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Falling into Gentle Ruin

BY

Monique Prinsloo

DOCUMENTATION AND COMMENTARY ON THE BODY OF PRACTICAL WORK
SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTERS OF FINE ART

- *Falling into Gentle Ruin* -

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Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* collection

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INTRODUCTION

“Photography’s field might even have to be imagined as a group of expanded fields, multiple sets of oppositions and conjunctions, rather than any singular operation.”¹

Photography’s nature is rather peculiar, because it is not necessarily particular. The diversity of photography lies in the fact that it requires different methods of interpretation precisely because photographs come into being in different ways.² Some artists ‘create’ photographs, some ‘appropriate’ photographs, while others perform a formal investigation into the photographic medium. My consideration of photographic practices then, remains loyal to more than one of the aforementioned interpretations. I create photographs, I appropriate photographs, and I also follow in-depth observations of this imaginative medium.

The first section of this paper introduces my artistic practice, which encompasses abandoned photographic objects. This inquiry, extending to the ramifications of what I call ‘photography’s ruin’, develops to an exploration of the various theoretical frameworks on the subject of photography that has informed my practice. These photographs capture my attention precisely

¹ Cited in Baker, 2005: 124.

² Especially since the rise of digitization the modes of creating photographs have expanded; from the analogue image, to the digital image, to the film still to name but a few.

because of their mystery. I do not know where they come from, I cannot identify any of the subjects, nor why these photographic objects have been discarded. The pathos of the 'lost' photograph resonates with me, with my feelings regarding loss and the passage of time.

My research is based, in part, on my own collection of photographic objects. Each photographic object used in my work has been rescued from a second hand store, flea market, or the like. These photographs simultaneously evoke notions of forgetfulness and remembering. They stand as melancholic visions of the past.

I will flesh out on this quality of melancholia and the way in which it relates to my personal solitude, and show how it has shaped my process, my collection, and the notion of the ruin. But it would be best to get underway with this paper in the same place as I started my body of work: with the assortment of images that I have been collecting for the last five to seven years. The strange allure of these objects as they find their way into my collection compels me to study the compulsion of collecting. In view of my process, I will here be taking into consideration to what extent I engage with, and later put to use, these found photographic objects. I will discuss the reading of the photographic image, delving into these objects' gradual disintegration, and the implication of a conceptual association between the image and the object.

I want to draw the audience into this space so as to understand the endearment I hold for these photographic objects. I invite the viewer to enter into this activity of looking and reading the photographic image, delving into the photograph's gradual disintegration and trying to make connections, as well as raise questions. By involving the viewer in this way, to some extent I am restaging my own fascination and in this manner I accomplish a wistful affection for the past. And in order to achieve this, I have focused on those photographs that foreground something of their own mystery.

The second section of this paper explores ways in which several contemporary and historical artists probe into the material surface of the photographic print. Inspired by the 'ruins' of the

past, these artists meditate on the ephemeral photographic object that has become a poignant reminder of the passing of time. These artists, who also meditate on the ephemeral photographic object, include James Coleman, Tacita Dean and Christian Boltanski. They help us to be mindful of 'photographic time' involved in the viewing process by the spectator, the 'time needed to understand' the narrative patterns of a photograph, and 'the time of survival' emitted by the photographic object.

Through this research I have endeavoured to unpack the 'whys' and 'hows' of my own obsession with collecting photographs, by relating it to a theoretical framework as well as to contemporary artistic practice. I further present here examples of my own body of work to show how I have given form to my concerns.

This personal account, I hope, will bring to mind some of the elegiac aspects of the photographic medium, as I have approached it, as well as my methodology. The theoretical structures around photography have guided me to a new understanding of photography that applies to my body of work. In some way this process has made me more aware of my personal compulsion, and on level with its moment: the evanescent moment imaged in a photograph and the transient nature of the photograph's surface; thus, at the core of my project is the notion that these photograph are falling into gentle ruin.



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* collection

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PART ONE

1.1 SOME REFLECTIONS ON COLLECTING AND MY METHODOLOGY

Motivated by an instinctive appreciation of things that have no known relationship to one another, I use the photographs I collect as an integral part of my work. Following the principle of collecting, my work incorporates the finder's arduous search for completeness. The idea of myself as finder developed in reaction to my sympathy for photography's 'fate'.¹ A sense of duty compelled me to search for and find photographs that serve as a guarantee of *being*. In a sense, *if* the photographs that I rescue survive, perhaps I too can escape death. To rifle through sets and sets of images in search of evidence, in search of that sense of being existing in the photograph, that essence before it slowly passes into oblivion has become a tiring endeavour. Along with an ongoing motivation of 'curiosity' (the curious and intriguing nature of found photographs that have inspired my interest in them), the every-day nature of photography has become painful to me. My spirit of inquiry has led me to consider abstract ideas around photography such as loss, melancholy, and then also the true level of time bound up with the medium of photography.

In the following section I will elaborate on my obsession with the discarded photographic objects by discussing all of the concepts of loss, melancholy and 'photographic time'. These printed ephemera exist in my collection as poorly preserved photographs, damaged

¹ From the moment of the first photograph in 1826, photography has markedly developed, and the medium as celluloid filmstrip is notably disappearing with the rise of digitisation.

from abuse by others. The photograph lives then, as tamed evidence; evidence which name I do not know. Mysteriously, and at last, all these ideas coincide for my in the process of making this body of work.

The medium of my work encompasses more than 'photography' as such. It is very important to be mindful of the fact that I have not taken the position as a photographer; I am first and foremost a collector. I scour old bookshops, second-hand stores or flea markets in search of objects with which I feel a particular affinity. Some of these found objects are immaculately preserved, and these I have carefully boxed. Others lie piled in loose stacks on tables and shelves in my studio; eroded, dog-eared and faded nearly past recognition. The subjects in these photographic objects do vary of course: from photographs of family gatherings or celebratory events, to travel souvenirs or portraits. The greatest part of this corpus is on paper, and then a handful of these images adhere to glass. Some of these surfaces have obscure messages scribbled in various languages, while others have annotations with dates, numbers, and codes on their reverse. A small number of these images are marked with illustrations, and others with bits of printed material.

These found images function as the catalyst for the process of my creative work. From the outset I specifically acquired objects with a unique appearance, or in order to fulfil a particular creative urge. But, with time and as my collection expanded, I have come to realise that I instinctively collect objects triggered by the things I have already accumulated. I have collected images of cars, landscapes, certain landmarks or lampposts, even a person's stance that bears a likeness to another in a different image. At times it might even not be the subject matter, but the physical condition of the photograph or the texture thereof that resembles a photographic object already in my possession.



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

In the way that I have reflected on my process, I have engaged with these photographic objects in a distinctive way. It is important to take note that it is in no way intentionally autobiographical; I do not reflect on the place where I found an object and I do not collect in order to gather facts of past events. On the contrary, in an attempt to unpack each object and reinsert it in an imaginative narrative order, I reflect on these photographs that seem to have been left behind through forgetfulness. Photographs do, however, get thrown out – not by me, I am too sentimental for that – or sold as part of the estates of deceased individuals. One might marvel at the beauty of the subject, but the realisation that the individual in the photograph has passed on does not occur instantly. You first enter the paper's depth, the grain, and then the photograph lets you see that this indeed reflects the 'has been'.

When I have found photographs to add to my collection, I usually experience blissful satisfaction and elation. After searching for objects, discovering and obtaining them I, the passionate collector, imagine a re-created past in which I combine my own experiences with the fantasised past of my collected objects in an almost mystical union.

According to Walter Benjamin, collecting also constitutes a form of memory:

*"Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."*¹

1

Walter Benjamin, cited in Putnam, 2001:12

In my exhibition, I display the objects so as to engage them in the interesting interplay between revealing and concealing, similar to the common process of remembering and forgetting. But at that moment of encountering the photographic object, I find that it is threatened by a sense of undeniable desolation.¹ These objects do not belong; each object is invested with a sense of strangeness and they are discarded and alone in the world. As each object finds its way into my collection – in relation to the lost, found, or rediscovered object – I am reminded of what is not there. I experience a fragile sense of security in the fact that I am the one thumbing through the snapshots and not (yet) the subject of the images. There exists a tension then, between certainty and oblivion² within my collection of photographic objects. As the photographer captured actuality, and as I re-present the photograph, we are both agents of Death.

It may be more useful to articulate this phenomenon as a devotion to what Roland Barthes, in *Camera Lucida* (2000), calls the "that-has-been" of the photograph.³ Intrinsically, the photograph confirms what it represents. It does not necessarily say what is no longer, but rather what has been. In his text, *Collecting, An Unruly Passion* (1994), Werner Muensterberger elaborates on the this particularity of the lost object, convinced that it lives in "the period, the region, the craftsmanship, the former owner."⁴ The small residue of the subject as it lives in the found object, evokes a sense of a pulsation, back and forth, between subject and object; each chosen object can be recontextualised in its fragmented state: I can relive old, hidden, and either actual or perhaps illusory sensations of former times, and to some extent attempt to ascribe to the object a life and history of its own. Still, the sense of loss persists even in imaginative reconstructions. Even the 'that-has-been' will also disappear. Something else can take its place, something that is an object only in a strange sense.

1 'Desolation' refers to an intense state of being utterly alone or forsaken. Above this, desolation can also indicate a state of ruin or barrenness; I will elaborate on this idea of the photograph in ruin later on in this essay.

2 The familiar term oblivion refers to a state of being unaware or unconscious of what is happening – a figurative extinction, per se – and it is derived from the Latin word *oblivisci*, which translates as 'forget.' (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2001. Sv. 'oblivion.')

3 In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes refers to the "That-has-been" of the photograph, the "noeme" or essence of photography. "What I see has been there, in this place that extends between infinity and the subject; it has been there, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet always deferred" (Barthes, 2000: 77).

4 Muensterberger, 1994: 15.



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

At first glance the photograph has no link with the viewer's existence. But a viewer's reading of that photograph transforms the image. The trace of passed time draws the observer's attention to recognise the strange beauty of these cast-off materials. Each object has become endowed with a whole new aesthetic structure.¹ The photograph looks like anyone except the person it represents; the subject has been there, but it is separated because the subject gives way to the viewer's interpretations. The viewer recognises something; perhaps a sentimentality or nostalgia draws them to a peculiar image. Most probably the subject in the photograph has met his or her death. What was made permanent fades by reality: 'it is not there,' but 'it has indeed been.'

I find that a distance exists between these found images (what is their relation to each other? Why are they in the same collection?), between the image and myself (what is my attraction to these images?), and across the space separating viewer and image (what is my relationship to the people in the images?). As a means to confront this sense of distance, I arrange these images so as to establish new relationships between them. I configure these images to hold moments of tension, sensations of distress, and harrowing doubts in what one sees. I reconstruct the order of relations through techniques of doubling and by exceeding the frames, repeating fragments and arranging fragments of fragments themselves. Even though the subject and history of the photograph is unknown to me, I attempt to give these long-since departed and forgotten subjects the possibility of a resurrection. I bring these objects back to life so they can belong again.

But despite my efforts, these objects do not fulfil this need of belonging; I desire them to, but they do not. Instead, the distance is amplified, the objects remain alienated, and the image still disconnected. Something in the photograph desperately tries to hold my attention. And just as I am convinced that I have a grasp on that something, it slips away and I am left powerless; something has vanished. And so I am driven towards an ongoing search. I hope that, with each visit, the acquisition of one more print, negative, postcard or photograph will satiate my pursuit for the vanishing image. I go out again. I make my way to markets, garage sales, second hand stores, car-boot sales and the like, in the pursuit of finding that object, that image. I anticipate the next beautiful, absurd, even uncanny snapshot to rescue from oblivion with the hope to part with my personal feelings of solitude that resonate off each object's surface.

A dedicated collector, Walter Benjamin, observed his own habits and concluded:

"The most profound enchantment for the collector is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them... one has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired."

The solitude, disaffection, alienation, and estrangement I identify in the photographic objects echo my private uncertainties. And then the repeated investment in a photographic object serves as a powerful aid in keeping the dread of renewed anxiety or inner uncertainty under control. This iterative process cannot satisfy reason; there is something futile about it. The creeping melancholy about their falling into ruin is precisely what incites my interest. Even if these objects could magically alleviate the dread of aloneness and provide support, one object, one image, has but a temporary satisfaction. Obtaining one more object does not bring an end to the confusing problems of need and longing. My uncertainty and questioning appear to be satisfied by the endless repetition of this whole process. I may constantly return to the experience and the objects – real or imagined – but to escape to this remote and private world only once, or even

from time to time, is not enough. It is an experience of triumph in defence against anxiety and the fear of loss, but the return must be performed over and over again. To quote Barthes: "My eyes were touched with a kind of painful and delicious intensity..."¹ I can say this about all the photographs that touch me: these photographs and the subjects whose name I do not know. In an instant I recover the image that disturbs me, and I pass beyond the unreality of the thing represented. I enter into the image and take into my hands what is dead or what is going to die. I re-present it, and the course of the image is reversed: the waking of resistant reality.

In the form of this body of work, what I am compositing from this disintegrated and incomplete set of anonymous photographs is not a sample of instances. It rather presents events at different stages of development — a slowly decomposing set of photographs laden with possible fictions. Each photographic object is obscure in nature: both as I find it and by the means I choose to make effective use of it.

My work gives expression to a particular interest in collecting; representing groups of related objects, objects that are obsolete and trapped in a still viewable, arrested state of being. But this only reveals how these objects still function emotionally, despite the fact that the object is so greatly disconnected from the individual who clicked the shutter. During the whole time I remain with the photograph, I look at it and scrutinize it, as if I want to know more about the thing or the person it represents. I want to understand it better in order to show the viewer what is behind: this aged photographic object not only implies the death of the subject in the photograph, but it foreshadows the viewer's own death.

What remains then, are these objects, but they are still mortal. I can single out, rework, and exhibit these non-significant ruined objects. By using a methodology based on principles of association, I try and find between the rhythms of these objects the unforeseeable way in which a person stumbles on the marks left by another, unknown person. I create environments for these encounters to take place spontaneously. I introduce a temporary and creatively re-imagined

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Barthes, 2000: 116.

future for each individual image in that moment before the photograph is lost in oblivion.

And in this manner, I engage the viewer in the act of looking. The objects are fluid: arranged fragments evoke various cultural, mythical and historical references and ambiguous associations. And so these objects exist as something else then, as objects with a future not of signification, but of inter-related significance. And we become aware that we are all fighting to save ourselves from becoming: forgotten.

With the physical condition of the object still visible (stains on their surfaces, watermarks, folds, faded colours), the way that my works are presented in the exhibition simultaneously reveal the photograph's state of ruin, and conceal the photograph as an interruption of a given moment. This interesting contrast between revealing and concealing inspires my associations between them. I form imagined narrative groupings that are created from rare and idiosyncratic photographic objects, exploring the obsessive collecting tendency and artistic production. I want to recreate something of the fascination I have with the photographs in the curation of these objects.



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

In that discontinuous moment, the photograph can be understood from contextual clues; the intermittent burst of fragmented sequences and the discrepancy between any two sets of figures displays an elliptic narration. These temporal collisions and visual disorientation discloses uncanny continuities between different styles and time periods. The miraculous privileged moment

then, the prick of the "Punctum", comes when least expected. The Barthesian notion of the punctum of the photograph is the 'detail', in other words, a partial object. This punctum can potentially produce an effect on the spectator. It can be said then, that photographs do have an aura, the aura of lost time and lost memories because of the punctum.² Barthes states that the punctum is "that accident that bruises me, is poignant to me,"³ it is this element "which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, break (or punctuates) and pierces me."⁴ This idea of the punctum is not of form, but of intensity. The presence of the punctum changes me and it wounds me. And it is in the moment of recognising the punctum that I realise my own death.

*"It is Time, the lacerating emphasis of the noeme ("that-has-been")."*⁵

I cannot account for each object's fate, that the object a person once so preciously kept with him- or herself, has been discarded, left behind, or lost. I can but hope that this exchange of views contributes to elucidate the motivating principle of a collector, his or her fearfulness of his or her own death and the agitation that accompanies this anxiety, and his or her overwhelming compulsion to follow the traces of time, of photography, throughout its different arrangements.

*"Willem, soos U weet, mevrou, het alles opgetel wat hy sien lê het, altyd was sy sakke te klein, sy tas te swaar. My "ensiklopedie van eenmalighede," het hy sy versameling genoem. Alles waaraan jy raak, Kippelstein, verander jy in klokwerk, het hy dikwels gesê, en alles wat ék bymeakaarsprokkel, hang ek in my "baldakyn van verlore oomblikke." Kronos en Kairos is ons, twee gesigte van die tyd."*⁶

1 Roland Barthes uses the word Punctum, a Latin term that designates a wound or a prick, a mark made by a pointed instrument, but it also refers to the notion of punctuation: "these wounds are so many points" (Barthes, 2000: 27).

2 Barthes, 2000: 42, 43.

3 Barthes, 2000: 27.

4 Barthes, 2000: 26.

5 Barthes, 2000: 96.

6 Cited in Van Niekerk, 2009: 61. "Willem, as you know, m'am, would pick up everything he saw lying around, his pockets were always too small, his bag too heavy. My "encyclopedia of once-off's", he called his collection. Everything you touch, Kippelstein, you turn into clockwork, he'd often say, and everything I gather, I suspend to form my "canopy of lost moments." We are Chronos and Kairos, two faces of time." (English translation from Afrikaans – my own).



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

- *Falling into Gentle Ruin* -

PART ONE

1.2 MELANCHOLIA AND THE RUIN

With each of my journeys, when going out in search of these objects, it was very often not even a photograph, or the subject of the photograph, but my sense of photography's disappearance¹ as objects that aroused in me a melancholy for these photographs in a state of ruin.

What I infer from this notion of the ruin of the photograph is the fleeting images of what has disappeared, as well as the floating fragments of this history of disappearance. And we can hold onto these small remnants that were once much larger and more noticeable, these degenerate yet lingering memories, in order to ensure that these photographs don't become totally functionless in the course of the its ruin.

In this section, I reflect on the notion of melancholia and its significance in relation to my production. In order to do this, the notion of melancholia as articulated in psychoanalytic theory will be useful as a means to understand the dynamics within my methodology and representational strategy.

¹ Digitisation has altered the objectness of photographs; in the digital process photographs have lost their properties as objects. Here too, reproduction plays a role – because in reproduction the photograph loses both original significance as object and its function, whether pedagogic or veracious, among others.

In order to come to a comprehensive understanding on the nature of melancholia, it is necessary to be cognisant of the principle of mourning and to ascertain what differentiates the conventional idea of mourning from what is often frames as its 'pathological' twin, namely melancholy. Sigmund Freud articulates his understanding of melancholia in his text *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). Firstly, mourning can be described as a reaction to the loss of a loved person. At first, the subject refuses to acknowledge the lost object, to the point of having hallucinations about the persistent presence of the lost one. For the mourning subject, the world has become unyielding and trivial. But then, after a lapse of time, he or she overcomes the painful departure and any attachments to that object; and so the mourning subject gradually comes to terms with the reality of the loss of a loved one.¹

The definition of melancholia on the other hand, is highly indefinite. From a distance, melancholia may seem to have the same premise to mourning, in other words the loss of a real object followed by the denial of that particular loss. But, for the melancholic, the lost object has not actually died; it has been lost as an object of love.² The subject cannot differentiate between fantasy and reality, and so he or she preserves the beloved object within the ego. Freud suggests that the ego attempts to compensate for the loss, and subsequently the subject establishes a narcissistic identification with the abandoned object.³ Freud explains:

*"...In yet other cases one feels justified in concluding that a loss of the kind (as in mourning) has been experienced, but one cannot see clearly what has been lost, and may the more readily suppose that the patient too cannot consciously perceive what it is he has lost. This, indeed, might be so even when the patient was aware of the loss giving rise to the melancholia, that is, when he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in them."*⁴

This statement by Freud leads one to conclude that the loss that inspires melancholia points to a

1 Freud, 1957: 244-45.

2 Freud, 1957: 244.

3 Wald, 2007: 164.

4 Sigmund Freud, Cited in: Solomon-Godeau, 1998: 20.

loss with regard to the ego; it is the melancholic's ego that has been reduced on a grand scale. It is an unconscious loss, "...that which is lost is not abandoned; the grieving subject entombs the object within, neither relinquishing nor separating from it,"¹ which is very different from the actual object-loss of mourning.

*"The fact is, however, that when the work of mourning is completed the ego becomes free and uninhibited again... this would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious"*²

This concept of Melancholia can be clarified by following the French analyst Jacques Hassoun. In his text *The Cruelty of Depression* (1997), Hassoun defines melancholia as an experience of loss in the absence of the person's knowledge or fantasy of what is lost.³ The emphasis then, is placed on the emotional attachment to a significant other, and Hassoun stresses the absence of the knowledge about what is lost but cannot be claimed. In this way then, the subject does not know how to detach or let go of this loss, resulting in an anxiety that is without a cause but not without an object.⁴



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

1 Sigmund Freud, Cited in: Solomon-Godeau, 1998: 19.

2 Freud, 1957: 244-45.

3 Rauch, 1998: 117.

4 Ibid.

The melancholia that I experience in and through these found objects is related to something beyond the image. It cannot simply be the people, as I do not know them. It might be the deteriorating surface, the transience of the subjects and the wavering information, that which can never be fully revived. Even so, I would rather like to believe it to be something unknown, something unarticulated within myself that evokes this anxious affect of melancholia.

I obtain a fleeting sense of completion, but my desire remains fixated on the past. I compulsively repeat for the sake of bringing about the satisfaction of a merger between affect and signifying image. But I cannot detach from the nothingness, the anonymity, or the obscurity of these objects. I can only re-interpret, re-imagine and re-present the past so as to constructively communicate my melancholic state.

“The melancholy of ruins resides in the fact that it has become a monument to lost signification. To dream among ruins is to feel that our existence does not belong to us anymore and is already reunited with a vast oblivion.”¹

In some sense, I have started my practice by denying this loss; instead of reconnecting with an object in fantasy, I am left with a feeling of sadness and emptiness. This elegiac aspect of my production emanates from the sense of melancholy for images on the verge of being lost for all future time. André Habib suggests,

“The major characteristic of a ruined construction is its loss of function and original destination.”²

I see these photographs as more than objects; for me, they are ruins. And the ruination of hundreds of these photographic objects signifies photography’s diminution, at least as a practice that results in image-objects. I state this not only because digital photography has extended so extensively that the monotonous regularity with which a person can assert him- or herself in

1 Jean Starobinski, cited in Habib, 2006: 127.

2 Cited in Habib, 2006: 123.

today's photo-culture is reducing the subject, but also because the importance of analogue photography has diminished. Each photographic object with which I engage has become a trace; taken out of its regular function, it is stripped of what it was destined to do. I am concerned with this transience of photography: how the photographic object has not always already been a ruin, but because of the increased digitalization of photography as a practice, it has become bound with absence, with vacancy, and with loss.

Barthes ideas are further associated with this notion of loss and these traces of a lost subject. As mentioned earlier in this section, Barthes refers to this as the "that-has-been,"¹ and he considers this as photography's essence, or "noeme."² The photograph as a frozen moment in time epitomises the irretrievable loss of that moment, and its increasing distance from the ever-moving now. This sense of past is linked with death, with decay, and the interesting photograph provides the viewer with the testimony that the thing seen has been, that it is thus, and its attachment to death. As Freud pointed out,

*"One cannot fully imagine one's own death, but always remains a live spectator watching the event in imagination."*³

Everyone only dies once. And death will turn up. The ritual aspect to paging through photographs fuels this general compulsion to monitor one's perceptions of death. The repetitive viewing of pictures, whether these photographs are recovered objects, or if they originate from one's personal archive, erects one's own barricade against the reality of death. Having a picture in one's hand suggests a kind of ambiguous control over death; you stare at the photograph and you know that death has emerged and it is done.

"The image, then: this means 'of ruin' – composed of ruin, belonging to ruin, taking its point of departure from ruin, seeking to speak of ruin, and not only its own – but also 'the ruin of ruin,' the emergence and survival of an image that, telling us it can no

1 Barthes, 2000: 76-77.

2 Ibid.

3 Goldberg, 2005: 221

longer show anything, nevertheless shows and bears witness of what history has silenced, to what, no longer here, and arising from the darkest nights of memory, haunts us, and encourages us to remember the deaths and losses for which we remain, still today, responsible.”¹



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

The phenomenon that interests me is a sustained melancholy and loss that colour my body of work entitled *Falling into Gentle Ruin*. The loss expressed in these works manifest in many different objects, ranging from glass negatives, silver gelatin photographic objects, to celluloid film. There is a commonality that runs through much of it however, a fundamental similarity of approach that recurs with regularity throughout these pieces. The lack, or gaps, in these images are not static, but linked to a kind of narrative that makes it worthy of contemplation and representation. In some way, I undergo the process of melancholic incorporation, through which I attempt to physically incorporate these objects in the exhibition space. This incorporation can

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Cited in Cadava, 2001: 35.

be understood as a fantasy, a fantasy that poses itself as reality and which the viewer will then perceive as such.

The impulse to re-present these images perhaps started as an unconscious form of acting out the unresolved grief for the images lost. My work highlights how unconscious melancholic processes can also resist and infringe upon photographic norms; like a melancholic clinging to the lost object, through the device of a photographic image.

In many respects, my project is a melancholic one, melancholic in ways that only photography can be. Again, Barthes attributed the melancholic disposition to photography's static character – and also to its ghostly insistence on something that was: the that-has-been of photography.

It is important to note that my interest in the evocative power of photography lies deeply in the simple cues given by the photograph as object itself: past/present, positive/negative, inside/outside, unique/reproduction, subject/object and viewer/photographer. At this surface of the image, there is live evidence as well as the death of the referent, the suspension of time, and the binding past. There is something alluring about the materiality of the photographic object and holding that remnant, the remains of a mystical moment, in my hands. The photograph becomes a poignant reminder of the passing of time; it indicates that life outside continues, that time flows by, and that the captured object has slipped away. Photographs then, show and allow something of its nature to speak.

I am captivated by the image and the way in which the negative support (the photographic negative) echoes its form. This image of a double is not only reflexive; but it evokes the uncanny dimension of repetition. It enables me to engage with the halting of meaning, the continuous and the discontinuous, the interchange of more and less, or large and small, of essential and

¹ The assembly of collected items can be a systematically ordered grouping of natural objects, works of art, pieces of writing, or in my case, photographic objects.

unimportant, of sense and nonsense, the frozen and the mobile.

Some of these objects that exist in my collection adhere to a strip of celluloid film. I have the means to scan these digitally and manipulate them by using the software on my computer. However, I am drawn to the process of extracting an image in the darkroom; as you emit the light to go through the negative film, I direct my gaze to a small facet, I probe into its details, and then I reproduce that seemingly insignificant feature onto light sensitive paper. The suggestive, sometimes nostalgic beauty each negative provides pique my curiosity. I noticed strange details resulting from a long exposure, or scratches and effacements on the emulsion of the photographic negative. Following photography's expressive form, I vigorously drew out these details or marks even further. Loosened from its original context, the negatives transformed into something else – not necessarily rationally or systematically, but methodically and persistently. I continued employing a range of repeated actions; as details appeared to migrate across the photographic surface, I burned into the emulsion so as to discard extraneous details, leaving traces of the work's evolution.

I find this useful in leading the viewer to see the many ways in which photographic practices are as fluid as they are fixed. I recover these images and manipulate each object so that in it's suspended state it will evoke feelings of loss¹ and melancholy in the viewer, as they have done with me. The purpose of these images, however, is not to document a removal or an absence² per se. I formally arrange, repeat, and restore the narrative sequence within the traditional practice of still photography by making use of digital technologies. In turn, the familiar and recognisable turns unusual and disturbing, moments that evoke memories of something already seen arises as something uncanny or dreamlike.

Each photographic moment is simultaneously past, present and future. The photograph interrupts the movement of time in the form of a pause; it suspends and deranges time. The image then,

1 Loss: signalling the fact or process of losing something or someone. This alludes to misplacement as well as forgetting.

2 Absence: as in the state of being away from a place, or even a person. By this I also refer to unavailability, to nonexistence.

becomes exposed to the movement of its disappearance: to its ruin, to damage, to annihilation. The photograph can never simply be itself; it looks simultaneously backwards (to its making: photographed time) and forwards (to its dissolution: the time of the photograph). Every image then, is inherently an image of ruin; simultaneously constructed and effaced, incessantly vanishing. This testifies also to the disappearance of memory. We can, however, recollect the floating fragments; the ruins of an image, and temporarily rescue it from this disappearance. This process encourages the reader to recognise that the image, bearing several memories at once, is never closed.

Observing photography's history, it developed in an attempt to transform the instantaneous into the permanent. It reveals also the photograph as a medium of enlightenment as well as betrayal. This somewhat conflicted idea of photography exposes the vagaries of photographic meaning.

Photographic meaning is torn between the two poles of narrativity and stasis. Narrativity includes properties such as duration, movement, and inevitably a certain sense of plurality. Stasis, on the other hand, encompasses the freezing of time, the motionless image and instead of plurality, the fixed or repetitive motif. Narrativity can be regarded as an essential to the functioning of historical consciousness, while stasis is linked to the antihistorical.¹ I will now refer again to Barthes, who explored the photographic medium and its dependency on stasis. Barthes called this condition of photography its "Totality-of-Image",² which signifies the photograph and its achievement (through stasis) of the appearance of being complete or integral. But photographic meaning exceeds these said ideas; one can never confine the photographic medium to fixed grounds. The photograph always finds a way to uncannily exceed, erode and unfix static visual certainties.

What is more, when one takes the reality of time into consideration, we face a fascinating paradox. Photography is an art of the present, and at the same time photography always photographs

1 Baker, 1996: 73.

2 Barthes, 2000: 89-91.

what is already past.¹ The illogical conjunction of the here and the formerly is a type of consciousness that is of significance to photography. It is simultaneously too late and too early. The photographic object is conditional upon a lapse of time; the time of idle wandering, the time of discovery and the time of looking at the image, and the exhibition of these objects are set out by the time of labour. This time is not governed by movement or action, nor ordered by narration. This time emerges from its very own difference. When looking at an image, the viewer finds allure in the ways in which forms and spaces are inscribed in time. Before dissolving the appearance of a distance that separate each one of these images, the onlooker becomes involved in the dynamic between the moved image, the moving image, and the image in motion.



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

Both the time of the photograph and the time of the photographic object contributes to photography's precariousness. For one, the photograph conserves a particular moment when three-dimensional space becomes unified within a photograph. Long exposures convey a sense of arrested time, creating a play on the real and the artificial. Take for example *The Winter Garden Photograph* series from my body of work. The exposure time had in fact eliminated the person

¹ Once a photographer presses the shutter, the moment that plays out in front of him or her is gone. It has passed. We are left with the remains of that moment in the form of a photograph. But this photograph can never hold that time. It is a time that is passed, merely captured on the surface of a silver gelatine print.

beneath the hat; it elongated another woman's fingers; and it seemingly removed yet another woman's eyes.¹ This brings me to my second point: in said series we become aware of a physical disappearance. Purposefully effaced areas or scratches had removed emulsion from the negative. This contributes to the fact that celluloid is fallible, and moreover it serves as index to the fragile existence of the photograph as object.

Loaded with indeterminate time, these objects are not only of 'a time,' a past brought back to the present, but they also embody 'time,' a layering of times those objects have travelled, of which they are documents. The photograph might show reality, but in a past state. The photographs are spotted and faded with age; they bear witness to an expanded temporality. In its arrested state of being, the photograph provides the viewer evidence of existence; including both the photographer and the photographer's subject. It fulfils man's basic desire to withstand the body's decay, to give proof of one's life, and to seek immortality. I attempt to reintroduce to the present a past life that time has dismantled. Time becomes a mark of pain, something not only in the photograph but something on it.

The sense of preservation of time with its unexpected depths, faint or dramatic reflections, absent, displaced or exaggerated details, and sometimes the selectively mirrored surface, is evidence of the photograph's enigmatic nature. It indeed stops time. But what it holds in its stillness, and the manner in which it encompasses time, intensifies the act of recognition that in turn depends on the phenomenon of reappearance sometimes occurring in its ceaseless flux with disappearance.

"Thus, if disappearances of any given moment are a construction emerging from the debris of all that has previously appeared, it is understandable that this very construction may give birth to the idea that everything will one day be recognisable, and the flux of disappearance cease."²

1 This discussion will be continued in Part 2

2 Cited in Berger, 1985: 148, 149.

Photographs compel us to slow down our looking. Upon taking a photograph one realises that what you photograph will never be seen again, not by you or anybody else. Any image records an appearance that will disappear.¹ In the whole course of time past and time to come, this moment is unique: the last opportunity to photograph what will never again be visible, which has occurred once and which will never reoccur. These objects echo the continuous happening of things. They make visible the immeasurable sphere of time that separates the viewer from the object. Time was duration, or was rate of change, or it was the sum of all conceivable rates. It was seen, always, as linear and isotropic. Time, it was said, passed. Which looks, presently, like an inordinately euphemistic way of saying that *we* pass.² As Roland Barthes noted;

“What the Photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once: the Photograph mechanically repeats what could never be repeated existentially.”³

By photographing we embody the act of viewing. In this somewhat voyeuristic approach to observing the observer, one comes to possess a sense of seductive depth to photography – that image within the image gives away the moment of contemplation and thought stimulation preceding the click of the shutter. The photographs then, illuminate connections and prompts the viewer's understanding of the relationships between images. Loaded with possible fictions, the images read like portraits of the traces that missing people have left behind. We realise there is no actual human presence, as the persons in the photographs most probably have already passed on. What we see are objects and a general atmosphere that suggests life; a life imagined or maybe dreamed, but perhaps not lived.

Photographs make onlookers of us all, and at times, beholding a photograph, the viewer becomes caught up in the self-reflexive nature of the image.

1 Berger, 1985: 148.

2 What I intend by saying that we pass, is that as we look over past images of ourselves, we increasingly become aware of our own deaths.

3 Roland Barthes, cited in Putnam: 2001: 116.

“Because the faculty of sight is continuous, because visual categories remain constant, and because so many things appear to remain in place, one tends to forget that the visual is always the result of an unrepeatably, momentary encounter. Appearances at any given moment, are a construction emerging from the debris of everything which has previously appeared.”¹

In my work, I have dedicated myself to the photographic process because of its incredible depth of expression. A photograph is a construction, emerging from the debris of everything that has previously appeared. Photography communicates something of a specific moment and that moment's capacity to move; moving from the event to the memory of that event; as one forgets or as the surface of that photograph erodes; and how that memory grows more distant, eventually converted into a vague recollection. In an attempt to represent the photographic images in a manner that reflects my own perspective, I have traced the details, enlarged the negative, cropped and rotated the view. But because of the nature of the negative and the photographic process, there is never enough information to indefinitely zoom in and see what is hidden.² I am left with a grainy image so obscure that instead of coming closer to the event, it casts a shadow over it. One is left with something abstract; a mind-image of what one would imagine is beyond the grain. Considering this photograph with its illuminated areas and shadows, positive and negative spaces, visible scratches and its grainy quality, one contemplates each work according to the language of photography. The temporality of the ruined image – this dismantled time that overwhelms the present – abolishes the space between what was photographed and the image support (emulsion, paper). Everything suddenly appears on the same plane – the image, and the ruin.

The ruin breaks the spatial depth of the image, while inscribing on the surface of the photograph a temporal depth. As apparitions of ruins, these images are thus enhanced (rather than obscured) by their greyness, by coloration and dirt deposits, the scratches and colour blots that signal the

¹ Cited in Berger, 1985: 147.

² Following Michaelangelo Antonioni's "Blow-Up" (1966), where the main character repetitively enlarges the image so as to come closer to the event, only to distort and lose more information, hence moving further and further away.

passage of time and its ruinous effect. We witness the movement of the time of the image, this falling into complete oblivion, which bestows a melancholic depth to all the images that we view.

These images are all part of an aesthetic of ruin that is articulated between memory and oblivion. Each object has a life of its own, from which one is pushed out. Whether it is a person's purpose to collect, to arrange, manipulate, or to gaze, any individual will experience some level of exclusion from these objects. This scope of experimentation and interpretation of photo-ephemera can perhaps present photography as it has continued to mutate, as it forms our memories and our post-memories, as the image becomes re-enanted. It is this strange interchange between memory and oblivion, preservation and destruction, melancholia and death, presentation and re-presentation, which all these photographic installations I compose aim to express.



Photographs from the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* artist's book

- *Falling into Gentle Ruin* -

PART TWO

2.1 CONTEMPORARY ARTISTIC CONTEXT

*I*n this paper, I want to articulate my approach to both the medium of this project, as well as the nature of my process in making the works. In this section I hope to elucidate these points by making reference to the body of work *Falling into Gentle Ruin*. But first I will elaborate on three artists' work that has informed this project to a great degree: James Coleman, Tacita Dean, and Christian Boltanski.

Born in 1941, Ballaghaderren, Ireland, James Coleman lives and works in Dublin and Paris. Although Coleman has been representing Ireland for years (dating from the 1973 Paris Biennale), he has more recently revealed himself as an acclaimed artist on the international contemporary art scene. Working in both the photographic and cinematic medium, Coleman gives expression to the complex nature of experience. He accomplishes this by way of considering how we identify and create relationships to both the objective world, and with ourselves as social beings.¹

Following his interview with James Coleman, Richard Kearney brings this to light regarding his practice:

¹ Kearney, 1982: 128.

“The artist himself is ‘absent’ from the work; his own personality as ‘author’ is suppressed in the interests of the ‘text’ whose emphasis is on the active participation of the spectator.”¹

Anonymity strengthens Coleman’s sense of ‘objectivity’ and, based on these suggestions, it is safe to say that Coleman refrains from a didactic or unyielding practice. Instead, he strives to draw the viewer in and so inspire a dynamic participation with the work, from whence perceptual and psychological meanings emerge for an individual viewer. He would break a viewer’s habit of seeing by making use of endless repetition, integrating perceptual experience into everyday life, and changing patterns of sequences. One particular work, entitled *Slide Piece* (1973), reveals Coleman’s sensitivity towards the spectator. He engages the viewer in the work by directing him or her not to what they are experiencing, but how they are experiencing it.²



James Coleman, *Slide Piece* (1973), Video Projection, Installation View

Slide Piece is a static projected image of an empty city square in Milan.³ Upon entering the exhibition space, one hears the voice of a narrator, reciting accounts of different individuals’ descriptions of the said scene.⁴ Each voiced perspective is different; not one version seems to be

1 Cited in Kearny, 1982: 127.

2 Kearney, 1982: 127.

3 After moving from Ireland, the said artist lived and worked in Milan.

4 Clarke, 2007: 40.

more significant than the other and the projected image remains unchanged. The image is opaque in content, ultimately refusing to cohere. It almost seems that Coleman withholds the meaning of *Slide Piece*. On this maintenance of subjectivity in Coleman's work, Raymond Bellour has stated,

*"Meaning – constructed from a scintillation of possible meanings, endlessly torn and recombined – does not, properly speaking, exist."*¹

So it could also be that there is no meaning fixed to *Slide Piece*. Or perhaps the work's meaning is encased in the experience of the viewer, whose account is left in-between and over-lapping the recorded text. I find the manner in which Coleman makes the viewer mindful of the ways in which they invest objects with meaning significant. As Coleman himself states;

*"Narration is not intended to produce truth, through it may propose a form for conceiving or locating it. The narrative structure in my work questions linear sequence, and tries to create ambiguity between temporality and causality – to nudge events and states of feeling between ideas of the past and the possible."*²

Seeing, then, becomes interrelated in a complex web of knowledge; individual memory is inextricably bound up with one's personal and shared experience. Perceptual and psychological associations begin to emerge; the viewer becomes aware of him- or herself as a perceiving subjectivity, while simultaneously also being made conscious of the incompleteness of his or her own reading. These are all important facets of Coleman's oeuvre. The power of his work, along with its rhythms and repetitions, lies in highlighting this complex nature of experience.

I can also extend my observations to the work of Tacita Dean. Born in 1965, Canterbury, England, Dean is an artist who works in a variety of mediums. Her art is characterised by a unique sense of history, time and place. Similar to James Coleman, Dean relies on the sensibilities of the individual for her work to capture the truth of the moment.

1 Cited in Clarke, 2007: 41.

2 James Coleman, Cited in Kearney: 1982: 128.



Tacita Dean, *Floh* (2001), Artists book, Selection of images

Tacita Dean has compiled many projects from discarded images; turning abstraction or amnesia into becomingness, and seizing the last gasp of the photographic object as medium by recovering the incompleteness of photography's narrative. One such project, *Floh* (2001), is a book without words. It is compiled of visually associative images that Dean collected, over a span of seven years, during her visits to a variety of flea markets.

*"I do not want to give these images explanations, 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."*¹

Dean never had anything specific in mind while collecting these photographic objects. As she stumbled upon images, they appealed to her by chance. Had she not taken them in, these images would have been discarded. And considering that the printed photographic object has almost fallen into disuse, *Floh* communicates something about the medium of photography: that, to an increasing extent, digitalization renders analogue photography obsolete. On this notion of photography, Dean notes:

*"Photography is somehow an anachronism now. It is 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 that is very, very different... 'Photography: to draw with light.' It is not that anymore. It is electronic."*³

1 Quite fittingly, the German title *Floh* translates as "flea".

2 Tacita Dean, Cited in Godfrey, 2005: 92.

3 Tacita Dean, Cited in Godfrey, 2005: 90.

And so, these found photographic objects evoke a feeling of melancholy. Each image is incomplete in nature and the viewer remains unaware of the intention of the photographer, the biography of the subject in the photograph, or the history of the photographic object itself. Dean writes on obsolescence, stating that,

*"[Obsolescence] is a state of normality. Everything that excites me no longer functions in its own time. The one thing I have noticed is that so often I am attracted to things conceived in the decade of my birth. I court anachronism – things that were once futuristic but are now out of date – and I wonder if the objects and buildings I seek were ever, in fact, content in their own time, as if obsolescence was invited at their conception."*¹

I find Dean's desire to make practical use of these outdated objects valuable. To her, these objects act as something fantastic, something elusive. *Floh* plays around with the idea of the allegory of the artistic object, and this book is composed of photographs that are distinctly not false documents; loose thematic links are noticeable and one experiences the compulsion to take cues from the visual information available. In this way, *Floh* develops in the mind of the viewer, who completes an imaginative description of the photographs. This work then, is inevitably related to one's personal experiences and memories; when a particular sequence is arranged, another 'theme' emerges. This recurring process sets in motion a narrative that oscillates between fact and fiction, history and myth, and so also reality and illusion.

Another example of Tacita Dean's process is evident in the series entitled *Russian Ending* (2002). Dean's inspiration for this work came about when Danish printer Niels Borch Jensen² shared with Dean an amusing story about the Danish film industry. At the beginning of the 20th century, the filmmakers of Denmark were prescribed to make two different endings to each film. This transpired largely because Russian audiences had a deep-seated aversion to most happy endings, whilst the American market was partial to such euphoric endings. In view of this

1 Tacita Dean, Cited in Newman, 2003: 17.

2 This series was also printed by Niels Borg Jensen in Copenhagen.

prerequisite, endings where the story built up to a tragedy became known as a "Russian Ending."¹

This anecdote prompted Dean to go out to flea markets and, in the manner of *Floh*, search for images. In both *Floh* and *Russian Ending* Dean's trips to the flea markets were intentional; but when compiling *Floh*, the photographs had to find her, so to speak. *Russian Ending*, on the other hand, is comprised of images found in a more directed manner. Dean specifically looked for images of accidents and catastrophes, and she eventually found a selection of postcards that resembled this theme. These photographic objects, onto which Dean made tiny notations in white, act as the substance for *Russian Ending*. By enlarging the selected postcards to several times their original size and transposing them to photogravures,² Dean transformed these scenes into a series of twenty varying Russian Endings. Some titles for these individual scenes (*Death of the Priest* or *La Bataille d'Arras*) were invented and applied by Dean, while other titles (*Ballon des Aréostiers de Campagne*, *Erinnerung aus dem Weltkrieg*, or *The Wrecking of the Ngahere*, for instance) were taken from the inscriptions on the postcards themselves.



Tacita Dean, *Russian Ending* (2002), Portfolio of 20 Photogravures on Hahnemühle Bütten 300 gr. paper, 54 x 79,4cm (*Death of the Priest* & *La Bataille d'Arras*)

¹ Vischer & Friedl, 2006: 25. I.e. in all contexts "sad endings" can be referenced as Russian Endings; this term is not necessarily connected to specific films, it has been absorbed by pop culture etc.

² Photogravure is an intaglio printmaking or photo-mechanical process whereby a copper plate is coated with a light-sensitive gelatin tissue which had been exposed to a film positive, and then etched, resulting in a high quality intaglio print that can reproduce the detail and continuous tones of a photograph.



Tacita Dean, *Russian Ending* (2002), Portfolio of 20 Photogravures on Hahnemühle Bütten 300 gr. paper, 54 x 79,4cm
(*Ballon des Aréostiers de Campagne*, *Erinnerung aus dem Weltkrieg*, & *The Wrecking of the Ngalhere*)

The third and final artist I shall discuss is Christian Boltanski. Boltanski was born in 1944, Paris, France and he lives and works in Malakoff, France. From 1970 Boltanski has employed a range of mixed media installations with photography and light, touching on the elusive concept of 'reality.'

In order to suggest a concept of reality that is ambiguous and at times indefinable, and to explore the impenetrable mysteries of the normal, Christian Boltanski includes personal objects in his installations. This becomes more pronounced in each of his inventories of everyday things obsolete and abandoned: threadbare underclothing, aged photographs, furniture, dog-eared books, appliances, and even furniture. In many of his inventories he makes use of 'fake' photographs to tell what are supposedly 'true' stories, or the other way around. Contexts change either way, and after the transformation of the subject into the object, the objects assume a magical value. By constructing false biographies, he affirms the absurd and pointless nature of the biographical project.

Boltanski's work imparts an evocative account of a past that is clear only through the yielding lens of memory. His work expresses a consciousness, a remembering: we do not fear forgetting; we fear the uncertainty of memory. Memory, in a sense, constitutes an anecdote to despair. This not only corresponds to the "that-has-been" notion related to photography, but also an image's

capacity to arouse feelings of melancholia.

One example of Boltanski's works is *The Missing House* (1990). This site-specific installation consists of a series of plaques mounted on the reconstructed walls of a building in the former East Berlin, which was destroyed in the 1945 bombings. These plaques indicate the family name, profession and the period of residency of each tenant who had lived in the bombed out apartments. Whilst this exhibition was running, Boltanski installed a second component on the grounds of the also destroyed *Berliner Gewerbe Ausstellung*,¹ in the former West Berlin. There, Boltanski placed a number of display cases, filled with various forms of archival documentation. These related to the building's residents, of whom many were Jews, and evicted, deported by the time of the bombings. Therefore, many of the tenants at the time of the bombings were German Aryans. Boltanski writes, saying that

*"Much of my early work is about the Holocaust. But I would never have spoken about it in these terms, or pronounced that word. Early pieces...deal with the Holocaust, but the subject matter is displaced and hidden. I could only begin talking about it much later."*²

This abovementioned information was revealed to Boltanski only after he commenced the project. Inevitably, this raises some important questions concerning how Boltanski's work should be interpreted. His whole oeuvre is one of contradictions, and to some extent we can look at *The Missing House* in order to contextualise Boltanski's formations that inform his production.

Boltanski's installations speak of the significance and the futility of memory. He removes the divide between what the memory accomplishes and what recollection is capable of feeling in terms of fragility and mourning.

1 Solomon-Godeau, 1998: 3 [This was an exhibition space for arts and crafts].

2 Solomon-Godeau, 1998: 3.

“Christian Boltanski’s art expands, liquid-like, in subjective memories, modifying the truth and the conditioning of time. This, and only this, is the key to its interpretation.”¹



Christian Boltanski, *Missing House* (1990), Mixed Media Installation, Dimensions Variable

By engaging in a nostalgic play of displacement, Boltanski rearranges the memories (or the photographs, both of which were not his own) in a plausible order.² This expresses a strong link between the object and the passing moment; the altered surface which then reconstitutes the image in its two-dimensional state. Boltanski also re-photographed images; the faces emerging from the unfocused portraits, evidently meditating on the transition of a person from subject to object, from life lived to death. On this seemingly inexorable link between time and death, Ralf Beil states:

“There’s only one thing stronger than we are, and that’s the eternal progression of time which never stops and inevitably leads to death.”³

1 Cited in Eccher, 1997: 21.

2 See *Les Suisses Morts*, 1991, Mixed Media, Variable dimensions, Installation Marian Goodman Gallery, NY (Troisi, 2001: 98).

3 Cited in Beil, 2007: 65.

Even when the person photographed is still living, that moment when she or he was (the moment imaged in the photograph), has forever vanished. Strictly speaking, the person who has been photographed – not the total person, who is an effect of time – is dead: "dead for having been seen," as suggested by Dubois.¹ But, the dead are only dead in so far as they continue to exist in the hearts of the surviving. This means that, because of the unforgiving pushing of time, you die not once but twice; physical death is followed by the death of memory.



Christian Boltanski, *Les Suisses Morts* (1991), Mixed Media Installation, Dimensions Variable

As a means to reveal the muted traces of the fragile passing of time, Boltanski's stages his works in semi darkness.² He employs a practice of hiding and showing at the same time; the need to remove from view the image one wishes to preserve. In this relic-like fragmentation he expresses something general and objective in all of his works; one becomes aware of the terror of nothingness, the ultimate sense of passing, the torment of memory, and the forgetting of what reality is.

Boltanski constantly moves across the space separating loss and death; hovering between the ephemeral moment which marks its recording and the threshold of time from which it looks out

¹ Cited in Dubois: 1983: 89.

² To accommodate the warm and cold lighting interchanges in his displays, Boltanski chooses the catacomb-like cellar, rather than the upper storeys, to exhibit his work.

into the present. This space where more intensive life may develop presents the possibility of an imaginative visibility.¹

“I think what I was trying to do in my work was to take strange objects – objects that we know have been used for something although we don’t know exactly for what – and show their strangeness. It has to do with individual mythology. The objects I display come from my own mythology; most of these things are now dead and impossible to understand. They might be insignificant things, or just simple or fragile, but people looking at them can imagine that they were once useful for something.”²

Effacements and scratches on the photographic surface, and even some enlargements of areas, leave the viewer with a strange sense of discomfort; the ‘real’ is disrupted.³ We become aware of the collapse of imagination, that one cannot help but imagine your own death, the decay of the memory of you, and your own disintegrating memory. Boltanski explains,

“I provide the stimulus, and the observer reacts in accordance with all of his past, his deepest experiences, turning it into something else. In the end what we see is always something extremely personal. The most important factor for me in art is that every artist is basically saying something about himself. Everyone tells their own story, but it’s a tale which at best will become someone else’s story. That’s why the message cannot be too precise; otherwise it is not possible to project.”⁴

This melancholic profundity of any image we catch sight of is unveiled by the ruin. The physical destruction of disintegration of something operates on traces because these traces afford a

¹ Everyone can recognise something of his or her own self when viewing the something similar to one of Boltanski’s installations.

² Christian Boltanski, Cited in Didier (Eds et al), 1997: 17, 19.

³ This popular acceptance of the image as ‘real’ and ‘true,’ that the photograph literally contains some aspect of the referent, is due to the mechanical and chemical process of photography “in Photography I can never deny that the thing has been there” (cited in Barthes, 2000: 76). See my own version of *The Winter Garden* (2011), a series of silver gelatin prints.

⁴ Christian Boltanski, Cited in Spies, 2007: 33.

measure of *what has been* lost. From this view one can infer that fragments of rediscovered photographs, derelict and anonymous, are mnemonic traces of forgetting. I do not ideate that it is by our imagination that we complete what is lacking from totality; it is rather the lack itself that constitutes the image.

As with the works of Coleman and Dean, the viewer recognises something in these found and displayed objects. Rather than simply being alienated by the image's difference or strangeness, the viewer recognises something in this object's strangeness. This is a strangeness that is both complex and mysterious. I relate to these strategies of the aforementioned artists: the manner in which Boltanski draws on melancholia when establishing a project, Dean's methodology of collecting, and Coleman's process of employing the uncanny dimension of repetition. The self-reflexive nature of these artists' work is piqued by the continuity and expansion of the imagination it elicits, by the nostalgic desire to invest the series with the ambience of the sacred or ritualistic, and then also the power one, as artist, has to reconstruct whole situations.

These various examples indicate the widespread use of the found photograph in different contemporary projects. For these artists the found photograph is more than just that. It is void of any kind of textual accompaniment. The artist can then either appropriate images so as to change their established signification, or they can merely present the subject as irretrievable; what you see is what you see.

- *Falling into Gentle Ruin* -

PART TWO

2.1 THE BODY OF WORK "FALLING INTO GENTLE RUIN"

The body of work I have completed, drawing on my collection of photographs, is more representative in nature than it is definitive. Following Putnam, my collection can also be described as one where the subject matter is "both eclectic and personal, bound up with memory and imagination, rather than sheer calculated order and selection."¹ One can consider collecting then, as a form of memory. Walter Benjamin states that:

*"Every passion borders on the chaotic, but the collector's passion borders on the chaos of memories."*²

With reference to most amateur photographers and the normative use of photography, the value in a photograph lies in its function as a memory record. When memory falters, the photograph is there to hold witness of that captured moment. But when it comes to the notion of memory, the images in my collection came into being as seemingly reliable documentation: they are bound in the emulsion, but also vulnerable because of it. There is a limit to the amount of information that can be held in the photographic image, not only metaphorically, but also technologically. The film is vulnerable to being scratched, susceptible to degrading and having chemical interference. In order to draw attention to the fragility of the photographic object, I adapt and arrange them

¹ Cited in Putnam, 2001: 12.

² Walter Benjamin, cited in Putnam, 2001: 12.

before I bring them to the public eye. I include the physical photographs, slides, and negatives. I ask the viewer to consider that they have a history and they have an end. They are slowly disappearing: this is the falling into gentle ruin.

I extend this notion of 'falling into gentle ruin' by employing different strategies. I make connections (juxtapositions, if you will), within the differences, echoes, slight changes of repetitions, the presences and absences, as well as the revealed and concealed. The images conjured up in the photographic works and the two video pieces are meditative contemplations of curious details and tableaux rather than exact narratives and factual accounts. These works linger in a suspension of certainty and perpetuate a sense of disorientation.



Two Women; One Woman Twice (2010-11), Video still

The sense of disorientation as fragmentary objects seem to scatter and disappear is rather pronounced in *The Winter Garden Photograph* series. This series came into being some time in 2010. Rummaging about in one of my favourite haunts for material to work with, I found a large format negative of a garden party. A couple of months later, in the same second-hand store, I came across a similar negative. Back at my studio, I placed this newly acquired negative beside

the one found nearly eleven months before. To my surprise, these were two negatives representing one event. I do not dismiss the notion that the shop assistant might have kept some stock in the storeroom, and once stock was low, perhaps only then took it to the display area. But I stay true to that feeling of mild astonishment, that unexpected moment of realising the connection of the second find.



The Winter Garden Photograph (2010-11), Original Images

It was only early in 2011 that I produced a series of five considerably large photographs from these two large-format negatives. These photographs, their originals exposed, burned and developed in the darkroom, to me prompt a kind of curiosity and aesthetic emotion. Looking closely at each photograph in *The Winter Garden Photograph* series, one can make out a woman with seemingly erased eyes staring straight ahead at the viewer; the detail of a table behind a blurry hand holding a teacup; a woman's elongated fingers, holding down her hat in a gracious manner; a grainy image of a man obscured by scratches that effaced the emulsion off the negative. Finally one identifies a hat – more precisely a white hat against a black background – apparently hanging mid-air. The subtle variation of black and grey and the simplicity of the subject matter purposely shroud associations to alternative art-historical sources. In the darkness the viewer is left to discern independently what defines each photograph – it defines the time of the photograph, and then also the time of the photograph's making, in other words the length of exposure.



The Winter Garden Photograph I-V (2010-11), Black and White Photographic Prints, 100 x 80cm

Only after this series was produced did I come to realise that my practice is not only on the subject of photography. It is also, (to take as example the image with the floating hat) the *subject* as a *hat-being-looked-at*. It refers back to a much previous experience of looking – farther than the viewer gazing at the photograph, beyond myself as artist intently inspecting each detail – as far as the photographer who clicked the shutter and the subject who looked into the lens. This one series consists of so many assembled moments that it constitutes a totality rather than the fragment, contrary to the seeming instantaneousness of its making.

Each object in my collection is charged with an ethereal quality – at once delicate and unsettling – a place of stimulation and inspiration that has many parallels with and influence on past, present, and future. My attempt to imaginatively manipulate and transform these images allows the images to speak for themselves rather than divulge the didactic function of photography. It is not my intention to over-interpret, but to prompt questions rather than give answers. I aim to arouse the viewer's imagination; allowing them to construct imaginative accounts of what has taken place, or possibly to relive my experience of coming across these images: each moment an enchanted discovery.

The euphoria that sweeps over me as I discover two images (or more) of the same event is mystifying. In a similar way to *The Winter Garden Photograph* series where I found great

delight in uncovering unnoticed details, I completed a diptych: *The Woman in White I and II*. This work was produced after undergoing a series of sessions of exposing and developing various photopositive slides that represent the same event. I decided on two components that feature the subjects in a thought-provoking way. The selected detail again features the notion of a hat-as-subject, which conveniently aligns with the previous discussion on *The Winter Garden Photograph* series.

The two images give the impression that it is from the same viewpoint, yet the displacement of the subjects in the photograph proves otherwise. You notice more than one woman in white – but it is for the viewer to decide which woman in white is connected to the title. I re-presented the two original found slides in an altered form, and the final black and white photographic prints function as an integral part of an ongoing inquiry into re-presentation, so to speak. The work's final form then, evokes a consciousness to the active participation in looking. The viewer stands in front of the diptych, gazing onto the backs of the subjects in the two images. The subjects are also onlookers, absorbed by the actual happening of that moment. As a result, the viewer plays a significant role in this interaction between looking, observing, and to some degree, beholding the different stages of contemplation that I engage in as artist.



The Woman in White I & II (2011), Black and White Diptych on Hahnemühle Paper, 55 x 55cm

The Woman in White is an attempt towards permitting the subjects in the diptych a power of expression: to speak to the people before the images. The camera's capacity to make people enter images both technically and psychologically rests on the conventions of re-presentation; this conventional correspondence between those in the image, and those standing before the images, establishes that the people in them represent the people before them. The progression from clicking the shutter and processing the photographic positive slide, to exposing its negative in the darkroom and developing details from these negatives, reduces the subject to the simplest editing procedure and to the continuous flow of time itself.

Breaking apart the idea of linear time and replacing it with repetitions, managing to cut through the constant driving pressures of 'real time', allows one to splice sequences together along another axis of time. This might reduce the legitimacy of the image as historical document, but it dissolves and reinterprets fragile moments.

An appropriate example from *Falling into Gentle Ruin* would be the video piece entitled *Box*, in which cinematic illusions are interrogated. The video was created from scans of sixteen medium-format negatives of a boxing scene. Truth be told, only fifteen of these images portray this series of boxing matches. I found amongst the bulk of negatives one single negative, in the same format, which depicted a couple of young girls on their knees, praying. A sense of duty to remain true that moment of surprise urged me to include this coincidental narrative interruption in the video piece.



Box (2010-11), Video Still

The video piece does not serve to link the frames; the images do not follow some literal or chronological order. They repeat, skip around, and dilate the movements of the boxing match so that *Box* seems to have no beginning or end. All of its moments are decomposed.

"What counts on the contrary is the interstice between images," Gilles Deleuze writes, "between two images: a spacing which means that each image is plucked from the void and falls back into it".¹ The frames allow for a literal reshuffling of the scene as perceived cinematically, broken by the single image of the praying women, and so it draws the observer's attention to recognise the strange and radical beauty of each frame and what it displays.

Another work entitled *What Remains*, consists of a display case and twenty-three repeating photographs of a single building. These objects are displayed in episodes, so to speak, in order to illustrate the story behind this collection of photographs. These objects found their way into my collection in a very peculiar manner. It started in 2010; I was rummaging through a box of images, where I found about seven identical photographs of this one, single building. I purchased the photographs and they lay in my letterbox a rather long time. A few months later, I came round to the same store a second time. To my surprise, I found another set of these photographs of that one, single building. It dawned on me that these photographs reflect certain actions that put forward a number of questions: when were these photographs taken, or more importantly, when was each photograph produced, and why so many of this one single subject matter? Why this building?



What Remains (2010-11), Kiaat and 23 Found Photographs, Display detail, 210 x 14 x 20cm

¹ Cited in Deleuze, 1989: 179.

Upon returning home, I laid the newly acquired as well as the old batch of photographs out on the floor. I was intrigued because, as both sets held this same subject, the tonal quality, the state, and the condition of each individual surface was very dissimilar. I did not know what to do with these images, so I put them, along with the newly acquired images, back in the letterbox.

It was only a few weeks later, when I returned to the store to establish whether I got hold of every last image, and then finding even more of them, that I decided to collate these objects into a work. These photographs become endowed with a whole new aesthetic structure. I display the episodes in a completely different way as compared to when they were discovered. Not only does the display case frame these subjects, but also they are visible all together; calling on the observer to recognise the strange beauty of the cast-off materials. The piece is a reinterpretation of the preceding events, and it dissolves the idea of a normative and linear narrative.



When it Falls (2010-11), Photographic Prints, found Magic Lantern Glass slides, Light box, Kiaat wood, 60 x 60cm & 60 x 80cm

I have made use of various methodologies to portray the excitement and the mysterious, or even just a detail that attracted my attention. This awareness of looking is echoed in yet another diptych entitled *When it Falls*. This work holds two large photographic images, digitally printed from Magic Lantern glass slides. The actual objects are positioned in a light-box, and these backlit

objects rest within the larger frames. Through this form of presentation, the viewer cannot witness the whole all at once; each glass object interrupts the continuous flow of the larger, static frame. Like a butterfly under glass on a pin, or a precious gem, each glass slide is isolated from its original context. By necessity the abandoned objects exist as a function of individual memory, while the photographic prints produce a sort of post-memory. The first of the diptych depicts a woman looking onto her hands. As a viewer's eyes wander from her expression to her hands, from object to reproduction, he or she would notice details in the magic lantern slide that are imperceptible in the photographic print, and vice versa. The second of this diptych represents an explosion. Expecting the slide to illustrate the same event (on the basis of the previous work), the viewer becomes aware that the slide in fact represents a different moment. With the similar tonal ranges – in photograph and slide – the viewer can connect these two images, moving back and forth and identifying relationships between the two. To some extent the photographic print becomes an inversion of the magic lantern slide, and one is left with a frame that is no longer motionless, but wandering. As respective observers identify with the photographic object, they become both voyeurs and participants in this process – and so the work is recomposed. And in this way then, the work comes alive within the bounds of this dialogue between the object and the reproduction.



Untitled (Two Victorian Ladies) (2011), Photographic Print, Light box, found Glass Negative, 80 x 60cm

The single work *Untitled (Two Victorian Ladies)* also corresponds to this interchange of the found photographic object and its re-presentation. This work ventures to shift the viewer's normative reference to a negative and positive. In *Untitled (Two Victorian Ladies)*, the

positive image is partly concealed from direct viewing, and the glass negative is displayed in the foreground for the viewer to inspect closely. One has to look through the glass negative to see the reproduction, and one can never isolate the one from the other. The viewer alternates from object to reproduction repeatedly, uncovering unnoticed details and participating again in this act of looking and comparing, similar to the previously discussed work, *When it Falls*.

As a part of *Falling into Gentle Ruin*, I produced a final work entitled *Hand on Hand; On a Cold Hand*. A couple of glass negatives, of which the surfaces are degraded, scratched and faded, inspired this photographic series. The process again resembles that of *The Winter Garden Photograph* series: as I worked, I methodically transformed the objects into something else; I scanned, developed in the darkroom, rescanned, layered, and then pieced together the separate sections. I started with an object, and I ended with an object; where the process in-between altered the object's nature and definition. The three photographs reflect the process as I respond to what I see; moving and repeating, and I recombine these elements in a number of ways. This repetitive process affirms the notion of re-presentation; taking the original apart and assembling it in my own way. It not only becomes a way for me to reconsider the technology of the objects' manufacture; the time of it's making, but also ultimately re-imagining the physical bodies and the time and space in which these individuals in the images operated.



Hand on hand; On a cold hand (2011), Photographic Prints, 80 x 60cm

I have employed a different kind of looking when it comes to *Hand on Hand; On a Cold Hand*. The original objects are not exhibited alongside the final photographic prints as with *When it Falls*; the objects are present in the reading room adjacent to the exhibition space. Upon closer inspection of these objects, one comes to notice the loss or absence of information that creates the impression that these objects are altogether ephemeral. Some viewers might even experience a sharp pang of regret or sadness at no longer being able to make out some features of the women depicted on these glass negatives.

Functioning as an extension of this state of mind the final photographic images, which are exhibited in the gallery space, accentuate the anonymity of the individuals. The surface quality and the process of abstraction removes the element of recognition; the figures in the images become nebulous and ghostlike, articulating the faint traces of each object's ruination.

These descriptions so far should clarify the diversity of subject matter, the arrangement of images and the mode of their reproduction in my body of work. The particular character of my treatment of photography – so decidedly outside the conventions or traditions of photography – aims to communicate the idea of a forgotten reality, one where the viewer is an agent on the path of memory.

The structure of the exhibition takes form as reference to familiar collecting and viewing practices. As a constitutive element of this particular form of production, a reading room next to the exhibition space has been installed for the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* exhibition. This separate room, where the wood encasings and platforms becomes a feature, reminds one of a library or a museum display. It thus serves as an important marker to the idea of a collection.

Along with the *What Remains* display cabinet, light boxes in drawers reveal some additional magic lantern slides. Glass negatives are displayed and the stockpile of found photographs are bound together and at hand to inspect. A manual projector displays some photopositive slides, and the viewer can change the slides in the projector, thumb through the found photographs, attentively view the video piece *Box*, and leisurely page through the edition of

Falling into Gentle Ruin artist's books. Inside this book is a large selection of photographs, all found in second hand stores and flea markets in and around cities in South Africa, over a five to seven year period. Although this book is not completely void of text, I have selected the images to follow one another in a rather associative flow. Very few spreads contain text, and without being entirely didactic in nature, these phrases impart clues to the reader with regard to details in a specific photograph that caught my attention as the collector. Many of these images are doubles; some merely resemble each other, while a select few images were starkly juxtaposed with others. With no evidence as to where the images were found, in what era they were produced, or who these subjects might be; the photographs remain anonymous and silent.



Photographs and slides from *Falling into Gentle Ruin* collection

The reading room installation not only brings material form to my collection I have described thus far, but it also puts the viewer in different situations of encounter. This intimate and tightly packed space contrasts with the rather large and spacious space where the framed works are exhibited.



Photographs and magic lantern slides from *Falling into Gentle Ruin* collection

As the viewer looks at a photograph of an anonymous stranger, even though the photograph has nothing to do with personal memory or knowledge, it inevitably becomes part of the viewer's memory because it triggers a memory of a moment he or she might have seen or experienced before. A specific image in the exhibition space might have an impact on the viewer, and he or she might not fully know whether they recall it from the objects in the reading room, or if it elicits a neglected memory. I have restaged the possibility for someone to experience that moment of melancholy. And so he or she enters the viewing room again, rifling through sets and sets of images in search of that one vanishing image. Driven towards an ongoing search, the viewer then re-enacts my pursuit; anticipating the next beautiful, absurd, even uncanny snapshot to hold and make sense of, with the hope to part with his or her personal feelings of solitude that resonate off each object's surface.



Photographs from *Falling into Gentle Ruin* collection

- *Falling into Gentle Ruin* -

CONCLUSION

*T*hrough this research I hope to have unravelled the thought processes behind my obsession with collecting abandoned photographic objects. The theoretical structures around photography, as well as the scope of contemporary artistic practice, have guided me to contextualise my production. I have related my own fascination with these objects, the melancholic depth to each and every one of the images, as well as presented an extensive account for my methodology. The works produced for the *Falling into Gentle Ruin* exhibition gives form to my concerns, and these works are all part of an aesthetic of ruin that is articulated between memory and oblivion.

Whether it is a person's purpose to collect, create, arrange, manipulate, gaze, or perform a formal investigation into the photographic medium, this scope of experimentation and interpretation of photo-ephemera perhaps presents photography as it has continued to change in nature from analogue to digital, as it still forms our memories and our post-memories, and as the image forms part of a re-enchanted and numinous space. My concern with photographic practices has remained loyal to more than one of the above-mentioned renditions. I have created photographs, appropriated photographs, and I have followed an extensive observation of this imaginative medium.

Much of my practice relies on chance and consequence, motion and stasis, negotiation and

appropriation; but it nonetheless generates a production that I find compelling. It resonates from both the conscious and unconscious. My ways of dealing with each object, the strategies I employ to each and every piece of ruin, produces some sense of wonder that finds its existence beyond the confines of traditional photography. It resonates from both the conscious and unconscious. My ways of dealing with each object, the strategies I employ to each and every piece of ruin, produces some sense of wonder that finds its existence beyond the confines of traditional photography.

In my re-presentations of my photographic collection, the possibility of memory as stable and reliable is disrupted; instead, memory has to some extent become untameable and chaotic. Through the workings of this photographic medium, we have confronted the difficulty of memory; that a personal memory can no longer be trusted, that impressions of life – seemingly constant and dependable – has begun to slip.

These precious objects that I have accumulated, these images taken mostly by amateur photographers, are records of moments. They bear witness to a kind of photography that is both poignant and banal. The subject in the photograph can be blurry or well composed and the photographic object itself can bear marks of love or it can contain scratches of hatred. It is this strange uncanniness of photography, this physical link between object and image, this indexical character of photography, which has guided me to re-present the collection, to disrupt the possibility of memory, and allow this memory to become untameable and chaotic.

Digitization has afforded us an efficient way of archiving of images. Yet it seems that digitization has disturbed and altered the flow of photography. The contemporary time of digital technology has divested the photographic signifier of its referential ground; the traditional idea of 'a photograph' no longer constitutes an image to be bound by celluloid film. Photographs rarely exist as objects; they have become virtual images, images that arise from digitisation and no longer exist physically. Any image can be erased with the click of a button; we no longer need to print out photographs, whether they are remarkable, adequate, or amateurish. Only one or two exceptional photographs come to exist as photographic objects. In point of fact, the notion of a found

photograph is growing extinct and the romantic idea of the accidental find is rapidly vanishing. These grounds leave me, in some sense, desperately hanging onto the past and it is productions like my own, which attempt to augment the almost-lost dominions of photography.

The images I choose to re-present all elicit a sense of distance, of radical difference. I restore this distance, I amplify this difference, and I seize upon something obscure, something bizarre even, something that becomes oddly expressive. The staged and manipulated photograph could be the source of a new melancholy of photography, both of its time, of its archive. It is this interchange between memory and oblivion, preservation and destruction, presentation and re-presentation, which all these photographic works I compose tend to express. But I cannot separate myself from the anonymity or the obscurity of these objects. I invest these objects with a re-imagined past; I re-present the object so as to constructively impart my melancholic state for these objects falling into oblivion. Each one's unexpected survival, its marvellous transformation, has infused into it a power, a regenerated authority so to speak. It has recovered the visual power to move and to echo.

I hope that this text has successfully illuminated the conditions of *Falling into Gentle Ruin's* making, the appropriation and the circumstances in which each work has come to be displayed. Also, I hope to have achieved to illuminate and restore the tangibility of photography's margins, which enabled the objects to come into being in the first place. This body of work is one that is in motion; I will continue rescuing these threatened and out-of-place objects. I still encounter a visual stimulation upon stumbling upon neglected photographic objects. I still hear the voices of the dead subjects weeping, chanting, and calling onto me to give them another life before they are forever silenced. Even so, I realise that there will come a day where there will be a loss of the photographic object, and a loss of the lost.

University of Cape Town

- *Falling into Gentle Ruin* -

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University of Cape Town