin-based artists inside a white cube that had been constructed inside the Palast der Republik. It was so popular that on the last day of the show, there were hour-long queues to get in. It was really a lot about actually getting inside to see the Palast. They can't afford to pull it down really, but they're supposed to do it before the World Cup, which of course is coming to Berlin in June.

JE Oh, they want to tear it down because of the World Cup, I didn't realize that.

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TD They're supposed to have it totally flattened, just green land, and to put up a huge screen to project the World Cup on, exactly where the Palast is. So they have to hurry up.

JE There are a lot of places to put up a screen in Berlin. It sounds like the same kind of popular uprising that led to bringing down the wall is now happening to keep up the Palast.

TD Maybe, maybe, but it's an ambivalent thing, for a lot of people.

JE Well, I was reading the "ABC's of TCD," and the author Mark Godfrey describes the reflective windows of Palast der Republik as the center of the GDR government, as keeping the oppressive regime concealed. But from what I've heard about it, it's also where they had a lot of their festivals. I thought it was a place many East Germans remember fondly . . .

TD No, it's not actually. They had a lot of cultural activities there, but it was an enforced cultural thing. The government only ever met 28 times in the Palast, but it is still very symbolic of the GDR. And even Thomas Scheibitz doesn't love what the building represents, but I think what he wanted to say was that Berlin lacks a decent contemporary art space. So that was his politics, it wasn't him trying to keep the Palast open out of fondness but perhaps saying, This building functions, why not use it.



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Tacita Dean, *Palast*, 2004, film with sound, 10 minutes, 30 seconds.

JE You said once, “Everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time.” I respond to that myself, because a lot of my work is about obsolescence, about ruins. I grew up in Detroit and so, at a very young age, was put on intimate terms with entropy. Places of decay used to depress me incredibly, when I was nine to twelve years old. And sometimes I couldn’t even bare to look in junkyards and vacant lots. And for some reason now, nothing pleases me more than looking at a junkyard or a vacant lot or ruined building. I don’t know how that changed, but when you speak about that in your work and how you respond to Teignmouth Electron, Donald Crowhurst’s beached catamaran on Cayman Brac or the abandoned Bubble House, I can completely understand your fascination.

TD It’s an amazing memory for you to have, of those sort of places that once depressed you. I think about structures like the Bubble House or the Teignmouth Electron as futuristic. They were not of the normal build when they were constructed, so they were not contemporary. And I don’t know when they ever sat comfortably in their own time.

JE So, you’re just going to stay in Berlin for the rest of your life? You’ve settled there, you have an apartment, you have a child. Going to put some personal history in here.

TD (*laughter*) Cram in the personal history. Well we’ve lost some of our major friends, who have gone off to far-flung places like Chicago.

JE But otherwise?

TD Otherwise, for the time being, it’s nice. It’s snowing here.

JE We haven’t really talked about anything really, except coincidence, but we’re over our time. If we talk longer, the transcript will get too long.

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TD Are you at home?

JE I'm at home in my living room.

TD Okay, so are we going to hang up?

JE I think that would be prudent. (*laughter*)

TD Can't we end it a while ago?

JE End at something we said a while ago? Yeah, I'm sure we will. I don't want my anguish to be on tape.

TD Your anguish?

JE My anguish, yes. I don't want it to be on tape, so I'm going to hang up.