



*All images: Tacita Dean. From Floh, 2001.
Courtesy Marian Goodman Gallery, New York.*

Photography Found and Lost: On Tacita Dean's *Floh**

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Photography is somehow an anachronism now. It's disappearing while we talk. We are going to lose it soon and we are going to replace it with something that is still images but something very, very different. . . . "Photography: to draw in light." It's not that anymore, it's electronic.

—Tacita Dean¹

Floh

In 2001, Tacita Dean produced her fourth artist's book in a signed edition of four thousand—a “democratic art work,” so she said.² Published by Steidl press and designed in collaboration with Martyn Ridgewell, it measures twelve by nine inches and has hardback, light green, linen covers. Debossed on the front in sans-serif capital letters just above the center is the title—the German word *Floh*, meaning “flea” as in “flea market.” Inside, just past the blue card papers and white pages with the edition number and signature are 163 photographs, all found by Dean in flea markets in various cities in Europe and America over a seven year period, each reproduced with extreme care and clarity. Dean has called *Floh* “a book without words”; indeed the title and her signature were the only inscriptions in the volume.³ Now, many of Dean's works are wordless—films like *Disappearance at Sea* (1996), or *Bubble House* (1999)—but she usually supplements these works with

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1. Tacita Dean, interview with the author, December 16, 2003.

2. “As soon as you sign it, it becomes an art work, but it is in an edition of four thousand, so it becomes quite a democratic art work” (interview with the author, December 16, 2003). In an essay on Dean's work that has been very important for my own thinking, Michael Newman has suggested that “the point of signing all the copies of the run is perhaps to indicate that they have all been touched by her, as she has been touched by the images” (Michael Newman, “Salvage,” in *Seven Books* [Paris: ARC, 2003]).

3. Dean, interview with the author, December 16, 2003.

expansive and allusive texts published in the exhibition catalogs, texts that one critic named “asides.” *Floh*, however, has continued to be wordless, and Dean has been somewhat more reticent about it than her other works. When her “asides” were collected on the occasion of an exhibition in Paris in 2003, a new paragraph on *Floh* appeared, by far the shortest of the thirty texts in the book. “I do not want to give these images explanations,” she wrote, “descriptions by the finder about how and where they were found, or guesses as to what stories they might or might not tell. I want them to keep the silence of the flea market, the silence they had when I found them, the silence of the lost object.”⁴ Without seeking to explain the origins of the images, without breaking the silence Dean craved so much, I will argue that for all its lack of words, *Floh* articulates something very important about photography, something about the medium that is becoming evident only now and that is rarely remarked upon, something that requires attention as digitalization renders analog photography increasingly obsolete.

Floh begins with two photographs on facing pages, each showing two twinned Audis. The cars are dirty white against a snowy landscape, which is brighter than the wide, white borders of the page. Two women stand beside the vehicles in the first shot; in the second, they are absent. From early color photographs, which are almost drained of color, we flip the page to find another photograph from another era, this one black and white, bled across the gutter of the facing pages and extending to their very edges. No cars here, but more twins: two girls, probably from the 1920s, in matching Sunday best. Both wear broad-brimmed hats and wide-collared jackets, with bright white blouses underneath. The three photographs in this pair of opening spreads immediately suggest that Dean intended to produce a deeply reflexive work.⁵ An empty book, her “support” for this project, has identical pages facing each other across a gutter. How better to recognize this support than to echo its form, first with twinned photographs, second with a photograph of twins, which is printed so that one appears on each side of the gutter? Dean’s other medium is photography, and these opening selections equally articulate its condition: since photography doubles its referent, what could be more reflexive than an image of a double?⁶

4. Tacita Dean, “Floh,” in *Seven Books*.

5. An earlier artist’s book was *Book with Leaves* (1995), which suggests a punning reflexivity. It opens with two blank pages before, on a third, one finds an image of a four-leaf clover, which is printed so well as to look like a flattened dry plant.

6. During the late sixties and early seventies (a period of special interest to Dean), twins were a popular photographic subject: while Diane Arbus photographed real twins, Douglas Huebler arranged a look-alike competition, and Alighiero e Boetti produced his *Gemelli* postcard. While each of these works has different motivations, it is clear that the recurrence of the motif shows its strong relation to the medium. Rosalind Krauss has discussed how Surrealist photography used doubling to destroy the myth that “the photograph carries on one continuous surface the trace or imprint of all that vision captures in one glance” (“The Photographic Conditions of Surrealism,” in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986], p. 107). “Doubling . . . elicits the notion that to an original has been added its copy” (p. 109); “Doubling is . . . the signifier of signification” (p. 110). Dean seems less interested in doubling as a strategy to rob photography of a sense of presence, and more in the uncanny dimension of repetition. Repetition occurs in *Floh* in the six or so images of pairs, twins, and doubles, but also through placing photographs of the same people in different parts of the book, so that they are separated by many other photographs.



These two selections articulate the *mediums* of this project, but equally, the spreads might suggest something about the nature of Dean's *process* in making this work. She trawled flea markets to collect these photographs, never looking for anything specific, instead coming across appealing images by chance. So too, we might suppose, the two Audi drivers came across each other fortuitously: one, noticing how strange it was to encounter a matching car, could not resist capturing the moment. The wildly diverse subjects, dates, and formats of the opening selections (cars/sisters; 1970s/1920s; color/black and white) also suggest the random nature of her process, and seeing the content and juxtaposition of the opening spreads as an instantiation of "chance" rather than as a reflection on the book-support and photographic doubling certainly makes sense as we continue to page through *Floh*. Just after the black-and-white spread of the twins, the selection of images becomes more and more diverse. The next spread displays a square format, black-and-white shot of a woman recumbent on a bed opposite a horizontal, rectangular image of a cut-off armchair and a table top cluttered with a book of matches, an ashtray, and very suggestively, an open Kodak carton. (This photograph is probably just the first shot in a roll of film, which was taken to make sure the film has been loaded properly.) Like the ones of the cars, these two photographs have wide borders around them. But the image on the following page is bled to the edges again. It shows a view from the window of a high-rise block onto a pathway. We look for someone below, someone waving up at the photographer, *anything* that might have motivated this image, but in vain: the paths are empty.



Turn over to two more black-and-white images. The first shows a nondescript building in an American town. A shaft of light falls across its sidewall, and the diagonal line across the building dividing light from shadow rhymes oddly with another line in the photograph, toward its left-hand side. *This* line, however, is not in the photograph but *on* it—a crease where the photograph must once have been folded mistakenly. Across from the building photograph, there is a shot of two swans, their necks arched toward each other to form a heart shape. The following spread contains two images of a toddler on a wooden-slatted porch. It is hard to see if it is the same boy in both: neither image shows him very clearly. In one, he seems to munch his shirt, in the other, he turns away from the camera. (How *do* you get a one-year-old to stay still?) Next come two very old oval photographs in rich sepia tones, portraits, we guess, of a nineteenth-century American husband and wife, both emerging from haze to sharp focus toward the center of their respective images. If the emphasis seems to have returned to pairings with the swans, the toddlers, and this couple, all sense of doubles and doubling disappears as we turn the page again. Dean has used a gatefold device to produce a *three*-page triptych of square photographs, rather imprecise images of a 1940s family by a swimming pool. And with another jolt, we turn over to find a totally blank page facing one with two color images stacked one above the other, perhaps from the late 1970s, of a couple on the beach with their child between them, playing Frisbee.

And so we continue. Sometimes there seems to be a loose thematic link between images in the same spread; for instance, a woman holds a parrot outside

a house on one page, while a man carries a giant broken icicle outside another house opposite. Other times there is a formal affinity between two completely different kinds of images. An elaborate arrangement of fruit in a 1970s color snapshot sits opposite a mounted Edwardian soldier whose oval helmet rhymes with the dome of a melon in the fruit arrangement. But elsewhere it seems impossible to reconcile the facing images to each other: a cow stands in a field, its head and tail lopped off by the frame of the photograph, and opposite we see what seems to be a massive geyser. Or, the spread in which a mother and child from the late nineteenth century face a color 1970s snapshot of toy puppies in a gift-shop window. Photographic subjects jump like fleas. Such juxtapositions interrupt any thematic coherence just as we begin to recognize it, halting flows and sending the mind whirling off to other realms of thought.⁷

The arrangement of the images is just as random as their subjects. Most images seem to have been gathered singly, but some photographs were obviously collected in clusters as they show the same figures. Dean kept some clusters together (the above-mentioned triptych, for instance), but has scattered others through the book, producing strange moments of half recognition for the viewer

7. It is because of this diversity of photographic subject matter that I prefer not to think of *Floh* as a kind of collective photo album. Family albums are much more selective, and rarely include the mistaken photographs I will discuss later. Tamara Trodd has seen *Floh* as a kind of failed family album. See Trodd, "Film at the End of the Twentieth Century: Obsolescence and the Medium in the Work of Tacita Dean," *Object 6* (2003–04).



as he pages through (*I've seen this face before . . .*). The arrangement *on each page* is equally diverse: on one spread, a single image bleeds across the gutter, on the next broad frames surround each of two photographs on either page, and on the next, a blank page sits opposite a full-bleed shot. There seems little logic to this design, no archival or serial principles that might be obeyed. And Dean is aware of this: working with Ridgewell on the design, *Floh*, she says, was laid out intuitively: “we just did it totally visually, refusing all categories.”⁸

As we turn each page with anticipation, we relive Dean’s experience of coming across the images in the flea market, each moment of enchanted discovery.⁹ But the temporal experience of flipping through the book is far from fluid. Dean’s films are calmly paced, each still shot holding its image for what always feels like a generous amount of time before the cut to the next one. With *Floh*, however, the rhythm is rather jolty—it is more a matter of delays and quick restarts. Some images are more compelling than others and cause you to linger. Others might not halt you so much. Oddly, some of the most casual images are the most fascinating, likely meriting a kind of attention probably never given to them by their original owners. And some of the most formal images are perhaps the least compelling. In this way, the presentation might disturb the distinction Thierry de Duve once made between the “time exposure” and the “snapshot”—the snapshots in *Floh* becoming time exposures, and vice versa.¹⁰

Species of Found Photography

From the description so far it should already be clear that on account of its weight and size, the diversity of subject matter, the arrangement of the images, and the superb quality of their reproduction, *Floh* cannot be assimilated into existing models of artists’ uses of found photographs. But it is worth recounting some of these models to clarify and distinguish the particular character of Dean’s treatment of photography. One explanation for the use of found photographs has been that it marks the culmination of the de-skilling of photography. Ed Ruscha has often been cited as an instigator of this practice. In his photobooks, he deployed “a particularly laconic style of photography, one that situated itself as explicitly outside of all conventions of art photography as much as outside of the conventions of the venerable tradition of documentary photography.”¹¹ Ruscha

8. Dean, interview with the author, December 16, 2003.

9. When one finds a photograph, it reveals itself in an instant, but when one finds a reel of film, it needs restoration and projection to be seen. Unlike her contemporaries Matthew Buckingham and Fiona Tan, for instance, Dean has not worked with found film, possibly because showing found film never captures the experience of the instant of finding it. Dean’s use of found photography suggests that she is interested in relaying that instant of discovery to her viewer.

10. Thierry de Duve, “Time Exposure and Snapshot: The Photograph as Paradox,” *October* 5 (Summer 1978), pp. 113–25.

11. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, “From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique

commissioned professional photographers to take the shots for some books; for others he attempted to use found photographs. In a recent talk on Ruscha and Bernd and Hilla Becher, Benjamin Buchloh argued that the use of the found photograph in the work of artists such as Hans-Peter Feldman and Christian Boltanski completed the process of de-skilling.¹² De-skilling is taken to be a process in which artists separated their antiaesthetic *use* of photography from the photographer's "fine art" ambitions for the medium—the impetus for de-skilling in the 1960s being the work of fashion photographers, such as Richard Avedon or Irving Penn. The recent emergence of the large-scale, highly crafted photographs of artists such as Andreas Gursky might motivate a new mode of de-skilling, but this hardly helps us account for Dean's approach to found photography. As we will see when we look closer at *Floh*, Dean's selection included the most "de-skilled" photographs imaginable—totally unfocused, badly cropped, and poorly printed snapshots—but she also included well-composed, focused, elegant exposures. But in any case, it is the obvious delicacy of the presentation of all the images in *Floh* that most powerfully proves that Dean in no way would be concerned with the critical position assumed with the notion of de-skilling. Another distinction between Dean's work and that of Ruscha (or Feldman) is the different approach to archiving. The practice of de-skilling has been married to archival arrangements. Ruscha grouped images of particular subjects, be they gas stations or parking lots or swimming pools, and Feldman made small gray books with images of airplanes or women's knees or shoes: random and banal subjects which emphasized the de-skilled quality of the images. The photographs in *Floh*, by contrast, are hardly arranged by theme, and when a particular sequence is so arranged, another "theme" intrudes.

The notion of an archive of found photographs brings us to Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*, which of course has prompted other explanations for the use of found photography in postwar art.¹³ Buchloh, again, has provided an eloquent analysis of the work, arguing that by placing panels of sentimental family photographs, "souvenirs of a past that was being left behind forever,"¹⁴ alongside panels of found photographs cut from newspaper reports and magazine advertisements, Richter could examine "photography's oscillating ambiguity, as a dubious agent simultaneously enacting and destroying mnemonic experience."¹⁵ As the family photograph panels give way to the "unfathomable heterogeneity of picture types"¹⁶

(Some Aspects of Conceptual Art 1962–1969)," in *L'Art Conceptuel: Une Perspective* (Paris: Musée de l'art moderne, 1989) p. 46.

12. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Random Denotations, Arbitrary Reference, Compulsive Collections," lecture given at the conference "Photography and the Book: Between Page, Wall, and Screen," Victoria and Albert Museum, London, May 2003.

13. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Gerhard Richter's Atlas: The Anomic Archive," *October* 88 (Spring 1999), pp. 117–45.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 138.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 139.

in the fifth panel, photography increasingly emerges as “a system of ideological domination, more precisely, one of the instruments with which collective amnesia, repression are socially inscribed.”¹⁷ Photographic media culture, Buchloh suggests, prevented Germans from acknowledging their recent history, but photographs themselves could summon this history in the most piercing ways. Because of the inclusion of historical photographs from the concentration camps in panels 11, 16, and following, Richter’s *Atlas* could “yield its own secret as an image reservoir: a perpetual pendulum between the death of reality in the photograph and the reality of death in the mnemonic image.”¹⁸ Now it could seem somewhat unfair to refer to *Atlas* to help place Dean’s *Floh*—the two projects are so wildly disproportionate. *Atlas* continues to proliferate to this day; *Floh*, begun almost forty years later, is a closed affair. Dean is certainly not trying to address the multiple workings of photography in our contemporary culture in the way that Richter (at least for Buchloh) was doing in 1960s Germany—but the comparison does help clarify the nature of Dean’s more humble project. The family photographs in *Floh* importantly are *not* Dean’s own, *not* souvenirs of her past (even though *Floh*, like *Atlas*, was completed around the time Dean moved from her childhood home to Berlin). And there are absolutely no photographs found in magazines, or newspapers, on packaging, or in history books. There are no photographs, in other words, that are related in obvious ways to the workings of consumer capitalism, or to the formation of a historical knowledge, but that is not to say that these are not areas that concern Dean.

A third model of found photography has been that of “appropriation,” a term particularly associated with practices emerging in the late 1970s. By rephotographing the canonical works of photographers such as Walker Evans and Edward Weston, or images from magazine advertisements, artists such as Sherrie Levine and Richard Prince could interrogate concepts of authorship and subjectification, scrutinizing the operations of photography in art history and in consumer culture. Quite clearly, Dean’s concerns are far from these, but her interests also differ from those of artists who have more recently found and appropriated whole archives of photographs. Steve McQueen, for instance, produced a slide show of images in 2002 titled *Once Upon a Time*. The 116 images he used were the photographs that had been taken into space by NASA’s *Voyager* in 1977. They presented a fairy-tale story of life on earth, with famine, poverty, natural disaster, and war—that is to say, the subjects of the most famous photographs of the twentieth century—nowhere to be seen. One of the projected images showed the resplendent headquarters of the United Nations, and its appearance reminded the viewer that the U.S. government bypassed the institution at the time the work was made. If, in going to war, the U.S. government falsely presented itself as bringer of democracy, no less mendacious was NASA’s prior representation of *its* world as a peaceful paradise. McQueen’s work was effective because though he installed the slide show in a very specific

17. Ibid., p. 134.

18. Ibid., p. 144.

manner, he had done *nothing* to the photographs themselves—no rephotography, no cropping, no textual addition (as was common in Prince’s, Levine’s, and Barbara Kruger’s practices). Simply projecting them at a certain historical juncture in the context of the art institution, he shifted the photographs’ meanings. No longer Edenic representations of Earth, they stood for uncovered, imperialistic white lies. Certainly the meanings of the photographs in *Floh* are changed through their publication, but the nature of this change is less definable—it is not as if the photographs Dean found had one fixed and clear meaning in their original context, which was then totally inverted through their presentation in an art work. The initial, and eventual, meanings are opaque.

Yet another use of found photography is suggested in the recent quasi-anthropological projects of such artists as Fiona Tan. To make her work *Vox Populi* (2004), Tan collected some 267 color photographs from Norwegian family photo albums, all dating from 1960 to the present. These were installed in a loose grid in a long horizontal rectangle, so that the viewer, going from left to right along the wall, would encounter a kind of life narrative beginning with photographs of babies and proceeding through the stages of life to images of the elderly. *Vox Populi* is an affecting unofficial portrayal of Norwegian life. Its effect is to indicate something about the diversity of “Norwegianness”: the viewer walks away from the work without the stable image of national “identity” or appearance that he might find in tourist brochures. But if *Vox Populi* renders the heterogeneity of the Norwegian people, the project also indicates the homogeneity of family photography. For all their difference, people tend to represent themselves in the same way, and viewing this archive elsewhere in the West, one realizes how similar a comparable project from another country would be. Amateur family photography is obviously as controlled and controlling a space as advertising. Like Tan’s, Dean’s archive is restricted to amateur photography, but these sociological concerns are not her own.¹⁹

Then there are artists who use found photographs to test out the notion of the document. They assemble archives of found photographs claiming the archive documents some authentic information; inevitably the work requires the viewer to recognize the falsity of the claim, and therefore also to question the wider documentary claims of other kinds of photography. One of the most notorious early instances of this tendency was Boltanski’s *Tout ce que je sais d’une femme qui est morte et que je n’ai pas connue* (1970). Each of the six photographs in the book was accompanied by a descriptive text, but there was no way of telling whether the photographed woman was in fact dead, known or unknown to the artist, or even the same person in all the images. Sometimes this kind of tendency is complicated by

19. In a recent essay on Matthew Buckingham’s work, Dean wrote, “Home movies and photographs, once detached from the people they mean most to, often become intangible and unwitting vehicles of a collective memory that can . . . stand in for our fantasies of history” (Tacita Dean, “Historical Fiction,” *Artforum* [March 2004], p. 149). It does not seem, though, that Dean presents found photographs in *Floh* to construct a collective memory.

another twist—the artist presents an archive of seemingly found photographs, which are in fact not found but carefully constructed. Zoe Leonard's and Cheryl Dunye's project *The Fae Richards Photo Archive* (1996) typifies this model. Each image was set up and prepared with costume directors, lighting experts, and scene managers. Actors played parts and a group of images was created, supposedly documenting the forgotten career of one of Hollywood's first successful black actresses. Leonard took special care to doctor each photograph after the shoot, adding creases, stains, and tears to falsely age them so the archive could appear authentic, but when the photographs were published in a book, she made no claims for their authenticity, listing the actors and various production assistants in the back pages. Only by reminding her audience that the images were false could Leonard suggest the underlying truth of the project: black actresses *did* have careers like Richards', but such careers *had* been forgotten, and somewhere there probably *was* an undiscovered photo archive of genuine shots.

In an opposite but related way, other artists use “genuinely” found images not quite to create fictional and fantasy works, but to explore the structures of fiction itself. Pierre Huyghe, for instance, gathered photographs from American high school yearbooks and produced a work in collaboration with the novelist Douglas Coupland titled *School Spirit* (2003). The photographs are interspersed through the book both with texts sourced from the yearbooks and with Coupland's narrative describing the thoughts of an imaginary student, Kelly Harding, who died at the school in the 1980s. Harding's ghost haunts the corridors and the images too: flipping through the book, we become aware that we are seeing the students as Kelly's former friends. Fiction alters the encounter with the genuine images of these schools, but the macabre nature of Coupland's narrative adds another oscillation between fiction and reality—memories of Columbine haunt the book. The use of found photographs as jumping-off points for fictional narratives actually finds a counterpart in a work Dean made just after *Floh*. She began *The Russian Ending* (2002) after discovering that in its infancy, the Danish film industry used to produce films with alternative endings for different potential markets—a happy ending for the Americans, and a tragic ending for the Russians. Dean collected old postcards showing images of disasters, enlarged them, and covered their surfaces with inscriptions. The images were reconfigured as final scenes in a film, the inscriptions acting like storyboard directions. Some inscriptions were directions for camera movement—“Zoom,” for instance; others were expressive, “Poor minke” written over a dead whale. The texts over the images did not make a linear narrative—they were scattered over the images, so the viewer could not read them from left to right or top to bottom, but instead had to scan the entire surface, reading some and not others, seeing some in relation to the image and others as self-contained. While some are circled or underlined, other texts are partially erased. Nonetheless, *The Russian Ending* is particularly compelling when one thinks about Dean's film practice, since the found postcards enabled her to imagine the kind of plot-based narratives her films never provide, even if

the point was to keep these plots imaginary. Considered in relation to *Floh, The Russian Ending* makes even clearer the absence of narrative in the book. *Floh's* photographs are decidedly *not* false documents. Presented without inscriptions, though some might provoke us to imagine what was happening in the scene, they are not treated as starting points for possible plotlines.

These various examples indicate the widespread use of found photographs in different contemporary projects, but this proliferation of practices might require us to specify the term “found photograph” as it seems increasingly capacious. In many of the projects described above, the “found photograph” is actually the “sourced” photograph: though not taken or commissioned by the artist, it is specifically located by them in an archive, on the pages of a newspaper, or in the family album of targeted collaborators. Perhaps the greatest distinction between *Floh* and all these various projects is that the images Dean reproduces were found in a less directed manner. Of course, her trips to the flea markets were intentional, but once there, she searched more randomly. The photographs had to find her, so to speak, jumping out of the piles of old images to attract her attention. This mode of discovery recalls André Breton’s Parisian trawls. In *Nadja*, he writes, “when Marcel Noll and I went one Sunday to the Saint-Ouen flea-market, our attention was simultaneously caught by a brand new copy of Rimbaud’s *Oeuvres Complètes* lost in a tiny, wretched bin of rags, yellowed nineteenth-century photographs, worthless books, and iron spoons.”²⁰ If this mode of finding most closely matches Dean’s, the Surrealist use of found photographs rarely approximated her own. When groups of images were reproduced in journals, they tended to be specific collections—such as *Les Plus Belles Cartes Postales*, assembled by Paul Éluard and published in *Minotaure* in 1933. In 1935 Dali published a single found photograph in *Minotaure* showing three people in a doorway, the man at the back in shadow. This accompanied his article “Psychologie non-euclidienne d’une photographie,” a text explicitly discussing the image: Dali drew attention to a cotton reel on the pavement below the figures and argued that once it was seen, the viewers could no longer approach the image as they had before.²¹

However, earlier on, found photographs had been reproduced without explanation or attribution in *La Révolution Surréaliste*, often inflecting the suggestions of the texts that surrounded them, but not illustrating them directly. A photograph subtitled *La Mer Morte* appeared, for instance, above Philippe Soupault’s article “La Fuite” in 1926.²² This kind of use of found photographs clearly points forward to the novels of W. G. Sebald, and it also resembles one of Dean’s projects. In 2002, she made a film called *Section Cinema* in the basement studio room in Düsseldorf where Marcel Broodthaers installed the *Section Cinema* of his *Musée d’Art Moderne, Département des Aigles*. When she showed the film at the

20. André Breton, *Nadja* (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 52–55.

21. Ian Walker has compared Dali’s approach to Barthes’s treatment of the *punctum*. See Ian Walker, *City Gorged with Dreams* (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2002), pp. 20–21.

22. *La Révolution Surréaliste* 6 (March 1926), p. 8. My thanks to Simon Baker for these references.

Kunstverein and subsequently in other gallery exhibitions, Dean displayed in an adjoining room a framed found photograph that she had come across before the film was ever conceived and that she had christened “My Broodthaers.” In it, a parrot perches on a palm before the Brussels Atomium. As she later discovered, Broodthaers had been employed as a construction worker there and later had photographed the structure. The juxtaposition of found photograph and film was mutually enhancing, and not just because Broodthaers had used a parrot in his film *Berlin oder ein Traum mit Sahne* (1974). Both Dean’s film and the photograph dwelt on the fate of past projects, the activity of Broodthaers’s studio being as irretrievable as the space-age optimism that would have accompanied the futuristic Belgian structure when it had just been erected, as it appeared in the photograph. But still we can make a distinction with *Floh*, for in Dean’s book, the images serve their own purpose, not sparring off any kind of textual accompaniment.

In fact, returning to *Floh*, we can now say a lot to clarify what Dean was *not* doing. She was not using found photographs to de-skill photography, nor was she reflecting on the difference between family photographs and other kinds of photographs. She was not appropriating formerly well-known images to change their established signification, nor was she producing an anthropological study. This was not an archive that claimed a false documentary status, nor was it in any clear way a fictional enterprise or an investigation of fiction. The photographs, in other words, were not really found or presented for any immediately apparent ulterior motives. “What you see is what you see”: they are just there, collected in the book. But surely more can be said.

Anonymous Portraits

Right at the end of *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes makes a complaint. “Society,” he writes, “is concerned to tame the Photograph, to temper the madness which keeps threatening to explode in the face of whoever looks at it.”²³ Photography is tamed, he argues, either when it is turned into art, or when it is generalized and banalized, put to the service of advertising and information. Earlier in his book we find the claim that whereas in other cultural fields, amateurs are defined as immature artists (a Sunday painter, for instance, would never be able to fulfill the highest aspirations of the medium), “in the field of photographic practice, it is the amateur . . . who is the assumption of the professional, for it is he who stands closer to the *noème* of Photography.”²⁴ By finding amateur photographs and publishing them in *Floh*, was Tacita Dean then releasing photography from those who would tame it? Was she articulating its Barthesian “*noème*”?

Let us test this possibility against the photographs in *Floh*, but first we must remind ourselves what Barthes meant by “*noème*.” On account of its indexical

23. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida* (London: Vintage, 1993), p. 117.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 99.

character (“the photograph is literally an emanation of the referent”), photography has a particular tense. Barthes named it “That-has-been.” The photograph “attests that what I see has indeed existed”;²⁵ it shows “reality in a past state: at once the past and the real.”²⁶ This condition explains the tense of all photographs, but to describe the affective consequence of this tense-condition most powerfully, Barthes’s primary references were portrait photographs. In front of them, the viewer most powerfully senses that the person imaged “has been” and thus is irretrievable. Whether alive or dead, the person he or she was at the moment of exposure is no more. So in looking at a photograph you are not merely reminded of the distance between yourself as looker and the person in the image—you also confront the death of the person in the image, and the inevitability of your death as well.

Famously, Barthes is drawn to make this argument as he considers a photograph of his recently deceased mother as a child. However, photography’s tense also punctures his perception when he looks at portrait photographs of a former slave, and of a man on the eve of his execution. In somewhat similar accounts of portrait photographs, Walter Benjamin wrote about the “unruly desire” to know more about David Octavius Hill’s Newhaven fishwife, and his attempt to locate signs of her later despair in a photograph of Dauthendey’s fiancée, who would eventually commit suicide.²⁷ In all these cases, the writers know some information about the person in the image, or about the photographer. How might the phenomenology of photographic perception alter when looking at anonymous portraits anonymously taken, such as those we encounter in *Floh*? We might say that the affect Barthes describes is redoubled. If any photograph reveals to its viewer his temporal distance from the moment of exposure, and his separation from the subject of the photograph, then it does so much more so when the image is of a complete stranger, for the viewer is distanced from the person in the image to start with. In his essay on photography, Siegfried Kracauer described this phenomenon when he wrote of the “shudder [that] runs through the viewer of old photographs. For they made visible not the knowledge of the original, but the spatial configuration of a moment; what appears in the photograph is not the person but the sum of what can be subtracted from him or her. The photograph annihilates the person by portraying him or her.”²⁸ Looking at an old photograph, in other words, you realize more and more what you do not know of the person in the image, that the photographic information is utterly inadequate, and as viewer, you become an agent in this annihilation.

25. Ibid., p. 82.

26. Ibid.

27. Walter Benjamin, “A Small History of Photography,” in *One-Way Street* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 243. Margaret Iversen has suggested that Benjamin’s essay was one inspiration for *Camera Lucida* (“What Is a Photograph?” *Art History* 17, no. 3 [September 1994], p. 453).

28. Siegfried Kracauer, “Photography,” in *The Mass Ornament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 56–57.

Which is all very gloomy. Thankfully, reading *Camera Lucida* against the grain, we might find a contrary approach that might better account for the experience of the viewer of *Floh's* portrait photographs. Barthes makes the point several times that “the photograph does not call up the past (nothing Proustian in a photograph).”²⁹ “In front of a photograph,” he writes some pages later, “our consciousness does not necessarily take the nostalgic path of memory.”³⁰ Indeed, he soon argues that photography becomes the enemy of memory. It “actually blocks memory, quickly becomes a counter-memory.” He describes a familiar situation: confronted with photographs of one’s past, or of people we once knew, it becomes harder and harder to *remember* what this past or those people were really like—you only know what the photographs show. This is why the photograph is “violent”—“it fills the sight by force.”³¹ Through this discussion, photography and memory are pitted against each other—either I try to remember my childhood, remember such and such a person and what I’ve been told about them; or I look at a photograph of myself as a child, or of this person. If I take the second route, I can no longer take the first. The situation for the viewer of *Floh* is very different. Looking at a photograph of an anonymous stranger, there is no competition between memory and photography. This *might* mean that the violence of photography is loosened. Precisely because the photograph has nothing to do with your own memory or knowledge, it makes no claims against it. The photograph comes in peace.³²

In part, this explains the relatively innocent tenor of the encounter with the portrait photographs in *Floh*. As you page through the book, you do not really “shudder” at your lack of real knowledge of the subject—you never knew them in the first place. Nor do you dwell on the guilt of gazing at images of anonymous people who never realized their photos would one day be included for your visual consumption in an artist’s book. But something about so many of the portrait photographs themselves makes this so, something about the behavior of these anonymous strangers as they were being photographed. Earlier in *Camera Lucida*, Barthes described photography from the viewpoint of the photographed subject rather than the viewer. When photographed, he wrote, “I constitute myself in the act of posing, I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image.”³³ “I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter.”³⁴ What happens in *Floh* is in complete contrast to this scenario; many of its subjects were imaged in the process of

29. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 82.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

31. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

32. Kate Bush has described the ambivalent affect of anonymous photographs well: “Seared with unknowable emotions and irretrievable truths, other people’s pictures lend an aura of intense enigma when corralled into the service of art” (“Candid Camera,” *Frieze* 73 [March 2003], p. 62).

33. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 82.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 14.



refusing to be objectified in this way. There is a child, around a third of the way through the book, standing by his mother in a garden. She poses as Barthes describes; he sticks his tongue out. Later, spread across two pages is another shot, this time two young women with their tongues out. These subjects incapacitate the objectifying power of the camera; they shake off the paralyzing threat of the exposure, and because they do, they prevent their viewer from feeling an agent in this objectification.

Rejects, Mistakes, Slips, Stains, and Scratches

The images just mentioned round off a discussion of the ambivalent affective experiences of viewing found anonymous portrait photographs in *Floh*, but in fact this entire discussion might actually be a red herring. For as a whole, there are not that many portrait images in the book! Nonetheless, these last two photographs are really crucial, as they exemplify a much more significant strand in the work. Both images date from the first half of the twentieth century. It is likely that they were taken for inclusion in a family album, but both were rejected for failing to forge a decorous representation of the family or of the young ladies. The images are only the most obvious of the rejects that pepper *Floh*. One glorious photograph pictures two middle-aged women on the deck of what looks like a channel ferry on holiday in the 1970s. The woman to the right looks magnificent, but her



friend is asleep. When the holiday snaps were whittled down for the album, there was no way this image would make the cut. Then, there is the wedding photograph where the bride is *yawning* as she cuts her cake, and her mother-in-law by her side looks just as bored. Barthes, again, wrote *Camera Lucida* when reflecting only on photographs “that had been selected, evaluated, approved, collected in albums or magazines and which had thereby passed through the filter of culture.”³⁵ Tacita Dean, on the other hand, was equally fascinated by the residue, the grit in the filter, so to speak.

These kinds of rejects point to other sorts of mistakes. A man waters the garden and turns to the camera—smiling, he inadvertently sprays the laundry on the clothesline. A woman slumps against a wall, laughing; she’s just fallen in the snow. A man holding a rope in the shallows on a beach has just been knocked over by a wave; his partner cackles in response. Such light-hearted, literal accidents are joined by many others in which the photographer, not the subject, is the one who has slipped. Many images seem to have been taken accidentally—perhaps because the finger slipped to click on the exposure button, or as test shots to load the film. There is a color photograph, for instance, of an open-air swimming pool on a rainy day. Two men walk beside its edge, one in a bright yellow raincoat, but no one is looking toward the camera. The image sends the mind racing behind the image to the thoughts of the person who held the camera. Was the photograph really a mistake, was it as banal as it appears, or did the photographer wish to record something in the scene whose presence we cannot detect? Was the intended subject about to enter the frame, or had he or she just left it? Christian Metz once described the experience of the viewer in situations like this: “The spectator,” he wrote, “has no empirical knowledge of the contents of the off-frame, but at the same time cannot help imagining some off-frame, hallucinating it, dreaming of the shape of this emptiness.”³⁶

We cannot be certain if this photograph was taken by mistake, but other accidents, being technical, are less questionable. Sometimes, the framing has gone badly wrong. A woman lies on a bed with her dog; he is staring at the camera, but her face is chopped off by the edge of the frame. Sometimes, something has gotten in the way of the shot, producing an absurd result—one photograph shows a parachutist seeming to land on the domed head of a man in the foreground. Or the focus might be off, just where focus mattered—in one shot, the camera points toward a bird’s nest, but leaves the chicks inside it a blur; in another, a man holds a newspaper to show something to the camera, but the newsprint is totally illegible.³⁷ Underexposure blackens a violinist to a silhouette; overexposure has similarly awkward effects. Toward the end of the book, there is a shot of a wooden-framed

35. Ibid., p. 16.

36. Christian Metz, “Photography and Fetish,” *October* 34 (Fall 1985), p. 87.

37. This photograph strangely anticipates the image Dean used in her work *W. G. Sebald*, which shows the author receiving an award whose script is bleached out to illegibility by the flash of the press photographer’s camera. See Tacita Dean, “W. G. Sebald,” *October* 106 (Fall 2003), p. 135.



Tudor building. The camera pointed toward the sun, and the excessive light detached the wooden frame from the structure, leaving an echo of the frame below—an accidental penumbra, which appears as a square within a square. In this black-and-white image photography itself seems unframed, but “improved” photographic technologies hardly resolved such problems: flashes white out their objects or leave them strangely spotlit floating in front of a darkened background, and the brightest colored objects appear with white halos around them. A length of wool in one shot becomes a laser beam, and a Frisbee in another, an iridescent UFO. In some of the most marvelous images in the book, everything has gone wrong—the camera slipped, the film was loaded improperly, the shutter accidentally pressed; whatever the case, the photograph leaves little clue as to what stood before the lens. Obviously these were not purposefully “abstract” photographs but errors destined for the flea market. Perhaps some of them were the result of printing mistakes, chemical spills that altered the photographs after the moment of exposure. In any case these found photographs prompt us to rethink many of the assumptions of classical photographic theory—in particular the relationship of photography’s indexicality to its documentary facilities. Photographs might be imprints of light on light-sensitive paper, but this guarantees little in terms of iconicity—whatever the photographer intended, photographs might witness the mechanical limitations of the camera or the accidents of the darkroom.

Many of the photographs gathered in *Floh* have other marks on them that postdate the instant of the film’s exposure. We see creases and stains, ink spots

and scuffs. In one image, the lacy fabric of a curtain is overlapped by a fibrous mess that must have accumulated on the surface over the years, nicely rhyming with the curtain. In another, a blotch decorates a man's otherwise plain necktie. There is a photograph whose crease cuts between a husband and wife. These stains and folds were produced by accident, but other marks were deliberately made by the photographs' owners. A father and daughter lie on a grassy bank, reading the papers—above them is an inscription bearing the date of the photograph. An image of a group of young women in a cookery class bears a less precise date, "1928–29," which suggests that the numbers were written onto the print some time after the shot by someone who could not quite recall when it was taken. A picture of a woman from the 1940s has the letters "PAT" written below her feet, as if to the owner, the image itself being not quite sufficient to bring its subject's name to mind. Whether deliberate archival inscriptions or storage scrapes, *these* various marks tempt us to re-think the *temporality* of photography. In a text on obsolescence, Dean once wrote, "I like the time you can hear passing: the prickled silence of mute magnetic tape or the static on a record."³⁸ The marks on the *Floh* photographs are like this static—they show the time that has passed. Photographs might initially show what "has been," "reality in a past state," but in their eventual physicality they bear witness to an expanded temporality—not just the instant of exposure, but the time of printing, storing, and gathering dust; the time of treasuring and touching. Carol Armstrong has described "a certain nineteenth-century sensitivity to the . . . fundamental instability [of the photographic image], its fragility, its fading and disappearance, and the potentiality of its ghostly return to invisibility."³⁹ Dean's attachment is less to photographs "spotted, stained, and faded with age" than to signs of use, no matter whether the photographs date from the 1880s or 1970s. I should emphasize that Dean did not fetishize these marks: all the found photographs are reproduced flat and with straight borders. There is no indication of formerly serrated edges, bumpy surfaces, or worn corners, and few images are so degraded that they verge on disappearance.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, Dean refrained from using any number of restorative computer programs to clean away these marks. Tellingly, in her text on *Floh*, she referred to the found photographs as "lost object[s]" rather than images.⁴¹

38. Tacita Dean, *October 100* (Spring 2002), p. 26.

39. Carol Armstrong, *Scenes in a Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1998), p. 15.

40. Her project can therefore be distinguished from a work contemporary with it—Bill Morrison's film *Decasia* (2002), which comprises re-photographed films that he discovered in states of extreme decay. Morrison seems to fetishize and romanticize the ruined image in a manner quite distinct from Dean's treatment of found photographs.

41. Tacita Dean, "Floh." In his essay on Dean, Michael Newman quotes Walter Benjamin to emphasize the importance of the tactile to the collector. "Possession and having are allied with the tactile, and stand in a certain opposition to the optical. Collectors are beings with tactile instincts." Newman is thinking about Dean's work *Czech Photographs* (2002), which consists of a box of black-and-white photographs taken by Dean in 1991 and placed on a table in exhibitions. The viewer can handle and look through as they wish. As Newman acknowledges, the viewer's haptic encounter with the collection of photographs is key. Paging through *Floh*, the viewer never handles the photographs themselves but senses how others have touched them.



The most formal group portrait in *Floh* shows a group of twenty-three men and women arranged in three lines. Perhaps they were army cadets or the employees of an early airline; all of them wear uniforms and caps with winged badges and they all look toward the camera, smiling. This would be one of the plainest images in the book were it not for the fact that the faces of two women in the back row are scratched out. Someone (an enemy? a jealous lover?) has taken a blue pen and gouged away the faces, and the enlargement of the photograph—it is spread across two pages—heightens the violence of the scratches. These marks, sitting on top of the photographic surface, or rather on top and within it (the pen has torn away the paper), witness an altogether different kind of treatment of photography. They find their match toward the end of the book in another mark over a photograph of two young boys returning successful after a fishing trip. This time it is a mark of tenderness: we see a fingerprint over the youngest boy's face, the indexical sign of the index finger that once touched the image of the child.

Such touches of hatred and care spring off the pages of *Floh* as I turn through the book, and once I notice the scratched-out faces of the cadets, or the tenderly touched face of the young boy, I cannot see the images in the same way again. Could these latter marks act like a *punctum*, then? Could a *punctum* be something not *in* the photograph but something *on* it? The *punctum*, Barthes wrote, “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”⁴² “Once

42. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 26.

there is a *punctum*, a blind field is created (is divined): on account of her necklace, the black woman in her Sunday best has had, for me, a whole life external to her portrait.”⁴³ Certainly I think of a “whole life” external to these portraits, but here it is the whole life of the photograph itself as much as the life of the people it depicts. I think of its life as a relic—a life that recalls Benjamin’s 1931 account of the “magical value” of photographs,⁴⁴ the “cult value” he returned to in 1936: “Cult value does not give way without resistance. It retires to an ultimate retrenchment: the human countenance. It is no accident that the portrait was the focal point of early photography. The cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead, offers a last refuge for the cult value of the picture.”⁴⁵ Benjamin was arguing that the cult value of religious art remained in early portrait photographs but that photography gives itself later to less superstitious and more political deployments. But it seems that Dean’s interest is precisely in the ritual uses of amateur photographs—for like those early photographic portraits, these photographs are shown to have acted so powerfully for their owners as records of a moment or person that in exceptional circumstances they had to be fingered or scraped away.

The fingerprint on the fisher-boy’s face; the scratches on the cadets’—these marks may act like the *punctums*, and they may jolt as you page through *Floh*, but

43. Ibid., p. 57.

44. Walter Benjamin, “A Small History of Photography,” p. 243.

45. Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations* (London: Fontana, 1992), p. 219.



for all the surprise of their appearance, could you see them not as the exceptions in the book, but as the greatest confirmations of its rule? The scraped and fingered photographs *seem* to have an opposite status to the accidentally taken and stained photographs, as they point in such obvious ways to the irrational dimension of the everyday use of photography. But perhaps they typify the status of all *Floh's* photographs, for the “mistake” shots have been treated superstitiously too. Why so? Simply because they were kept by their owners; they were not *thrown in the garbage* when they were printed. Imagine a simple scenario: someone took two photographs—one shows its subject as he intended, the other was a mess. Why did he keep the second at all, if not for a certain reluctance in throwing *any* photograph in the garbage? Barthes declared himself “too superstitious”⁴⁶ to throw out a photograph of his parents; the owners of these did not even destroy their duds. Whatever the reason for the photographs’ eventual transfer to the flea market, whether they were culled from house clearances or lost in other ways, all the photographs in *Floh* have in common the fact of survival, and they all bear witness to their owner’s one-time superstitious attachment. And this is the real madness of photography that Barthes feared would be tamed—the madness of its amateur everyday *use*.

Floe

Around about the same time that Dean was finishing *Floh* she assembled another, smaller collection of found photographs, which she published as an artist’s project in 2001 in issue 9/10 of the magazine *Trans*. The project was titled *Found Ice: Berlin, August 2000* and included fifteen black-and-white photographs. Initially Dean had begun to collect pictures of frozen fountains. She was fascinated by the idea that fountains could freeze at all: their gushing water must solidify in a split second. Her found frozen fountains would have alluded to one version of photographic time—the idea that photography similarly involves a split-second instant. The collection would have also witnessed the inevitable belatedness of the photographs it contained, for all of them would have been taken after the decisive moment—in other words, only once the fountain had already frozen. But as it happened, Dean did not publish the frozen fountains. Her fifteen photographs instead showed other kinds of ice, in and out of cities. In some, ice is tamed: there is a familiar-looking snapshot of a child beside his snowman, and a photo of a soldier skiing down a gentle slope. But in most, ice appears predatory and voracious. It encrusts long-dead trees to form craggy posts on silky hillsides. It rises in slumps and blots out half-constructed buildings. It smothers wooden structures, forming a new architecture of caves and crevices.

The charm of these images is unmistakable, and their drama must have been heightened as they appeared to Dean in the flea market in the hot Berlin summer.

46. Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, p. 94.

Can we read *Floh* through this smaller collection, though? Let us recall how *Floh* presents photography. Photography can be poignant or banal; it can display the utterly serious or the haphazard and foolhardy; it can be elegant and well-composed or awkward, obscure, and blurry. Photography can be treasured and preserved, or creased and stained; photography can bear the marks of love, or the scratches of hatred. Photography, it seems, is itself like the frozen rivers of ice in *Trans*. Picking up whatever lies in its path, it dumps it elsewhere, on the stalls of the flea market. Photography—in other words—is a floe.

Hopefully we are now arriving at a coherent sense of how *Floh* presents photography's incoherence, but two main questions remain to be explored. First, why is it so compelling to articulate this idea of photography now? And second, given this idea of photography, how does *Floh* sit alongside Dean's other work? To address the first question, I want to take a detour through Kracauer's 1927 essay on photography while retaining the icy temperature of the current discussion. Kracauer's essay famously opposed photography to what he termed "memory images." While the memory image selects and condenses the crucial aspects of a character, place, or event so as to be of use to the person recalling it, photographs contain excessive detail, presenting everything that lay before the camera lens at a particular moment: "from the perspective of memory, photography appears as a jumble that consists partly of garbage."⁴⁷ "In a photograph," Kracauer wrote, "a person's history is buried as if under a layer of snow."⁴⁸ Instead of capturing the significant aspects of experience, photography is so very random and its proliferation increases its randomness: "The blizzard of photographs betrays an indifference toward what things mean."⁴⁹

Kracauer's photographic "blizzard" seems quite close to what I'm calling Dean's "floe." Certainly *Floh* presents photography "as a jumble that consists partly of garbage," but if *Floh* recalls Kracauer's vision of photography, it is possible, I think, to argue that the implications of this vision are now radically different from the moment when Kracauer wrote these lines. Kracauer's essay was written in the late 1920s at the moment of the growth of news media and confronted a situation in which the incessant publication of photographs impeded societal self-recognition. "The flood of photos sweeps away the dams of memory. . . . Never before has a period known so little about itself."⁵⁰ Dean's project, in contrast, emerges at a moment when the flood or blizzard or jumble is being tamed, cleaned up, and organized—at the moment of digitalization.

For many, digitalization's disturbance is that it alters the indexical character of photography; others are concerned with the spectacular forms of photographic manipulation that digital programs afford. But what is crucial here is the impact of digitalization on the amateur treatment of photography both at the moment of

47. Kracauer, "Photography," p. 51.

48. Ibid.

49. Ibid., p. 58.

50. Ibid.

exposure and at the moment of storage. Digitalization discourages people from saving or printing out “mistaken” photographs—they can be erased from a camera’s memory before they have physical presence, erased without any superstitious misgivings. All this might be heralded in the name of cleanliness, affordability, and efficiency, but the implications of digital handling are potentially troublesome: “To be actually able to delete an image in the moment of its inception is quite an enormous thing,” Dean comments, “It pushes beyond democracy and becomes almost totalitarian. It [parallels the way] society is trying to organize itself to get rid of anything that is dysfunctional or not up to the standard. It’s a horrifying concept to me if I think about it.”⁵¹

It is in this context that *Floh’s* presentation of a photographic jumble appears neither charming nor quaint (one can imagine these criticisms), but urgent and political. So too, it is in this context that we can note the distance between Dean’s approach to analog photography and that of artists such as Adam Fuss, Christopher Bucklow, and Chuck Close, whose returns to outmoded photographic technologies are much more romantic.⁵² By reminding us of the random floe that once was photography, Dean confronts the sanitizing effects of photographic digitalization—effects that do not seem to have been addressed by many other artists. With *Floh’s* expansive and chaotic vision of analog photography, digitalization’s contrasting ambition to present only the chosen and selected is brought into focus. Whereas for Kraucaer, photography destroyed the possibility of memory and knowledge, for Dean, facing digitalization, analog photography offers a messy and necessary kind of memory. Photographic memory is untameable rather than pristine, chaotic rather than censored.⁵³ Elsewhere, Dean has written that memory is “a place full of . . . whispering,” and this aural metaphor conveys the imprecision of memory that interests me here.⁵⁴

And the implications of *Floh’s* presentation stretch further still; for not only does *Floh* present aspects of photography that will soon be gone, it also stands as an example of a mode of photographic *finding* that is nearing extinction. Digitalization does not just mean that photographs are taken and printed in a more selective way—digitalization also leads to more organized forms of archiving. Will there still be flea markets full of old photographs in the near future? Will there be jumbles of unedited snapshots? Probably not. But what is so important about this? What is so wrong with efficient archives of images? What is the problem

51. Dean, interview with the author, December 16, 2003.

52. See also Lyle Rexer, *Photography’s Antiquarian Avant-Garde: The New Wave in Old Processes* (New York: Abrams, 2002).

53. My argument here is similar to one made by Michael Newman about Dean’s interest in sea voyagers. Newman suggests that Dean does not look at figures such as Bas Jan Ader and Donald Crowhurst, both of whom died at sea, to hero worship them or to treat them as “positive example[s].” Rather, their stories stand for her as “moment[s] of loss,” whose significance is accentuated in the light of recent technological advances. Satellite tracking systems now monitor the entire planet, and it would be hard to get lost in the same way as these figures. By focusing on them, Dean salvages “the possibility of abandonment.” So, too, she salvages the possibility of photographic imprecision at the moment of digitalization.

54. Tacita Dean, “Sound Mirrors,” in *Seven Books*.

with artists or anyone, for that matter, seeking photographs with Google's image search instead of coming across them by chance? At the risk of fetishizing the flea market, romanticizing the accidental find, let me pause to explain why such a mode of discovery still seems compelling. This mode of finding is important because it reveals to the finder the unexpected, pointing to unacknowledged desires and fears. The found photograph, in other words, can function in the same way as the Surrealist found object.⁵⁵ Writing about the found object in *Compulsive Beauty*, Hal Foster pitted its initial status as a "marvelous resolution"⁵⁶ to the finder's need against its essential character as a "figure of lack,"⁵⁷ "always a substitute, always a displacement that drives on its own search."⁵⁸ The found photograph similarly attracts its finder neither because it satisfies a need, nor because they understand immediately what draws them to it, but because of its opacity to them.

In *Floh*, Dean shows us photographs that have attracted her in this way, but the work does not require us to probe her desire or fear to unpack her attraction. Because it presents so many photographs in no thematic order or hierarchy, *Floh* offers to us the possibility of finding our own images. The book, in other words, is for its viewer a kind of flea market of photographs. I mentioned above that Barthes argued that photographs compete with our memory when they show people (including ourselves) who we remember. But when a found photograph attracts us, memory and photography don't collide. Dean has written, "I have always believed that art works best when it responds to the autobiography of the viewer."⁵⁹ The found photograph often "works best" in this way, recalling to its finder something forgotten but also unknown, drawing out memory in unpredictable ways. Of all the photographs in the book, the two to which I keep returning recall memories that are as often the source of suffering and shame as pleasure and hope. The same photographs might act quite differently for someone else; another might glance at them without the slightest pause.

Photography as Site

So how does *Floh* sit alongside Dean's work as a whole? Hopefully, we can now see that the *wrong* way to approach *Floh* would be to think about it as a filmmaker's investigation of the specificity of the still image. In her films, Dean tends to keep her cameras extremely static, avoiding zooms, pans, and shifts of focus. A

55. In a recent article, Margaret Iversen has outlined a theoretical trajectory that makes this link unsurprising. Barthes, she suggests, inherited the notion of the *punctum* from Lacan's idea of the "petite tache." In turn Lacan was indebted to Breton's theorization of the found object in his formation of the *objet petit a*. See Margaret Iversen, "Readymade, Found Object, Photograph," *Art Journal* 62, no. 2 (Summer 2004).

56. Hal Foster, *Compulsive Beauty* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1993), p. 40.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

58. *Ibid.*, p. 43.

59. Tacita Dean, *An Aside*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 2005), p. 5.

given view is held for considerable time before another replaces it. By holding her film camera as still as a photographer would have done in the medium's earliest days, Dean captures the often small movement of elements within the image without melodrama. In other words, it is within the practice of filmmaking that Dean can explore the difference between stillness and movement, and she does not need to alternate between photography and film in order to pursue this investigation. If there is a contrast between *Floh* and Dean's films pertaining to the question of time and movement, it is to do with the different rhythms in which the viewer encounters the images—as mentioned above, the jolty pace of *Floh* contrasts the gentle rhythms of cuts in the films. And in any case, as I have argued, the photographs in *Floh* ask us to think about an extended time rather than just the instant of exposure.

There are different ways to think about *Floh's* relation to the rest of Dean's oeuvre. She has accumulated and displayed other collections, such as *Washington Cathedral* (2002), a grid of 142 found postcards that were all produced long before the building was completed. Another work, *Four, Five, Six and Seven Leaf Clover Collection* (1972–present), displayed at MACBA in Barcelona in 2001, indicates that Dean's fascination with superstitious objects long predated her collection of (irrationally treated) photographs; indeed, Dean has also worked with eclipses, alchemy, relics, and palindromes. The various mistakes in the *Floh* photographs, meanwhile, echo those we find in Dean's own work. Around the same time she was making *Floh*, for instance, she attempted to film an eclipse for the second time, but just at the key moment, her camera slipped.⁶⁰ The image was jerky and bleached, but it became more interesting to her because of this accident, and she showed the material as the film *Diamond Ring* (2001).⁶¹ Finally, with its images of faces, *Floh* seems to have generated a turn toward a kind of portraiture in the recent trio of films *Mario Merz* (2002), *Boots* (2003), and *The Uncles* (2004).⁶²

But the best way to consider *Floh's* relation to Dean's work is, I think, to posit that through the project, photography itself becomes a kind of "site" to explore in the same way that she explores other more literal sites. In *Bubble House* and *Fernsehturm* (2001), Dean films "perfect anachronism[s],"⁶³ architectural structures that do not "function in the now."⁶⁴ The "Bubble House" was a futuristic island residence that Dean discovered in Cayman Brac while working on another project. Abandoned before it was ever completed, it was battered by wind and waves though it was designed to withstand them, and appeared to her as a futuristic

60. Her first film of an eclipse was *Banewl* (1999), but there the skies had been overcast.

61. Dean has harnessed the generative potential of accidents and coincidences, no more so than when making the work *Girl Stowaway* (1994) and curating the recent exhibition *An Aside* (2005).

62. For an account of these works, see my essay "Time Has Told Me—Tacita Dean's Recent Work," *Frieze* 88 (January/February 2005), pp. 102–07.

63. Tacita Dean, "Fernsehturm," in *Seven Books*.

64. Tacita Dean, "Dungeness," in *Seven Books*.

ruin. The *Fernsehturm*, meanwhile, is the television tower built as a monument to the technological advancement of the GDR but now stands as a memorial to an unfulfilled Communist future in the reunited Berlin. Both structures were originally invested with utopian promises, but these promises were never achieved. Through her films, Dean reanimates both structures so that the promises are remembered at the same time that their abandonment is acknowledged. The films do not so much mourn or dwell on failure—instead, they suggest that the buildings' contemporary interest derives precisely from the fact that the sites have become something other than they were originally envisaged. At the moment of its obsolescence, analog photography presents itself to Dean in a similar way. It is like a structure that initially held utopian promise, but despite nineteenth-century hopes for the medium, it became—in the hands of its amateur users—a chaotic floc, as often treated rationally as it was superstitiously, as often prone to mistakes as it was able to capture an intended image for posterity.

Sunrises and Stage Sets

Floh draws near to a close with a two-page spread on which an image of a young couple kissing is paired with a square format photograph of a group of five friends on a mountaintop. We guess they have climbed up to watch the dawn; they all face the same way, and their eyes are protected by sunglasses. The identity of the couple is unknown to us, but since their kiss found its way to the flea market stand, their affection will be forever preserved in the book. Opposite them the climbers look toward the light, toward the very force on which photography used to depend, but they also seem to be looking to the future, to the dawn of a new day. If the kiss and this day have passed, and if this spread might be read therefore as a romantic adieu to photography, the final photograph in *Floh*, which is in many ways the book's strangest, disturbs the nostalgic strain.

A man stands alone in the middle ground on a sand dune that stretches to the front of the photograph. Grasses bend as if it is windy, but behind the man, the scene is strangely still. There is a church of sorts, and to his left, the dune slopes down to the shore, where waves lap and boat masts stretch up to a distant horizon. The clouds above are calm. It takes time to work out what we are seeing, but eventually it makes sense. The man is on a stage set—the sand is there, for sure, but the church and beach are a painted backdrop. But still the image remains odd, because the man is standing and looking as if at someone right next to him. We would be tempted to suppose that this “someone” had been cut and pasted out of the scene were it not for the fact that this could be a moment from a rehearsal with the missing actor absent. What's more, though the man stands upright and still and is in no way about to move forward, his right foot is raised slightly, as if *it* were about to step away while *he* stayed put. The photograph reminds us that analog images were every bit as tricky as digital manipulations,



and perhaps because of all these confusions, or perhaps because of the memory of his *Restoration* (1993), Dean has called the photograph “my Jeff Wall.”⁶⁵

In her recent essay “The Index and the Uncanny,” Laura Mulvey has described the way digitalization alerts us to all that is strange in analog photography. The essay is a wonderful account of the way that theoretical accounts of indexicality lead to descriptions of photography that emphasize its magic, unfixable—in short, uncanny—qualities. Indexicality, the “most material aspect, the physical link between object and image gives rise to the most elusive and ineffable properties of this particular sign.”⁶⁶ In many respects, the description of photography in *Floh* tallies with Mulvey’s account. I come to it here not just because of this proximity, but because Mulvey’s essay also ends with Jeff Wall. At its end, she suggests that with *The Vampires’ Picnic* (1991) and *Dead Troops Talk* (1992), Wall has put his finger on all the strange uncanniness of photographic indexicality, but has only been able to do so because he works outside of indexical media. “This kind of reflection back on photography can, perhaps, only be achieved in an image in which ‘that was now’ is no longer of the essence.”⁶⁷ Here, I disagree, for in *Floh*, without images of the absolutely weird, the impossibly strange, and with the tools of analog photography alone, Dean has managed to do just this, to reflect back on

65. Dean, interview with the author, December 16, 2003.

66. Laura Mulvey, “The Index and the Uncanny,” in *Time and the Image*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (Manchester, U.K.: Manchester University Press, 2000), p. 147.

67. *Ibid.*, p. 148.

what photography was. Found photographs emerge as magical in their appearance and in their fate, as superstitious, as charming—as democratic—because they are cherished like precious objects. Layered with time, they trigger memories not of the people they show, but from the people who look at them. Touched lost photographic objects are presented in a valedictory way, knowing there will soon be a loss of the touched, and a loss of the lost: one day soon there will be no more discarded photographs that have been taken, rejected, fingered, scratched, lost, found, and wondered about, no more object/images cluttering our lives.