Tacita Dean first came to prominence as a leading light of the YBA generation of artists. More recently her work with 16mm film has caused her to become an advocate for the endangered medium. Away from the campaign trail however, her practice remains thrillingly diverse. 'I never had, from the beginning, an orthodoxy,' she tells Emily Steer. 'It's always been imposed by the outside.'

'There are no quick rewards,' Tacita Dean states, with characteristic sincerity, as we speak ahead of the third Istanbul Design Biennial in which her work will be featured this autumn. She's responding to a question about the nature of art viewing—Dean often requires extended passages of viewers’ time and mental stillness—though the answer could be used to sum up much of the primarily Berlin-based artist's work: favouring a time-consuming process, releasing new work at a less metronomic speed than many of her peers and, of course, dedicating endless hours to campaign for the things that she cares about. Time itself often finds itself a central subject of her work too. 'I love all those notions of time,' she says. 'Not time on a day-to-day basis, but this whole sense of narrative time, allegorical time, prehistoric time and edited time. There are so many elements of it which are endlessly satisfying.'

At the biennial, Dean will be showing the 16mm colour film Human Treasure in response to the theme 'Are We Human?' It's a film made in Japan in 2006, she tells me. 'It's about the Living Human Treasure, a Japanese designation for someone who has excelled in traditional Japanese art. I think there are only a handful of them, 100 or so, and they're only in traditional art so there wouldn't be a contemporary artist who would be a Living Human Treasure.' I liked the phrase. I went to find a Human Treasure and I eventually found this Kyozen—which is a sort of Japanese comic theatre—actor called Senmao. Because of the deference paid to him it was very difficult to have close access with him. It was always done through mediation, so it's a strange film in that way.

Senmao, like many of Dean's subjects, was already at an advanced age at the time of filming. 'I film a lot of things that have subsequently disappeared,' the artist says. 'Maybe I'm attracted to things that are threatened. When I film them they are not in their heyday. They are as they are, right now. Maybe that makes them melancholic and slightly dysfunctional in their time. But I'm not making a film that pinpoints the old days at all. That's what nostalgia is, and people use that word so wrongly for me.'

There are many instances of Dean's work being discussed in terms of nostalgia, much to her irritation—Dean, it seems, doesn't suffer fools gladly. 'It's a different word from "longing". Longing is this much more amorphous emotion. It doesn't get tied down to time, or better days. I'm not filming Michael Hamburgh and waxing lyrical over his youth. So it's a mis-understanding of what they are. They are not pictures of time, just like a portrait painter painting a sitter. You wouldn't say Whistler's portraits are nostalgic because the people are no longer there. So something is wrong in the language but that doesn't mean that the longing isn't there.'

The idea of nostalgia is perhaps attached to her practice so regularly because of her to-the-death commitment to keeping the medium of analogue film alive and well. I ask if having her work constantly read as making a stand for the medium rather than simply being a work of art in her chosen medium can become tiresome. 'Because I tirelessly try to convince to work with and look at the medium, I've had to become more aware of it than I would otherwise have wanted to,' she tells me. 'Sometimes institutions would be quite lazy and call my work "video" and I'd be very upset, not institutions but the press releases which would then be picked up. So I used to ask to be very clear in the press release that this is photographic, 16mm; it is not a video, video is different. I had a show in Melbourne once and they would it slightly and then there was a reviewer saying "By the time we got to the third film, we'd had enough"; he no longer looked outside of the medium. So there are problematics. I've spent a lot of time working on the protection of film, when I could of course just have been making more of them. I spent more time last year as a campaigner than an artist. But I hope we have turned a corner. The Turbine Hall [she was commissioned to produce a film—entitled Retros— for the Tate Modern Unilever Series] made me into a campaigner in a way, because that was the critical year—2011-12. All the labs are closing in my wake. I've been through a lot of labs in Europe. Now I say, oh, I'll always have to be film and it'll die with me.'

'The whole point of VHS was that digital could not capture the flash that was a trademark
alogue film alive and well. I ask if having her work constantly read as making a stand for its medium rather than simply being a work of it in her chosen medium can become tiring. 'Because I consciously try and continue to work with and look at the medium, I've had become more aware of it than I would otherwise have wanted to,' she tells me. 'Sometimes institutions would be quite lazy and call my work "video" and I'd be very upset, not institutions but the press releases which would then be based on that. So I used to ask to be very clear in the press release that this is photochemical, not video, is not a video, video is different. I had a show in Melbourne once and they overdid it slightly and then there was a reviewer saying "By the time we got to the third film, we'd had enough". I no longer looked outside of the medium. So there are problematical. I've spent a lot of time working on the protection of film, when I could simply just be making more of them. Spent more time last year as a campaigner than an artist. But I hope we have turned a corner. In the Turbine Hall [she was commissioned to produce a film—entitled FILM—for the Tate Modern Unlimited Series] made me into a campaigner in a way, because that was the critical war—2011-12. All the labs are closing in my time. I've been through a lot of labs in Europe. How I say, it'll always have to be film and I'll die with me.

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And that's at the heart of what I do.
of a millionth of a second but film could, because [the green ray] is bright enough to burn the crys-
tals. Even with Portraits, my recent film of David
Hockney, cigarettes look much more beautiful
on film than they do in digital.¹

There is a looseness to Dean’s work also,
that, despite her precision in many areas—espe-
cially around semantics and the public/press
perception of her work—gives the sense of an
artist who is still freely hunting around for ideas
rather than following a prescribed formula. ‘If
I’m very aware of what I’m doing I find that dis-
tracting,’ she considers. ‘Obviously the longer
[my project] goes the more aware I become of
what I’m doing, but I don’t like knowing what
the next week is going to be, or seeing it out.
It’s much closer to being on a bed and some-
thing comes across your mind than graphically
researching an idea and being really clear that
it must be this, this and this. I need that mys-
tery where things come to the surface and you
don’t know why. Later you may realise why,
but to know at the time is dangerous, I think.
I find that work that is so clearly consciously sought
outs me. I’m interested in the more mysteri-
ous mechanisms.’²

I’m curious to find out when the structure
emerges in her work—she famously leaves her
subjects to be as naturally themselves as possi-
ble. ‘In terms of a film, it really comes through
the editing. That’s when the work gets formed.
And that’s at the heart of what I do. Before
then I’m just accumulating material, like a bag
lady. Dragging things. I don’t sit there thinking:
I need that shot because that’s what I’m going
to cut next to that one. I never know that. But,
for example, with Michael Hamburger in his
orchard, he tried to perform in a strange way
and in the soil I had to cut around the edge of
anything that was too self-conscious. And that’s
why the editing is so important.’³

The world itself, despite Dean’s desire for
her subjects to be natural, often finds itself
warped in unfamiliar ways through the artist’s
lens. Locations have something of the Other
about them, present no more so than in her
2011 film X, which was inspired by her conver-
sations with British author J.G. Ballard about
the play between The Wreck of Time (1970) and
Robert Smithson’s film and landwork Spiral
Journey (also 1970). Here, many of her ongoing
concerns come together: the beauty of the film
medium; a warped sense of time; the natural
world, captured, but not quite. ‘With X it’s de-
finately a lot to do with film and the allegory of,
and the strange Ballardian relationship to time
and landscape. That was very specific, finding
a place that was otherworldly. That was about
building a union between Smithson and Ballard in
this strange landscape which was supposed to be
both futuristic and prehistoric, so getting that
right was very important. I didn’t want it to look
of the day, right now.’⁴

Alongside Dean’s fierce and very public
presence as the champion of film, it’s easy to
forget that she is, in fact, somewhat of a mixed-
media artist—creating large-scale print works,
drawings and paintings which have a similar
sense of visual weight to them. I wonder how
Dean came to her current positions—is it as a
result of a gradual broadening of interests, or
has her practice been this diverse from the word
go?⁵ I was always the kid with the oil painting set.
I always wanted to be an artist. I mean, thank god,
that’s a blessing to know exactly what you want to
do, all the way along. There was never a moment
where I wanted to do anything else. I came from
an academic family who weren’t impressed in
any way with the idea of going to art school. That
was the struggle. But the decision was clear to me,’
she says. ‘I went into a painting department
at Falmouth, and immediately was making a
drawing-animated film, which was kind of like
William Kentridge, changing the image in the
frame and taking 15 mm film frames and making
an animation. I was in painting, but I had one
foot down in the media department. I never had,
from the beginning, an orthodoxy. It’s always
been imposed by the outside. At Falmouth, I had
drawings, paintings, writing and film all in my
graduate show. Despite the difficulties of doing
that, that’s what my work was. Weirdly enough,
I’m still doing exactly what I did then.’⁶

The third Istanbul Design Biennial runs
12 October–4 December