

TACITA DEAN

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Teignmouth Electron

Through the work of Tacita Dean we learn something of the person of Donald Crowhurst and of the bizarre fate of a man who decided to enter a competition to circumnavigate the globe single-handedly, and who was ultimately lost overboard. In itself this would simply be a tragic story if it were not for the particular circumstances that led to his downfall, specifically the recklessness born of an acute lack of finances that impelled him to set sail inadequately prepared for the voyage, his reports of fictive successes when all the time his boat was in fact aimlessly drifting around the Sargasso Sea, his final disorientation, and the moment when he leapt overboard with his chronometer, the very instrument designed to determine one's position in space and time. A preventable yet inevitable catastrophe, heroism founded on foolhardiness and premeditated deception—might one not be tempted to see this as the epitome of the modern hero, of the artist? But those watching Tacita Dean's short film *TEIGNMOUTH ELECTRON* (2000) initially know nothing of all of that unless they have already leafed through her book of the same name.¹⁾

The film examines the boat, the Teignmouth Electron, whose story comes to a temporary halt on the shores of the tiny Caribbean island, Cayman Brac. Well above the tideline, the dilapidated shell of the boat, bereft of its rigging, is first seen from a distance on a deserted stretch of land between sprawling scrub and discarded beer cans. The camera approaches the boat; tilted slightly to one side, the vessel is resting on its rudder and one of the outer keels of the trimaran; out of the element that they were built for, its hulls seem cumbersome. The paint is peeling from the sides and the deck; the once seaworthy yacht seems to be completely at the mercy of

Nature, long since removed from its former environment and use.

The view of the ocean through the empty front windows of the cabin is interrupted by a palm tree: the archetype of Marcel Broodthaer's reinstated decor of the fiction of art. Or is this reality? Wind rustles through the leaves, water drips onto the coconuts lying on the ground. Then the camera closes in on the words painted on the bow of the boat, running slowly over them as though imitating the eye as it reads. But all we see is the odd name, Teignmouth Electron, vaguely associative but in itself meaningless. This letter by letter scrutiny—which already stands out from the rest of the film by the movement of the otherwise static camera—is one of the key moments in the film. A narrative element, embodied in the writing, enters the timeless world of this vessel that has fallen into disuse. Or, more precisely perhaps, the self-referential components of the yacht's name are seen in the light of the flotsam on the shore and measured against it in the viewer's mind—in their hopelessness, displacement, frustration. What we read is indeed legible, and ignites associative sparks for a brief moment, only to disintegrate into separate letters again; so, too, the different parts of the yacht have lost everything that connected them to their purpose. Before our eyes the writing and the boat's structure re-enter a state of entropy where any memories of words in a language and of the laws of the mariner's art fade away into nothingness.

While we have been looking at the boat, clouds have been gathering above as though a storm were brewing. The changing weather, the sound of the wind and the cries of seabirds on the soundtrack are all familiar from Nature but, in conjunction with the ruined yacht and the enigmatic writing, they seem less like a documentary background than anonymous, atmospheric elements connected to its fate.

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Not symbols, not metaphors, just a senseless drama that draws the viewer's attention from the sight of the wreck to the imminent destruction of order on all levels.

Suddenly the sound of an engine cuts across Nature in this fragile idyll; an airplane appears in the sky, climbing upwards as it describes a wide arc over the island. First the plane is seen in the sky above the boat, then the camera follows the path of the plane until it is out of range. This scene, which breaks abruptly into our scrutiny of the boat, is answered by the last shot of the film which is taken from inside a plane as it is leaving the ground. Through the window we see the coastline where the Teignmouth Electron is visible, the camera stays on the wreck until it is no more than a white speck far below. While the picture runs on, the loud engine noise which has heightened the illusion of flying is faded out, as though ultimately the abandoned boat is to stay in our minds purely as an image. While the camera position remained fixed as our gaze was drawn up to the plane in the sky, now the last shot takes sharp hold of viewers, spiriting them upwards with it. In the changing perspectives, the shift from static to dynamic, two possibilities of cinematographic representation intersect which could perhaps be defined as observation and empathy. While the movement of the plane in the sky points to the actual broken wreck as the Teignmouth Electron disappears in the distance, its imaginary presence grows ever stronger.

Yet this happens without the film in fact establishing a narrative thread or imposing a psychological perspective on the viewer. If it seems that the moment of recognizing the writing has been described here on a somewhat allegorical level and the confrontation of objective and subjective movement treated as a rhetorical element, then this reading is based on the way the material of the film is organized and not on an evocative plotline. The film consists of a number of generally static shots of various lengths, which—with the exception of the camera movement already mentioned—do not undergo any formal intensification. Instead of building-up tension the film focuses on the duration of each image, the sense of the time in which it takes place. At the same time there is no external reason for the duration of the in-

dividual images other than the amount of film material that was available. Moreover the images edited together neither rely on confrontation nor on any other conventions of editing used today; if anything they strive for neutrality and calm in sequences that do not go beyond the contingency of the isolated pieces of wreckage and their location.

While the film asserts its materiality, this is concerned less with the coloration, format, and pictorial composition than with the underlying fact that an image created by exposing a piece of film strip always has a particular duration. This duration may be measured in seconds or in centimeters of film material, just as one might measure the length of a drawn or painted line, or the weight of stone or steel. And all of Tacita Dean's works remind us of the material reality that they come up against during the course of their making. In *MAGNETIC* (1997), which consists in a certain sense of drawings made using magnetic sound tape of the kind used for film sound tracks, a sound is shown as a visible stretch of magnetic tape, without the sound itself being audible. Whether the recorded sounds are made by a human mouth or by seabirds can only be determined on a second level: namely by inscriptions in chinagraph identifying the individual tapes. At the same time Tacita Dean keeps secret whether the named sounds were indeed recorded on the relevant tapes or whether it is enough that in our imaginations we connect the length of the tape and the inscription.

In *DISAPPEARANCE AT SEA* (1996) the subject of the film—a lighthouse with its rotating light and the setting sun—presents a simple structure which determines the organization of the film's images into seven lengthy sequences. Tacita Dean's most recent film, *FERNSEHTURM* (2001), has a similarly rotating motif, the revolving restaurant on top of the TV tower in Berlin. Circular motion and stasis, the view into the distance and inwards to the center where the movement originates, are moments that can clearly be distinguished from each other in their motion and repetition and which, seen as a whole, can even be read metaphorically as an image of the carousel of life. In *TEIGNMOUTH ELECTRON*, on the other hand, there is no other basis for the organization of the images than the absence of any wider context,

Tacita Dean

the displacement of an object found and observed. What therefore should determine the duration and the sequence of the piece if not each individual element of the wreck and of Nature that enters the camera's field of vision? And so it is that they are shown, one after the other, until something happens to interrupt the sequence, until something distinctive comes into view. In this case it is the writing on the boat and the airplane climbing into the sky which break into the sequence of pictures and hint at an over-arching context. Moreover, the discovery of a second object on the shore of Cayman Brac—a strange, ruined house, abandoned before it was finished—led to a second film, *BUBBLE HOUSE* (1999). The material originally intended to be used in one film became two films with all the shots in the second film having been as it were diverted from the first film. *BUBBLE HOUSE* is thus not simply a companion piece to *TEIGNMOUTH ELECTRON* but an actual supplement to it.

In *BUBBLE HOUSE* the camera looks out through the panoramic window of the ruin—a cinemascope-like view within the actual frame—out over the ocean where a storm suddenly builds up on the horizon and approaches the coast until the first heavy drops of rain reach the camera. Although this image remains static, the viewer is struck by the incipient movement signaled by the changes in the light in the sky and on the waves—as vividly as by the plane that comes into view. Without being able to make sense of all this, one realizes that the film has reached its destination. It does not have the clarity of a narrative but operates instead somewhere between unfathomable meaning and happy chance. And were these not also the two contradictory conditions of a journey that had an ultimately fatal fascination for Donald Crowhurst, as noted in his ship's log on the last day of his voyage? "MAX POSS ERROR," he commented laconically, as he reset the chronometer that had run right down. "It is finished—it is finished, IT IS THE MERCY," reads his last entry.²⁾

(Translation: Fiona Elliott)

1) Tacita Dean, *Teignmouth Electron* (London: Book Works, in association with the National Maritime Museum, 1999).

2) *Ibid.*





TACITA DEAN, BUBBLE HOUSE, 1999, color photograph, 23 $\frac{2}{5}$ x 33" / Farbphoto, 59,5 x 84 cm.