

Reframing Disaster:

Word and Image in Tacita Dean's *The Russian Ending* *

重述災難：

塔奇塔·迪恩作品《俄羅斯結局》中的文字與圖像

Kathryn Brown

凱瑟琳·布朗

Lecturer, Modern and Contemporary Art, Loughborough University, United Kingdom
英國羅浮堡大學現代與當代藝術課程助理教授

* I am grateful to Alan Thomas and to the anonymous reviewers of the Taipei Fine Arts Museum Journal for their helpful comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this article. I would also like to express my thanks to Maria Schnyder of De Pont Museum, Tilburg for helpful background information about, and access to, *The Russian Ending*. My thanks also to Tseng Shao-chien for the opportunity to participate in this issue of the journal.

謝謝艾倫·湯瑪斯與《現代美術學報》審稿委員對初稿的寶貴意見；也謝謝荷蘭提耳堡 De Pont 美術館的瑪麗亞·史奈德，讓我有機會接觸並更加了解《俄羅斯結局》這件作品。承蒙曾少千教授的鼎力協助，讓本文得以刊登，在此謹致上最誠摯的感激之情。

Abstract

This article examines the relationship between word and image in a suite of photogravures produced by Tacita Dean in 2001 entitled *The Russian Ending*. It is argued that this intermedial encounter expands the signifying content of documentary photographs beyond that which is visible on their surface. This thesis is supported by an analysis of the different uses to which handwriting is put in the work. This includes the creation of fictions derived from the original photographs, the placement of images within different historical frameworks, the superimposition of cinematic directions, and the signaling of chance features that have impinged on each photographed scene. In her transformation of ‘found photographs’ of early twentieth-century disasters into a series of hand manipulated photogravures, Dean liberates photographic images from indexicality and broadens the nature and extent of information that they communicate about the world.

Keywords: cinema; Roland Barthes; Tacita Dean; documentary; handwriting; intermediality; photography

摘要

本文探討塔奇塔·迪恩2001年的蝕刻凹版系列作品《俄羅斯結局》，檢視當中的圖文關係。在這組作品裡頭，藝術家藉由媒材之間的跨界相交，讓原本眼見為憑的紀實攝影得以拓展其所指涉的內容。為了支持這個論點，本文仔細爬梳迪恩運用的各種手寫技法，看她如何自原始照片衍生出虛構敘事，將圖像置入不同的歷史架構內，並於畫面上疊加電影拍攝的指令，以及，示意每個場景所遭遇的機運之吻。透過親手操作，迪恩將將她所發現的二十世紀初照片轉化為一系列的蝕刻凹版；照片因此不再囿於純粹指涉的功能，從而告訴我們更多這個世界的蛛絲馬跡。

關鍵字：電影、羅蘭·巴特、塔奇塔·迪恩、紀實、手寫、跨媒材、攝影

The aim of this article is to examine the relationship between word and image in Tacita Dean's portfolio of photogravures entitled *The Russian Ending* (2001) and to show how the staging of this intermedial encounter problematizes the content of documentary photography.¹ Based on twenty black and white 'found' photographs of early twentieth-century disasters ranging from scenes of war to the loss of life and natural calamity, the majority of images contained in *The Russian Ending* record dramatic incidents such as shipwrecks, aviation accidents, bomb blasts, and engineering catastrophes. In contrast to these climactic moments, the work also contains a smaller number of funerary images or scenes that reveal the aftermath of disaster – a commemorative style of image production that contrasts with the recording of transitory events.

Dean uses these documentary images as the basis of a suite of photogravures: works in which the artist's handwritten notes have been superimposed on the surface of each photograph.² These textual additions take the form of film directions (including references to sound effects and plans for camera angles) that, taken together, transform each image into a fragment from a cinematic storyboard. In the following discussion, I shall argue that these annotations do more than signal a proposed, but unrealized transmedial shift. Rather, Dean's 'reframing' of disaster functions as an enquiry into the afterlives of media images and the ways in which their affective content can be manipulated to suit different styles of visual production. Importantly, this has consequences not just for the viewer's appreciation of a putative film, but also for a reading of the photographs themselves. I shall argue that though the addition of fictional anecdote and various 'on-' and 'off-screen' references, Dean creates interpretive trajectories that problematize the images' visible content. Troubling any easy distinction between still and moving images, *The Russian Ending* invites the viewer to linger over photographs that contain more information than they show.

1 Tacita Dean (b. 1965, Canterbury, Kent, United Kingdom), *The Russian Ending*, 2001, Portfolio of 20 etchings (photogravures) on Hahnemüle Bütten paper, 54 × 79.4 cm each print. Edition of 35 copies signed and numbered in Arabic numerals with 10 copies signed and numbered in Roman numerals reserved for the artist and the publisher. Printed by Niels Borch Jensen, Copenhagen, Denmark; published by Peter Blum Edition, New York. Details of individual titles for images in the portfolio and the order of their display are provided by Peter Blum Gallery, New York.

2 In the following discussion, I shall use the term 'photograph' to refer to the underlying 'found' images that Dean uses as the basis of the work; 'photogravure' will refer to the images as they have been reprinted with Dean's handwritten annotations.

Directing the Viewer

The first thing to note about *The Russian Ending* is the significance of the title. The reference to a 'Russian Ending' denotes an early twentieth-century practice (particularly popular in Danish cinema production) of creating films with alternate endings for different markets: a happy ending for US and Western European audiences and a tragic finale presumed better suited to Eastern European tastes.³ Before the viewer even turns to the content of the work, the title suggests a form of affective manipulation. These are images that have allegedly been selected for their distressing or moving content. No longer a handheld photograph or postcard, the images in the series are monumentalized (54 × 79.4 cm) in the exhibition space: visual spectacle is privileged at the expense of touch.⁴

Although the title refers to a 'Russian Ending' in the singular, the work itself comprises a series of endings. Each photograph in the portfolio constitutes a conclusion in its own right – the moment at which a particular occurrence or (unpictured) set of circumstances has peaked. In each case, however, the viewer arrives on the scene too late to know the chain of events that has led to the isolated moment shown in the photograph. As a result, the work comprises a series of disconnected endings from which much information remains missing. The images may be grouped broadly into four categories: (1) war (primarily imagery from the First World War); (2) death (abstract scenes or funerary images); (3) nautical and aviation disaster; and (4) environmental and engineering catastrophe.⁵ Visual rhythms are asserted within the overall structure of the work: sinking ships contrast with bombs that propel objects skywards; the body of a beached whale is echoed in the shape of submarines and airships; and the alternation of landscapes and waterscapes undermines the idea that safety can be found within any given locale.⁶

3 See Harm G. Schröter, *Americanization of the European Economy: A compact survey of American economic influence in Europe since the 1880s* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2005), 30; James Hellings, *Adorno and Art: Aesthetic Theory Contra Critical Theory* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 145–6.

4 For a discussion of ways in which photography probes the relationship between vision and touch see Margaret Olin, *Touching Photographs* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1–6.

5 The final image in the series, 'Ein Sklave des Kapitals', is the most overtly political image. Capturing a satirical undercurrent in the series, the scene in this photo is presented as the culminating tableau in a play. Smiling characters are on stage – each one with a name ascribed by the artist – and the unknown drama is given a pseudo-political interpretation by virtue of the title.

6 I am grateful to one of the journal's anonymous reviewers for drawing my attention to the repetition of shape within the series.

當代藝術與媒體文化



Fig. 1. Tacita Dean, 'Ship of Death', *The Russian Ending*, 2001, etching (photogravure), 54 × 79.4 cm © Tacita Dean. Image courtesy of De Pont Museum, Tilburg, The Netherlands.

Opening with the blurred image of a ferry that, in Dean's photogravure, is described as the mythological 'Ship of Death' crossing the Styx (fig. 1), the series takes the viewer on a journey though multiple, unrelated catastrophes and losses.

In an essay entitled 'Time Exposure and the Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox', Thierry de Duve posits a contrast between photographs of events and photographs intended to be appreciated as pictures.⁷ The former, he argues, are snapshots that 'convey very little, if anything at all, of the fluency of things happening in real life'; the latter, epitomized by 'time exposure' portraits, are visual artefacts designed to 'protract life' or memorialize the past.⁸ The repetitive, but non-sequential nature of the multiple 'endings' in Dean's work reinforces the idea that snapshots of 'events' are, as de Duve argues, abrupt moments that fail to give the viewer a sense of the broader reality in which a particular

7 Thierry de Duve, "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox", *October*, vol. 5 (Summer, 1978): 113–125.

8 *Ibid*, 113 and 166.

occurrence took place.

In contrast to this structural feature of the work, however, the viewer is induced to believe that missing factual information is provided in the medium of language. The handwritten notes included in the nautical disaster photograph entitled 'The Sinking of the SS Plympton', for example, stress the isolation of the wreck and the loss of the crew (fig. 2): the words 'no one for miles' are tactically placed on the left, just under the horizon, and invite the viewer's gaze towards the empty space that extends behind the ship. A sequence of notes insists on the human loss entailed by the disaster. From 'SS Plympton/gone now/crew all lost' written on the stern of the ship, to 'all hands lost/all crew lost/all lost/LOST AT SEA' repeated above the waves in the centre of the image, and 'HELP (too late)' scrawled over the open sea to the right, the viewer is pushed to empathize with the crew members and to reflect on the desperation of their final moments.



Fig. 2. Tacita Dean, 'The Sinking of the SS Plympton', *The Russian Ending*, 2001, etching (photogravure), 54 × 79.4 cm © Tacita Dean. Image courtesy of De Pont Museum, Tilburg, The Netherlands.

當代藝術與媒體文化

The addition of these details in a linguistic medium appears to fill out the narrative of the shipwreck, thereby reinstating the image in the ‘fluency of things’, to use de Duve’s formulation. Yet this strategy also reveals a way in which the photogravure induces and ultimately betrays the viewer’s trust. In fact, none of the crew members of the SS Plympton were killed in the wreck that occurred in 1909; nor was the ship stranded in mid-ocean as suggested by the language superimposed on the photograph. Reports of the incident indicate that the ship hit rocks near the island of St Agnes in the Isles of Scilly (United Kingdom). All members of the crew survived, but two persons who boarded the vessel to recover cargo (with the captain’s permission) were drowned when the ship finally tipped.⁹ While the real incident did result in a tragic loss of life, it was not the lonely end for all crew members as suggested by the combined visual and linguistic information provided in Dean’s photogravure.

On the one hand, the photograph’s indexical relation to reality invites the viewer’s trust. As Roland Barthes famously put it: ‘in Photography, I can never deny that the thing has been there’.¹⁰ On the other hand, the inclusion of language in Dean’s work – complete with its gesturing towards the medium of the moving image – suggests that the visual evidence provided in the photograph is both limited and susceptible to manipulation.¹¹ Developing de Duve’s point that the snapshot fails to convey the ‘broader reality’ of an event, the explanatory gaps left by the photograph become an imaginative stimulus in Dean’s work. It is by filling out the image and embedding it in a narrative that the artist conveys the photograph’s wider (allegedly factual) content and guides the viewer’s emotional response to it. As de Duve himself notes: ‘For an image to be read requires that language be applied to the image. And this in turn demands that the perceived space

9 An account of the incident can be found in the court report for Plympton’ (S.S.), no. 7302, 11th October, 1909 accessible on-line at <http://www.plimsoll.org/resources/SCCLibraries/WreckReports2002/19706.asp>. Accessed on 5 October, 2015.

10 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, translated by Richard Howard (London: Vintage Books, 2000). 76. Patrizia di Bello debates some of the issues arising from the ‘fantasy’ of indexicality that attaches to photographs in ‘Seductions and Flirtations’ in: *Photographies*, 1:2, 143–55.

11 On this point see also Barthes’s comments on ways in which the ‘photographic analogue’ is encoded through various techniques, including trick effects, poses, and composition in: “The Photographic Message” in Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath (London: Fontana Press, 1977), 15–31 (20–5).

be receptive to an unfolding into some sort of narrative'.¹² The composition of Dean's photogravure is designed to enact just such an 'unfolding' of the underlying image, but in ways that problematize its status as a record of true events.

This manipulation of a documentary image (and, by extension, of the viewer) captures an issue that recurs in discussions of media reports of disaster. As Gennifer Weisenfeld has asked in the context of images of the 1923 earthquake in Japan: 'how do images of 'ruined landscapes and graphic representations of death and destruction act on us to evoke emotion or to provoke action? The producers of the images, consciously or unconsciously, stake a claim to a particular meaning for disasters, and they communicate this meaning to us through both form and content'.¹³ By allowing stage directions to infiltrate the content of the photographs comprising *The Russian Ending*, Dean lays bare such attempts to reframe disaster and to guide the viewer's emotional response to the visual evidence provided in an image (a point to which I shall return below). Taking up Weisenfeld's point, the presence of language raises questions not just about each photograph's content, but about the ways in which that content might be expanded and given additional meaning.

Commentators have focused on Dean's use of found imagery (notably in the extensive postcards and photographs comprising the artist's book *Floh* from 2001) and have linked this to the concept of the archive.¹⁴ Indeed, Dean herself has discussed the chance acquisition of images and their incorporation into a growing personal archive

12 De Duve, "Time Exposure and the Snapshot", 57. This aspect of the interplay between language and image in Dean's work might also be viewed as an example of that which David Carrier describes as our impetus to 'move' scenes that are depicted in paintings. He explains that this use of 'the verb "move" alludes elliptically to the ways that we must know what has just happened, or what will happen next', a process that might take place through a variety of textual interfaces including titles, acknowledgements, art criticism, and narrative allusion. For Carrier this tendency forms part of the viewer's process of understanding the picture. See David Carrier, *High Art: Charles Baudelaire and the Origins of Modernist Painting* (University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 81–2.

13 Gennifer Weisenfeld, *Imaging Disaster: Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan's Great Earthquake of 1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), x.

14 Tacita Dean, *Floh*, artist's book, made in collaboration with Martyn Ridgewell, 163 colour plates, 176 pages, 29.7 × 24 cm, 2001. Other found image projects are listed in Tacita Dean, *Complete Works and Filmography 1991–2001*, 41, published as part of Tacita Dean, Karola Kraus, Achim Hochdörfer, Wolfram Pichler, Peter Bürger, Douglas Crimp, Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, and Marina Warner, *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey* (Göttingen: Steidl, 2011). See also Mark Godfrey, "Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's *Floh*" in: *October*, 114 (Fall, 2005), 90–199 (97–8); Dorothea Dietrich, "The Space Between: Tacita Dean's Russian Ending" in: *Art on Paper*, vol. 6, no. 5 (May–June, 2002), 48–53 (49).

– though one that is based less on order than on chaos.¹⁵ While *The Russian Ending* is comprised of found photographs from the early decades of the twentieth century, the viewer is not invited to appreciate them as artefacts that convey objective truth. Instead, the imagery is used to create a transitional space that remains permanently unresolved: the photographs are shown to contain limited information; the cinematic medium is invoked, but not realized; and images are gathered into a pseudo-archive that references a style of film production rather than the documentation of historical events. In many respects, therefore, the photogravures of *The Russian Ending* remain – despite the finality implied by the work’s title – permanently unfinished.¹⁶ Although they are not moving pictures, they might nevertheless be described as pictures in motion.

The references to cinematic production that permeate this work address Dean’s own background as a filmmaker and photographer, a theme that also comes to the fore in her drawings and other manipulated photographs. From *Disappearance at Sea I–VI* (chalk on blackboard, 1995) to *Roaring Forties: Seven Boards in Seven Days* (chalk on blackboard, 1997), *T & I* (gravure in 25 parts, 2006), and *Fernweh* (gravure in 8 parts, 2009), Dean uses language to ‘animate’ still images in the viewer’s imagination and thereby to suggest a broader range of imaginative and sensory responses to the works’ content. In *The Russian Ending* the addition of directorial notes such as ‘zoom in’, ‘fade’, ‘pan’ and, in the case of ‘Beautiful Sheffield’ a suggested musical soundtrack (fig. 3) ask the viewer to inhabit a mobile visual perspective and to enact a detailed tactile and aural exploration of the landscapes and objects seen in the images. Even the olfactory response of the viewer is envisaged. In ‘Death of a Priest’ (fig. 4), for example, the viewer is confronted by an elaborate funeral scene in a Church interior and is asked to ‘imagine the scent’, ‘imagine the incense’; this is, we are told, ‘a heady atmos[phe]re’. Far from crystallizing into an atemporal, commemorative portrait or signaling a set of cinematic directions, language imbues each photogravure with a frenetic sense of movement.

15 Tacita Dean and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversation Series 28* (Cologne: Walter König, 2012), 9–10.

16 See also James Hellings’s description of *The Russian Ending* as a work that ‘seems to say something and conceal it in the same breath, it is a story without end, or a story without one end in particular’. He adds that it is a ‘generatively open and constitutively enigmatic work, resisting interpretative capture and closure’, *Adorno and Art*, 145 and 146.



Fig. 3. Tacita Dean, 'Beautiful Sheffield', *The Russian Ending*, 2001, etching (photogravure), 54 × 79.4 cm © Tacita Dean. Image courtesy of De Pont Museum, Tilburg, The Netherlands.



Fig. 4. Tacita Dean, 'Death of a Priest', *The Russian Ending*, 2001, etching (photogravure), 54 × 79.4 cm © Tacita Dean. Image courtesy of De Pont Museum, Tilburg, The Netherlands

當代藝術與媒體文化

The use of language in *The Russian Ending* has led Emma Cocker to suggest that Dean's images reveal 'the highly constructed means through which cinematic conventions work to amplify the emotional potential of real-life events'.¹⁷ Her point is a good one and it captures a way in which the viewer's response is guided throughout the series. There are, however, two aspects of *The Russian Ending* that trouble any easy equivalence between such 'direction' and the certainty of the audience's response. This concerns the instability of the language superimposed on the images and the affective distance that is created by the overtly manipulative directions. I shall deal with these points in turn.

It is noteworthy that Dean elects to use handwriting rather than printed text throughout *The Russian Ending*. While this emphasis on hand gesture extends a style of modernist artistic production that flourished in Europe in the 1940s and 50s, in this case it is a feature of the work that communicates a physical relationship between the artist and the photogravures, but not between the artist and the underlying photographs.¹⁸ Like the viewer, Dean has come upon these images 'after the event' and her use of language is linked to the recycling of their content rather than to the moment of their production. In this case, therefore, handwriting serves less as a connection to the circumstances in which the original print was made than to its 'updating' in the present.

The intrusion of the artist's hand into the content of the photogravure also illuminates Dean's concerns about the obsolescence of technology and the emergence of digital photography at the expense of analogue photography.¹⁹ In an interview with Hans Ulrich Obrist, she discusses the physical appeal of typewriters, postcards, film stock, and even handwriting before noting their disappearance from contemporary life: 'Writing even. Crossing-out. Even that is obsolete. It saddens me greatly'.²⁰ Dean's comments are

17 Emma Cocker, "Salvaging a Romantic Trope: The Conceptual Resurrection of Shipwreck in Recent Art Practice" in Carl Thompson (ed.), *Shipwreck in Art and Literature: Images and Interpretations from Antiquity to the Present Day* (New York and London: Routledge, 2013), 218–37 (229).

18 This includes, for example, bookworks such as Pierre Reverdy and Pablo Picasso, *Le Chant des morts* (Paris: Tériade, 1948), Henri Matisse, *Jazz* (Paris: Tériade, 1947), and Matisse, *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans* (Paris: Tériade, 1950). On this subject see Kathryn Brown, 'Influence as Appropriation of the Artistic Gesture' in: Thomas Baldwin, James Fowler, and Ana de Medeiros (eds), *Questions of Influence in Modern French Literature* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 84–98 (93–6).

19 See also Margaret Iversen, "On Zoe Leonard and Tacita Dean" in: *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Summer, 2012), 796–818 (797–8).

20 Dean and Obrist, *The Conversation Series* 28, 102.

directed not solely at changes in techniques of image production, but also at a diminution of our sensory exploration of the world as we rely on increasingly sophisticated technologies to carry out mundane tasks. Obsolescence is, Dean argues, 'a state of normality', and one that encourages her to seek out anachronism: 'I wonder if the objects and buildings I seek were ever, in fact, content in their own time, as if obsolescence was invited at their conception'.²¹ By casting the photogravures as pseudo-blackboards and the writing on them as chalk markings, Dean suggests that the writing on the photogravures is as ephemeral as these lost arts of production, as susceptible to erasure by a casual hand gesture as to broader processes of physical deterioration or technical overhaul.²²

Reinforcing the theme of loss, the underlying images comprising *The Russian Ending* are analogue photographs, a method of production described by Margaret Iversen as having 'a chemical continuity with the world' or a 'continuous form of inscription involving physical contact'.²³ By recycling analogue photographs, Dean thus imbues the work with an additional commemorative aspect – one that relates to the passing of a style of image production rather than to the events or persons depicted or described in such images. Handwriting becomes, therefore, the pivot between past and future, between the obsolescence and endurance of certain styles of mark-making.

While the combination of analogue photographs and handwriting imbues *The Russian Ending* with nostalgia for an obsolete form of image production, the use of manuscript has a further effect on the affective impact of the imagery. In a discussion of contemporary news media, Pierre Nora suggests that to the 'extent to which the event has become intimately linked to its form of expression, its intellectual significance [...] is emptied out in favour of its emotional possibilities. Reality proposes, the imagination disposes'.²⁴ Nora explores the frameworks within which incidents become enshrined as

21 Dean, 'Obsolescence' in *Selected Writings 1992–2011*, 58 in: Dean et. al., *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey*. Essay originally published in *October* 100 (Spring 2002), 26–27. See also Giuliana Bruno's discussion of Dean's problematizing of obsolescence in *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014). 117–121.

22 I am grateful to the anonymous reviewers of this article for drawing my attention to this point.

23 Iversen, "On Zoe Leonard and Tacita Dean", 797.

24 Pierre Nora, *Présent, nation, mémoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011), 43: 'Dans la mesure en effet où l'événement est devenu intimement lié à son expression, sa signification intellectuelle [...] se vide au profit de ses virtualités émotionnelles. La réalité propose, l'imaginaire dispose'. Author's translation.

當代藝術與媒體文化

recognizable ‘events’ in the social imaginary. In his account, this is a process that entails, for example, the invention of additional ‘dramas’ designed to augment a set of facts or the appreciation of an occurrence for its magical, strange, mysterious, poetic, or even tragicomic features.²⁵ The spectacular expansion of an event beyond its purely factual boundaries in contemporary media is, Nora argues, equivalent to an experience of ‘the wondrous’ in contemporary society.²⁶

In similar fashion to these processes of theatricalization, the language included in *The Russian Ending* reveals ways in which images can be manipulated to heighten their affective impact and referential content. By suggesting sound effects, camera angles, music, and close-ups, handwriting becomes a verbal prop that signals the emotional potential of transitioning from still to moving image. In some cases, the cinematic style of the film is anticipated: a ‘disaster movie’ (‘The Tragedy of the Hughesovka Bridge’), a ‘B movie’ (‘The Wreck of Worthing Pier’), a ‘nostalgia film about the loss of pastoral England’ (‘Beautiful Sheffield’), or ‘A cheaper Moby Dick’ (‘The Story of Minkie the Whale’). Against the background of Nora’s argument, Dean’s recycling of historical imagery to form the basis of putative fiction films can be understood as an implied commentary on the fabrication of ‘events’ in the production and circulation of histories of the present.

Although the superimposed texts signal ways in which the viewer is to respond to the images, they often deflate the impact of the various disasters: words are crossed out; stage directions are written in different languages; word and image appear to be tautological (i.e. some objects are simply named); handwriting alternates between capitals and cursive; and individual words are blurred, partially erased, or difficult to distinguish. If language is used to ‘direct’ the image and to heighten affect, this project remains incomplete and often inconsistent on the surface of the photogravures themselves. While the erasures, crossings out, and overwritten texts are linked to the objects, scenes, and individuals in the photographs, they also impede the viewer’s access to such visual information. As much as language guides the viewer’s response to each scene, so too it creates obstacles to be

25 Ibid, 44.

26 Ibid.

negotiated, looked through, or resisted.

This feature of *The Russian Ending* is intimately linked to the use of handwriting as opposed to printed text on the images. As Clive Scott has discussed, handwriting can 'blur the line between what is textual and what is marginal' and, as a result, present itself as a 'space of ongoing reflection' or 'unworked response'.²⁷ Developing this idea for the purposes of the present discussion, it can be argued that in addition to troubling the indexical relation of the image to reality by casting documentary photographs as the basis of cinematic fictions, the altered and blurred handwriting of *The Russian Ending* transforms the surface of the images into a set of unresolved possibilities. Despite the wealth of information provided, the viewer remains uncertain as to how the scene will be realized in the future and how it actually unfolded in the past.

While the inclusion of language directs the images in such a way as to elicit an emotional response from the viewer, this very process is shown to be unstable. Some of the language is, for example, explicitly deflationary, ironic, or satirical. The image entitled 'Death of a Priest' referred to above (fig. 4) is described as a 'very sad' Russian ending and is intended to be paired with a 'funeral fanfare'. Like the other images, it is designated as the culmination of an imaginary movie, but in this instance 'The End' is accompanied by the sardonic stage direction: '(exit) Heaven?'. For the avoidance of doubt, the body in the open coffin is designated as 'dead' in both German and English, and a helpful direction is included for the actor: 'lie still'. Far from reinforcing the melancholy aspect of the event, language tips the scene towards the absurd and, in so doing, imposes a heightened self-consciousness on the viewer.

The potential for inconsistency in the viewer's response becomes the focus in 'The Tragedy of the Hughesovka Bridge' – described as 'the famous Russian Ending' (fig. 5). As an image that is proposed as the culmination of a 'disaster movie', the scene shows the structural collapse of a snow-covered bridge. This is, we are told, the cinematic moment during which the 'hero dies'; the identity of the villain is provided – the engineer who has

27 Clive Scott, *Translating Apollinaire* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2014), 52.

當代藝術與媒體文化



Fig. 5. Tacita Dean, 'The Tragedy of Hughesovka Bridge', *The Russian Ending*, 2001, etching (photogravure), 54 × 79.4 cm © Tacita Dean. Image courtesy of De Pont Museum, Tilburg, The Netherlands.

built the bridge from 'compromised steel' and 'cheap materials'. While these notes give us the fictional context of the scene, they also introduce ambiguity. We are told that the engineer should be held responsible for the crime of 'manslaughter'; yet this term is also written on the photogravure as 'man's laughter' and 'mans(laughter)'. As the recipient of an image that slips from documentary photography towards cinematic fiction, the viewer is pulled between his or her own response to the visual scene and to notes that interweave the tragic and the comic. The wordplay thus signals the absurdity of directing films to meet the affective prerequisites that informed the very notion of a 'Russian' ending.

In experiencing the photogravures comprising Dean's work, the viewer is suspended between word and image, photography and cinema, past and present. Instead of reconstructing a particular scene or event, each photogravure is structured as a *mise-en-abyme*: language provides a framework that duplicates the content of the underlying image by signaling its reproduction in a new medium. By casting the marked-up surface

as a pivot between two media, however, Dean also calls into question the ways in which the original photographs relate to the actual events they depict. Illustrating a point made by Roland Barthes in 'The Photographic Message', *The Russian Ending* illustrates the paradox that, despite their claims to 'objectivity', the photographs contain apparently contradictory, co-existing messages: 'the one without a code (the photographic analogue), the other with a code (the 'art', or the treatment, or the 'writing', or the rhetoric, of the photograph)'.²⁸ Rather than inviting the viewer to reflect on the moment captured by the photographs, Dean's work emphasizes the relation between different styles of image production, the expansion of signification beyond the visible content of the image, and the cultivation of an unpredictable range of affective and sensory responses.²⁹ These photographs are, as Barthes puts it, shown to be connected to a wider 'stock of signs' in the imaginations of both artist and audience.³⁰ In order to develop these points, I shall now turn to the way in which *The Russian Ending* pursues contrasting temporal trajectories within individual images and throughout the series as a whole.

Temporal Trajectories of Reading and Seeing

In contrast to the instantaneity of the photograph, Dean's photogravures require the viewer to 'read' each scene and to trace trajectories within and through its constituent parts. Two contrasting visual trajectories are, therefore, produced: the viewer follows a linear reading path around each image and also mines its depth by looking 'through' the language that lies on the surface. In the previous section I argued that Dean's use of language reveals and exploits fissures in the imagery – words fill out and enlarge each 'event' beyond the limits of the visible through the addition of related facts or fictions.

28 Roland Barthes, "The Photographic Message", *Image, Music, Text*, 19.

29 While this strategy draws the viewer's attention to the relationship between two visual media, it does not imply that the image's underlying connection to reality is eroded or severed. The possibility of the latter has been famously discussed by Guy Debord in *La Société du spectacle* [1967] (Gallimard: Paris, 1992) and later by Jean Baudrillard in *Simulacres et simulation* (Paris: Galilée, 1981). Susan Sontag offers a critique of their view in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003) when she expands on ideas expressed in her own earlier work: 'The view proposed in On Photography – that our capacity to respond to our experiences with emotional freshness and ethical pertinence is being sapped by the relentless diffusion of vulgar and appalling images – might be called the conservative critique of the diffusion of such images. I call this argument conservative because it is the sense of reality that is eroded. There is still a reality that exists independent of the attempts to weaken its authority. The argument is in fact a defense of reality and the imperiled standards for responding more fully to it' (109).

30 Barthes, "The Photographic Message", *Image, Music, Text*, 19.

當代藝術與媒體文化

This superimposition of language serves the further purpose of drawing attention to ways in which photographs convey information to the viewer.

I mentioned above that much of the language in *The Russian Ending* appears to be tautologous: words name objects seen in the image. The billowing smoke emitted by the chimney stacks in 'Beautiful Sheffield' is simply identified as 'smog' or 'black smoke (a lot)'; in 'Death of a Priest', flowers are labeled 'dahlias' on three occasions, candles are identified as 'candles (many)', and recognizable characters in religious paintings are named 'Virgin and Christ' or numbered as 'disciples'. This strategy is repeated throughout the series. On the one hand, such acts of naming add to a style of humour that works via incongruity. On the other, they point to a way in which the viewer absorbs – or fails to absorb – the abundance of visual detail that is captured in, or otherwise communicated by, photographic images.

Photography is often discussed as a visual medium that probes the boundary between authorial control and the automatic recording of events that elude such control.³¹ Carol Armstrong sums up this innovation when she writes that 'for the first time in the history of human image-making, a picture could be made instantaneously and all at once and thus result in a field of detail that cannot be all under the control of, or even seen by, the maker of the image'.³² Making a similar point, Dean has discussed the intervention of uncertainties and chance occurrences in film in the following words: 'Not every action is deliberate; not every gesture has intent, as any painter can attest. Film as a medium brings qualities to the work, some that the maker never intended – characteristics integral to its chemistry and to its internal disciplines and material resistance'.³³

31 See, for example, Robin Kelsey's detailed investigation of this subject in *Photography and the Art of Chance* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015); Diarmuid Costello and Margaret Iversen, "Photography between Art History and Philosophy", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Summer, 2012), 697–93; Jerry L. Thompson, *Why Photography Matters* (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2013), 14–15. Thompson also discusses comments made by William Henry Fox Talbot in *The Pencil of Nature* of 1844, an essay in which the author discusses the charm of discovering features of a photograph that were not apparent at the time the shutter was pressed. See Thompson, *Why Photography Matters*, 9–10; William Henry Fox Talbot, *The Pencil of Nature* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1944), 40.

32 Carol Armstrong, "Automatism and Agency Intertwined: A Spectrum of Photographic Intentionality", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 38, no. 4 (Summer, 2012), 705–26 (707). See also Dorothea Dietrich's comments on the role of chance in Dean's works in "The Space Between", 49

33 Tacita Dean, "The Last Picture Show? The Survival of Film in the Digital Age" (contributions by Nicola Mazzanti, Tacita Dean and Amy Taubin), *Art Forum*, October, 2015 (online edition): <https://artforum.com/inprint/issue=201508&cid=54974>. Accessed on 23 October, 2015.



Fig. 6. Tacita Dean, 'Die Explosion in dem Kanal', *The Russian Ending*, 2001, etching (photogravure), 54 × 79.4 cm © Tacita Dean. Image courtesy of De Pont Museum, Tilburg, The Netherlands.

Dean's comments are relevant to both the 'unrealized' films referenced in *The Russian Ending* and to the interpretive density of the photogravures themselves. While the texts are marked by uncertainty, indecision, and multiple narrative trajectories, so too the photographs confront the viewer with a wealth of visual information much of which – as in 'Die Explosion in dem Kanal' (fig. 6) – could not have been 'composed' by the photographer or seen fully by a witness to the event.

Through the addition of language, Dean draws attention to details that the viewer might pass over or that could be construed as incidental to the principal subject of the image. The act of naming specific features of, or objects within, the photographs does not, therefore, result in a simple tautology, but rather stresses the plenitude of the image – those elements of the composition that have intruded into the frame by chance or that the viewer would likely miss in his or her focus on the principal subject of the photograph. In addition to altering the temporal structure of *The Russian Ending* by slowing down the viewer's engagement through the portfolio as a whole, this feature of the work foregrounds visual content that might otherwise pass unnoticed or be considered irrelevant.

In *Why Photography Matters*, Jerry L. Thompson debates various ways in which photography functions as a medium that conveys knowledge.³⁴ For Thompson, the kind of knowledge that photography can provide is, in part, determined by chance. He argues that by admitting the role of chance into the production of a photographic image, the artist cedes an element of control and becomes 'an attentive observer, a willing participant in, perhaps even a servant of, a system larger than that artist's individual, personal, particular needs'.³⁵ My suggestion is that one of the consequences of Dean's use of language in *The Russian Ending* is to reveal the wider signifying content of photographic images by requiring the viewer to appreciate their gaps, contingencies, and contexts – in other words, things that are not necessarily shown in the image.

In 'The Life and Death of Saint Bruno' (fig. 7) a photograph recording the funeral

34 Thompson, *Why Photography Matters*, 4 and 7.

35 Ibid, 14.

of an anonymous monk becomes, in Dean's work, a scene intended to depict the burial of Saint Bruno, the founder of the Carthusian Order, who died in 1101. The work is, we are told, a Russian ending 'of a spiritual kind'. The language on the left side of the image pursues a pun on the word 'Chartreuse' – both the location of the Carthusian monastery in the Chartreuse Mountains in Southern France and the name of the liqueur produced there by the monks from the early eighteenth century onwards (long after the death of the Order's founder). Dean's photogravure links the death of Bruno with both the location of the monastery and the liqueur. The viewer is told that the recipe of 'juniper and secret herbs' will live on (in contrast to the mortal remains seen in the image) and that St Bruno is 'surely assumed a place in Heaven? for inventing a liqueur'. These references have the effect of overlaying different historical periods. I mentioned above that St. Bruno died in 1101; the recipe for Chartreuse was not received by the monks until the 17th century; the photograph dates from the early decades of the 20th century; and the superimposed directions point towards a film to be realized in the future. Dean thus conflates themes and historical trajectories that extend beyond the referential content of the underlying



Fig. 7. Tacita Dean, 'The Life and Death of St Bruno', *The Russian Ending*, 2001, etching (photogravure), 54 × 79.4 cm © Tacita Dean. Image courtesy of De Pont Museum, Tilburg, The Netherlands.

photograph narrowly construed.³⁶

The viewer's attention is attracted to the three figures in the centre of the photograph and to the action that takes place there, but the superimposed handwriting draws attention to the periphery of the image. The three shovels that have been used to dig the grave are identified and numbered in the upper left, lower left, and upper right sections of the image. The robe of a monk (given the identity 'Brother Thomas') juts into the upper right corner, and a disembodied hand appears in the lower left corner (this is identified simply as 'HAND [...] in shot'); finally, attention is drawn to the unusual angle of the scene. The camera has been placed above a wall (the tiles of which create a diagonal in the lower right quadrant of the image) and imposes a perspective that is identified as 'a voyeur's view' and the 'only way to see'. In addition to providing an historical framework, the language included in 'The Life and Death of St Bruno' thus identifies an internal, but unseen viewer (a 'voyeur'), ascribes names to anonymous individuals, and emphasizes the chance elements that structure the boundary of the image (the intrusion of the wall, hand, and robe). Developing Thompson's discussion of the ways in which photography proposes a new way of 'learning about the world', it is by gesturing to the contingent aspects within the frame and to the existence of persons, objects and events beyond it that Dean reveals how a photograph might communicate broader historical, fictional, and documentary content.³⁷

The viewer occupies an uneasy position within this temporal palimpsest, and the question arises as to the nature of the action to which the viewer bears witness. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas have debated various problems arising from the relationship of the viewer to imagery that purports to convey truth, noting that 'scepticism has become even more pronounced in an age of greater technological sophistication when images can be generated without an original referent'.³⁸ Dean's image shows a way in which an

36 See also Dorothea Dietrich's discussion of time in both *The Russian Ending* and Dean's films in "The Space Between", 49–51.

37 Thompson, *Why Photography Matters*, 12.

38 Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas, "Introduction" in Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas (eds), *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture* (London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2007), 1–22 (2). Dorothea Dietrich also points to uncertainties about the kinds of knowledge that can be derived from Dean's photogravures, noting the viewer's attempts to restore fragmentary stories to wholeness and to build archives from a visual miscellany. See Dietrich, "The Space Between", 53.

analogue photograph may generate a similar scepticism – or at least disorientation – on the part of the viewer. No longer posited as a witness to the burial of an anonymous individual, the viewer of this photogravure is asked to conceive of the image as an address to different narratives. The addition of language suggests that the image itself does not simply record a specific moment, but that it moves diachronically and attracts ideas and references derived from its placement within a longer temporal trajectory.

Throughout this article, I have shown ways in which Dean requires the viewer to explore each photograph in detail and to unearth content that extends beyond the bare visual evidence provided in the image. My argument is that the language superimposed on the photographs comprising *The Russian Ending* is neither an accretion nor simply a means of gesturing towards the medium of film. Rather, it reveals the content of each image more broadly conceived and suggests new ways in which we might learn from photographs. I have shown how words are used in the work for a range of different purposes and to contrasting effect: to signal the importance of particular features of a photograph, to identify its gaps and contingencies, to tease out historical references, to evoke emotional responses, to blur the distinction between snapshots and portraits, and to embed scenes within extended narratives (whether true or false).

The 'reframing' of disaster that is staged in the series also illuminates ways in which photographs connect with, and communicate information about, the world. Although the documentary status of the images may sometimes be called into question, the photogravures reveal other truths: the environmental impact of pollution, the social consequences of urban destruction, the devastation of war, and, of course, the ways in which images commemorate loss and facilitate remembrance. By drawing attention to the interplay between word and image in *The Russian Ending*, this article has attempted to show how Dean's use of language liberates documentary photographs from the notion of indexicality and reveals the multiple interpretations to which they can be made subject when expanded trajectories are traced within and beyond their visible content.

當代藝術與媒體文化

Bibliography

- Armstrong, Carol. 'Automatism and Agency Intertwined: A Spectrum of Photographic Intentionality'. *Critical Inquiry* 38.4 (Summer, 2012): 705–726.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulacres et simulation*. Paris: Galilée, 1981.
- Barthes, Roland. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Trans. Richard Howard. London: Vintage Books, 2000. 76.
- . *Image, Music, Text*, translated by Stephen Heath. London: Fontana Press, 1977.
- Bello, Patrizia di. "Seductions and Flirtations." *Photographies* 1.2: 143–55.
- Brown, Kathryn. "Influence as Appropriation of the Artistic Gesture." *Questions of Influence in Modern French Literature*. Eds. Thomas Baldwin, James Fowler, and Ana de Medeiros. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 84–98.
- Bruno, Giuliana. *Surface: Matters of Aesthetics, Materiality, and Media*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.
- Costello, Diarmuid, Margaret Iversen. "Photography between Art History and Philosophy." *Critical Inquiry* 38. 4 (Summer, 2012): 697–93.
- Carrier, David. *High Art: Charles Baudelaire and the Origins of Modernist Painting*. University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996.
- Cocker, Emma. "Salvaging a Romantic Trope: The Conceptual Resurrection of Shipwreck in Recent Art Practice." *Shipwreck in Art and Literature: Images and Interpretations from Antiquity to the Present Day*. Ed. Carl Thompson. New York and London: Routledge, 2013. 218–237.
- Debord, Guy. *La Société du spectacle* [1967]. Gallimard: Paris, 1992.
- De Duve, Thierry. "Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox." *October* 5 (Summer, 1978): 113–125.
- Dean, Tacita. *Floh*. 2001.
- . "Obsolescence." *Selected Writings 1992–2011*. Ed. Tacita Dean et. al., *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2011. 58. Essay originally published in *October* 100 (Spring, 2002): 26–27.
- . and Hans Ulrich Obrist. *The Conversation Series* 28. Cologne: Walter König, 2012.
- Dietrich, Dorothea. "The Space Between: Tacita Dean's Russian Ending." *Art on Paper* 6.5 (May–June, 2002): 48–53.
- Douglas, Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, and Marina Warner. *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2011.
- Godfrey, Mark. "Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's *Floh*." *October* 114 (Fall, 2005): 90–199.
- Guerin, Frances, and Roger Hallas. "Introduction." *The Image and the Witness: Trauma, Memory and Visual Culture*. Eds. Frances Guerin and Roger Hallas. London & New York: Wallflower Press, 2007. 1–22.
- Hellings, James. *Adorno and Art: Aesthetic Theory Contra Critical Theory*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
- Henry, William, and Talbot Fox. *The Pencil of Nature*. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1944. 40.
- Iversen, Margaret. "On Zoe Leonard and Tacita Dean." *Critical Inquiry* 38.4 (Summer, 2012): 796–818.
- Kraus, Karola, Achim Hochdörfer, Wolfram Pichler, Peter Bürger, Douglas Crimp, Christa-Maria Lerm-Hayes, and Marina Warner. *Tacita Dean: Seven Books Grey*. Göttingen: Steidl, 2011.
- Kelsey, Robin. *Photography and the Art of Chance*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2015.
- Mazzanti, Nicola, Tacita Dean, and Amy Taubin. "The Last Picture Show? The Survival of Film in the Digital Age." *Art Forum* (October, 2015) (online edition)
- Matisse, Henri. *Jazz*. Paris: Tériade, 1947.
- . *Poèmes de Charles d'Orléans*. Paris: Tériade, 1950.
- Nora, Pierre. *Présent, nation, mémoire*. Paris: Gallimard, 2011.
- Olin, Margaret. *Touching Photographs*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Pierre, Reverdy. and Picasso, Pablo *Le Chant des morts*. Paris: Tériade, 1948.
- Schröter, Harm G. *Americanization of the European Economy: A compact survey of American economic influence in Europe since the 1880s*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2005.
- Scott, Clive. *Translating Apollinaire*. Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2014.
- Sontag, Susan. *Regarding the Pain of Others*. New York: Picador, 2003.
- Thompson, Jerry L. *Why Photography Matters*. Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2013.
- Weisenfeld, Gennifer. *Imaging Disaster: Tokyo and the Visual Culture of Japan's Great Earthquake of 1923*. Berkeley:

University of California Press, 2012.

“Wreck Report for Plympton’ (S.S.), no. 7302, 11 Oct. 1909.” *PortCities Southampton Website*. PortCities Southampton. Web. 5 Oct. 2015.