Wolfgang Tillmans *Lighter*

Hamburger Bahnhof—(Museum fur Gegenwart, Berlin)

TOP PICK IN BOTH ARTFORUM AND FRIEZE "BEST OF 2008"

As seen in Frieze, January 2009

Gigiotto Del Vicchio

Wolfgang Tillmans solo show at the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin was great. A long sequence of emotions and a great number of works of unflinching intensity, this was the total vision of a total artist - the last of the Romantics. The show confirmed almost definitively who it is, today, that uses and understands images in all their possible nuances, citing poetry, reality, imagination, knowledge and background. Tillmans is not just a photographer: he is a complete artist. 'Lighter' proved this, creating a unique and excellently constructed itinerary, confirming his status not only as a major artist but a cultural beacon. Other shows: Tris Vonna-Michell at Kunsthalle Zurich: Alexander Rodchenko at Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin: R. Buckminster Fuller at the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; Marc Camille Chaimowicz (in collaboration with Alexis Vaillant) at de Appel, Amsterdam; Rivane Neuenschwander at the South London Gallery.

Lizzie Carey-Thomas

The year opened magnificently with Frances Stark at greengrassi, London. Wolfgang Tillmans' retrospective 'Lighter' at Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, reminded me why he has many imitators but no one else comes close. Also, Richard Wilson's mini survey at The Grey Gallery, Edinburgh, along with his spinning architectural intervention for the Liverpool Biennial International 08 Turning the Place Over (2007).

Beatrix Ruf

Wolfgang Tillmans' solo show, which made use of the Riek Hallen of Berlin's Hamburger Bahnhof, was an absolute highlight of 2008, as was the accompanying catalogue, which, like most of Tillmans' books, was designed by the artist himself. Tillmans is known for his outstanding ability to use space, and he managed to energize this endless sequence of rooms with a survey of works spanning his entire career, from wall pieces comprised of groups of multi-sized images to large-scale abstracts, from archives in vitrines to politically and sociologically activated sets of images.

> Wolfgang Tillmans' 'Lighter' at Hamburger Bahnhof was the total vision of a total artist - the last of the Romantics.
> *Gigiotto Del Vecchio*

As seen in Artforum, December 2008

Matthew Higgs

6 **"Wolfgang Tillmans: Lighter"** **(Hamburger Bahnhof-Museum fur Gegenwart, Berlin)** This sprawling solo exhibition was an exhaustive and exhilarating journey through more than two decades of Tillmans's images. Having worked in- as well as combinedvirtually every idiom of photography, including documentary, fashion, editorial, and fine art, Tillmans evidently has not lost his curiosity and genuine empathy for the world around him. Even the show's epic scale both mirrored and amplified the persistent inclusiveness of this most generous and self-consciously mercurial artist.

Bob Nickas

3 **"Wolfgang Tillmans: Lighter"** **(Hamburger Bahnhof-Museum fur Gegenwart, Berlin)** I was unlucky to arrive in Berlin a week before the opening of this show, but lucky to run into Tillmans as he finalized its installation. He's very much his own curator; his powers of visual thinking extend from the pictures to the rooms in which they're shown. When you've known an artist's work for a long time, you're bound to ask-especially in a major retrospective-if the artist is done; if you are; if you've seen enough. But with all Tillmans's openness to the beauty of life, and to human and political engagement, his show was a reminder that our interactions with one another continue not only to unfold but to surprise.

at left:
Wolfgang Tillmans
Peas
2003
Video with ambient sound
Duration: 2 minutes 42 seconds

above:
Wolfgang Tillmans
Lighter 44
2008
color photograph in Plexiglas box
24 3/16 x 21 1/4 x 5 1/8 "

“At that point . . .”

Daniel Birnbaum

Three parameters influence visibility in the night sky: the angle the planets make with the sun, the onset of dusk or dawn, and the disappearance of the planet beyond the horizon. Together, these factors result in a window of visibility.[1]
—Wolfgang Tillmans

Window of visibility seems to me a relevant concept when trying to grasp the production of Wolfgang Tillmans, a maker of pictures who usually is regarded as a photographer but whose practice clearly transcends all attempts to explicate art in terms of discipline and medium specificity. In some of his works the very nature of *visibility* seems to be the theme, in others the *window* itself, and then there are those pictures in which someone appears in the open and steals all the attention: a person, a group of friends, or a crowd of people involved in something larger than the individual point of view. In an attempt to define his most characteristic fields of interest, Tillmans points to two radically different centers of attention: on the one hand an exploration of the chemical fundamentals of photography as a pure *writing of light* (i.e., as a kind “alchemy”) without any necessary rapport to a world beyond itself; and on the other hand the social interaction between humans, himself included. The first tendency has given rise to a large body of nonrepresentational works, sometimes referred to as abstract and metaphysical in nature, dealing with the exposure process and with the nature of color, light, and photosensitive materials. The second tendency, the interest in human interaction, is abundantly evident in all those pictures of people and social situations that consistently seem to emphasize the possibility of lifestyles that dodge repressive and reductive stereotypes and instead suggest an alternative, perhaps even a “utopian,” social order. These pictures from rallies, clubs, and parties are what made Tillmans known in the mid-nineties, but the other aspect, the attraction to pure or abstract forms of visibility, has in fact been present all along, embedded in the works, slumbering as possibilities not yet fully developed. And then, some years ago, these abstract works became more visible and were given a more prominent place, which in turn made aspects of earlier works discernible in a new way retroactively. “At that point,” says Tillmans about his 2006 exhibition *Freedom From The Known,* “I had drifted

furthest from the visible human world, the social world." Dominating the show, he says, were "abstract works, largely metaphysical in nature."

"At that point . . ." So what are these explorations of pyrotechnic color, these monochromatic images, barely touched sheet of paper, and virtually blank windows of visibility doing in the exhibitions of the photographer who took the decisive portraits of his generation and made our new forms of living and being together visible in the first place? "I just see these things simultaneously," says Tillmans.[2] And now that the "abstractions" are there, prominently displayed in books and exhibitions, we can see hints and glimpses of that "zone" all over the place: in the reflections of the disco ball, in the empty skies behind the Concorde, in the strange light from the solar eclipse, perhaps even in the shiny ice cubes in a glass of whiskey. And then there are all these vacant surfaces lacking reference to anything beyond themselves and thus verging on abstraction: paper, textiles, skin. Something has been forced into the foreground and the void itself becomes visible and seems to gain new significance. "At that point," says Tillmans, "I had drifted furthest from the visible human world . . ." Into emptiness, vacuity, a zone freed of any social significance? To get a first grasp of this zone and of its role in the pictorial universe of Tillmans is my modest ambition here.

A clear-cut line between representational and abstract imagery is not as easy to draw as is sometimes believed. This, it seems to me, is of particular relevance for a critical assessment of Tillmans's recent work, and in fact it is a point the artist often makes in relationship to the works that appear to represent nothing outside themselves and their concrete process of coming about: "Reality is central to these pictures . . . In this sense, their reality, their context, and the time during which they were created are all crucial components of their meaning, for me at any rate." It seems that *abstraction* here, if that really is the right term (I doubt it, for reasons that will become clear), is not a permanent state fixed once and for all, not a distinct condition with an essence that can be defined and fully exhausted, but rather a feature that can *emerge* in pictures as well as in the situations they depict. And perhaps this *emergent* quality has an appeal to him because it's not a final and stable condition but rather a phase in a transformative process that can be quite explosive and which is present—perhaps in less purified form—also in photographs that do depict things in the world. It is photography in pure form: "I'm always aware that it's a miracle, a photo-chemical miracle. To me it seems like a gift to have this technology at my disposal." The possibility of creating a visually appealing and significant object out of an industrially manufactured sheet of paper must be seen as a gift, says Tillmans: "I won't lose that feeling, and that's what I meant by metaphysical."

Photographs can represent things in the world, but photography can also become self-reflexive and explore its own possibilities as a medium, i.e., the technical and material conditions involved in the making of images through light and chemistry. The abstract works that explore the effect of light on photosensitive materials could perhaps be seen as a kind of painting practice with photographic means, even if it's not clear if the concept of "painting" helps us understand them better (after a few early attempt Tillmans has in fact actively avoided the world of stretchers and canvas as well as forms of display too closely related to the history of painterly abstraction). More interesting, in my view, is the question what role these sometimes strict and seemingly purist but often surprisingly visceral works play it the oeuvre, and what the turning back upon itself of the photographic medium implies for an artist so often seen as the key portraitist of his generation. And what, in general, is the nature of the realm opened up by such a folding back of the medium upon itself?

"I never thought of a picture as being bodiless, but rather as existing within a process of transformation from three dimensions to two," explains Tillmans, and this seems true even of images such as *Blushes, Peaches,* and *Freischwimmer,* in which the viewer tends to see hair, skin, and muscle fibers although they are produced without a lens and depict nothing. Indeed, they are more overwhelmingly visceral than any image showing a real body. They are bodily in the profound sense of the lived *flesh* explored by phenomenology and described in terms of a *living present* that always implies the embodied nature of the perceiving subject. Every form of perception—even of the most distant, abstract or theoretical kind—presupposes a perceiving subject that lives in a body and relates to the world (and to other embodied subjects) through the perceptual and kinesthetic capacities this lived body renders possible. Incarnation—the fact that we are bodily beings—is a fundamental point of departure. In his search for the most original and authentic mode of access to the world, Edmund Husserl tried to reduce experience to a level of immediacy and bodily givenness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed this path and discovered the "flesh of the world" as the ultimate origin of all experience.[3]

His original fascination was not with photography, says Tillmans, but with the things around him, with "objects and thinking about the world at large."[4] He emphasizes immediacy and the fact that photographs are themselves objects, which means that they are things produced by the photographer, not just some kind of pure representations floating in a mysterious abstract realm. Color photographs, for instance, don't simply come from the lab, they are actively produced and the process is full of decisions. Even before he started to use the camera, Tillmans experimented with the photocopier and his fascination with the possibilities of

intervening with the mechanical process to produce beautiful and artistically significant objects has remained to this day. He uses the copier as a kind of stationary camera that replicates what is on top of it rather than what is in front of it, that can secure, multiply, enlarge, and frame all kinds of textual material and imagery, and that, although without any status as an artistic medium, is capable of freezing the most riveting pictures. The machine adds what seem to be arbitrary digital patterns and lines, and out of a subtle blend of control and randomness entirely unpretentious objects of great splendor and obvious technical sophistication can emerge, free of the cultural weight and intellectual expectations associated with the technical supports of established disciplines and yet capable of creating links to the grandest of traditions and to issues that nobody expected from such a "low" artifact. A photocopy of an old fax, grayish and illegible, is normally hardly perceived as an auratic object. Regardless of technology, it's the physicality of the picture as a crafted object just as much as its ability to convey a true view on the world that appeals to him—true to his point of view, to his feelings, and to his intentions when producing the image. And the tension between control and chance, intention and liberating accidents is, I think, a constant theme in Tillmans's work, and in the photo-chemical experiments the chance element seems to be affirmed and given a positive role reminiscent of August Strindberg's speculations in the late nineteenth century and his occult "celestographs," produced through the exposure of photographic plates to the starry sky.[5]

Tillmans often emphasizes his attraction to paper not only as a support or medium for imagery but as an appealing body with its own artistic qualities. In fact he makes wrinkled, folded, and doubled photo paper a subject for art in a way that renders it sculpturally rich and fascinating. In the *paper drop* series the seemingly dry subject matter of folded paper is transformed into highly charged territory, and a white two-dimensional world gives rise to enigmatic topologies where an outside is twisted into an inside and an inside into an outside, and where the eye gets lost in a night that gradually gives rise to a day and the white tundra slowly passes all shades of grey and falls into the most impenetrable of blacks. Although utterly formalistic, the *paper drops* turn "abstract" photography into an exploration of psychological and erogenous zones. The *Silver* series, ongoing since the nineties, may seem less spectacular, but closer scrutiny displays a world of weird colors that seem to fit into no established spectrum and sometimes there is a silver quality that reminds the viewer of the metallic base of the photographic medium. The recent book *manual* opens with a series of these images, and we are invited to travel from a grayish pink and a pinkish gray via more recognizable hues back to a dirty crimson world. Everywhere there are marks, lines,

scratches, and stains that indicate a physical process, but these are not the traces of another "reality" beyond the process of creating the pictures. The smear doesn't refer to anything beyond itself and its own making. This goes for *Lighter* as well, a series of works consisting of folded paper in riveting colors shown in Plexiglas boxes that emphasize the three-dimensional nature of the works. This is a subtle game of wrinkled surfaces, sharp folds, and demarcation lines that sometimes generate the illusion of fault lines that in reality are nothing but visual effects produced by the confrontation of colors. In what sense are these modestly sculpted papers pictures, and in what sense are they really photographs?

Tillmans's works are always those of an embodied subject, even when the phenomena depicted are seemingly artificial, technical, or remote. There is something irreducibly concrete even in the experience of the most abstract things and something bodily even in the observation of a cosmic occurrence. The early fascination with astronomy that has remained with him until this day has resulted in unusual images of heavenly phenomena that, although light years away, are rendered as part of a world of concrete, tangible, and material things perceived by someone with an individual perspective. In a Tillmans exhibition a photograph of a Venus transit or a photocopied sun appears next to pictures of the most ordinary of things, next to newspaper clippings and to portraits as well as to images that display nothing beyond their own materiality. A distant star, a close friend, an empty sheet of paper—there seems to be no fundamental difference between how these things are approached, and the pictures themselves are given due respect as objects in their own right, carefully produced, selected, and displayed by the artist.

"I follow an aesthetics of mathematics," says Tillmans in a discussion about astronomical diagrams, but immediately makes clear that it's the concrete appearance rather than the abstract language that appeals to him: "I've always hated mathematics, but I'm interested in visibility diagrams, in the question of when something becomes visible." Even the most abstract of things become tangible the moment it becomes visible to someone, because this concrete someone a located in time and space and at home in a body. That's why the atmosphere in the nonrepresentational pictures is not different from the ones that depict the most ordinary things. They are also displayed as physical object, radically *concrete* rather than abstract. Indeed, the two kinds of pictures have more in common than what differentiates them, perhaps one could even claim that the concrete works makes something in Tillmans's deeply personal approach to the issues of what it is to make a picture visible in a way that is difficult in an image that depicts something outside of itself. In that sense they don't represent a radical break or alternative to the world of depiction, they simply make visible what the

photographic medium is capable of in the hands of Wolfgang Tillmans and what silently and in a less distilled way has been going on in his work for two decades.

((Notes))

1 If not otherwise indicated citations are from Wolfgang Tillmans and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversions Series,* Vol. 6 (Cologne, 2007).

2 Personal correspondence with Tillmans, December 2007.

3 In his late texts—especially *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964)—Merleau-Ponty, whose trust in art was far great than his trust in abstract thought, developed a philosophy with a set of new concepts: the visible, the flesh, the chiasm, and vertical Being. All these concepts have in common the attempt to transcend traditional dichotomies and reach a more originary level of givenness where the received dualisms (concept and intuition, mind and body, subject and object) have not yet been separated, but are united in a "positive ambiguity." The flesh is neither subject nor object, neither perceiving nor perceived. The opposites are united according to a logic that breaks down the distinction between activity and passivity. In order to attain this level, philosophy must "install itself where reflection and intuition have not yet been separated, in experiences not yet 'moulded,' offering us everything at once, 'pell-mell,' both 'subject' and 'object,' existence and essence, thereby making it possible for philosophy to define these concepts anew."

4 Personal correspondence with Tillmans, December 2007.

5 August Strindberg, *New Directions in Art: Or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation* (1894), reprinted in *Strindberg* (Valencia, 1994), pp. 188–94.

ART

JOSHUA WHITE REGEN PROJECTS

QUOTIDIAN: A Video of peas boiling is included in Wolfgang Tillmans' solo show. Other videos show a man's armpit and a rotating Mercedes emblem atop a German high-rise.

AROUND THE GALLERIES

The banal parts make up a deeper whole

HOLLY MYERS

Wolfgang Tillmans is not an artist who operates from project to project, in distinct, consecutive series, but who proceeds, rather, along multiple interweaving paths at once -- some personal in nature, some sociological, some political, some highly formal. Though grounded in photography, his work assumes myriad forms and explores a near schizophrenic array of genres: snapshot, documentary, portrait, landscape, still life, even abstraction.

Given the casual air his work often assumes, such breadth might easily be mistaken for a dilettantish lack of focus. He seizes on the unexceptional: the side of an apartment building, an airline billboard, a pair of dogs asleep on the ground. Though more capable than most of making a beautiful picture, he increasingly downplays the photogenic.

All of which makes him rather awkwardly suited to the conditions of a commercial gallery exhibition, which tend to privilege discrete projects and themes compact enough to be comfortably contained in the few paragraphs of a news release.

"half page," his fifth solo show at Regen Projects, is a substantial but nonetheless partial and rather scattered selection of recent work, and as such, may not win him any converts. Indeed, for those not already sympathetic to his project, it would be easy to interpret the show in line with many of his perennial critics: as so many random bits and pieces.

This reading, however, misses the point. Central to Tillmans' career has been an extended flirtation with banality, pursued not merely for its own sake, in a spirit of slacker irony, but with the deep, philosophical conviction that no aspect of the social, physical or political world is devoid of meaning or unworthy of investigation. If individual images occa-

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sionally fall flat out of context -- and I confess there are several in this show whose inclusion I find perplexing -- it needn't detract from virtue of the pursuit and the value of such a holistic perspective.

More important, however, the "bits and pieces" reading belies Tillmans' exceptional rigor as an artist. However banal many of his subjects, for instance, his methods of selection and organization are highly conscientious and complex.

This show, like much of his recent work, has a strong, if oblique, political undercurrent relating to issues of violence, war, globalism and consumerism, articulated most distinctly in the several collages composed across the surface of specially constructed tabletops. They function as visual essays, combining his own photographs with news clippings, advertisements, signs, stamps and other bits of ephemera. (One contains a sheet of paper that reads simply: "What's wrong with redistribution?")

Even more striking in recent years -- and in this show in particular -- is the complexity of his formal language. From his many experiments with scale and installation strategies to his investigation of related technologies like photocopying and video to his recent forays into darkroom-borne abstraction, few photographers in recent memory, or even in history, have undertaken such a far-ranging exploration of the photograph as an object.

There are three videos in this show, all depicting characteristically quotidian subjects: peas boiling in a pot of water; a rotating Mercedes emblem at the top of a high rise in West Berlin; and a man's armpit. Though lacking the distinctive sharpness and sensuality of his photographs, the works point in an intriguing direction with an air of tentative curiosity.

It is the abstraction that dominates, however: glossy sheets of vivid color -- blue, black, orange, green -- printed small and large, some crumpled or folded and encased like sculpture in clean Plexiglas boxes. They're dazzlingly seductive objects that seem to boil the entire discipline of photography down to its most poetic essence.

Regen Projects, 633 N. Almont Drive, Los Angeles, (310) 276-5424, through Dec. 6. Closed Sunday and Monday.

Ornate: Wolfgang Tillmans' show also contains photographs, including "Muqarnas" a framed C-print

frieze

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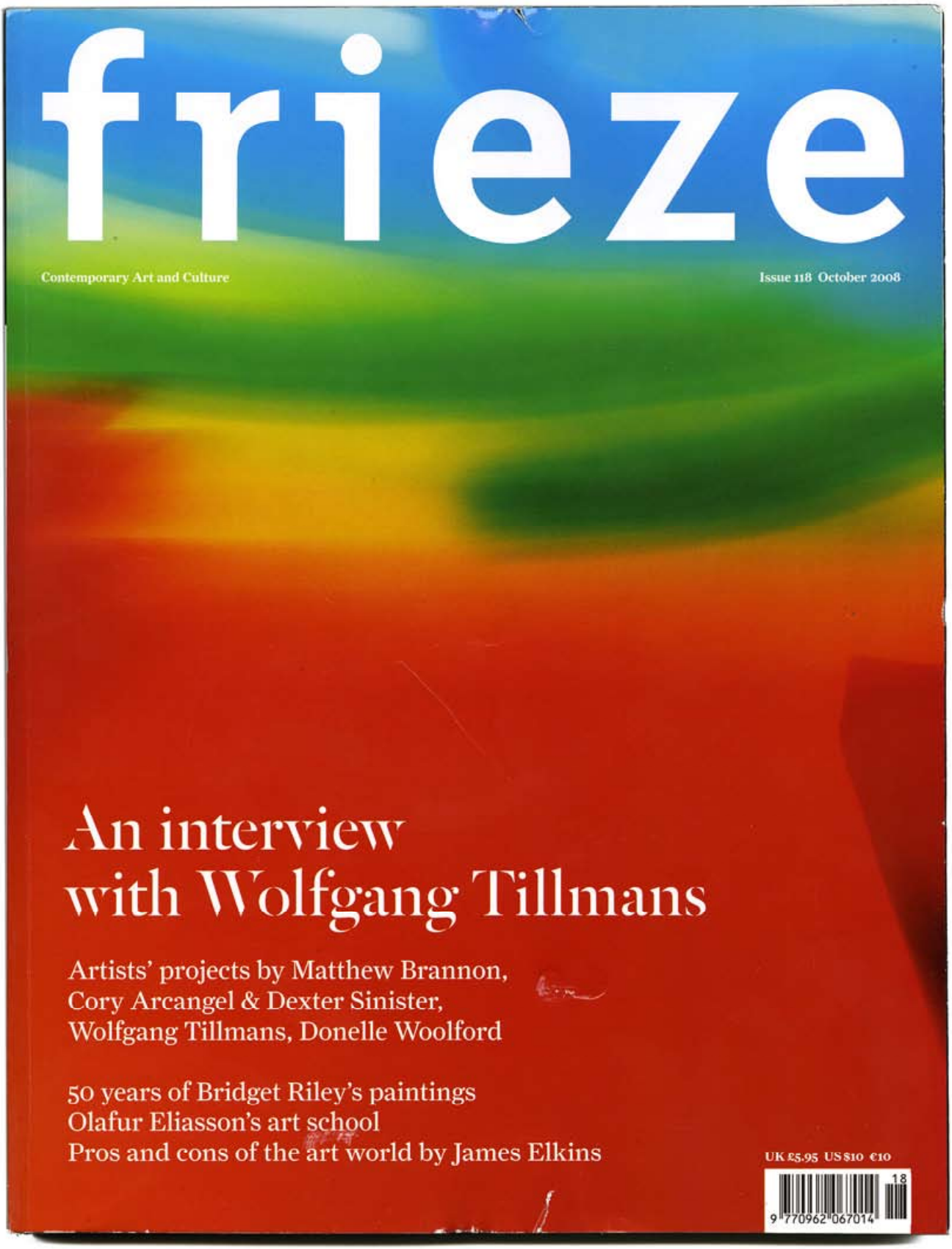

An interview with Wolfgang Tillmans

Artists' projects by Matthew Brannon, Cory Arcangel & Dexter Sinister, Wolfgang Tillmans, Donelle Woolford

50 years of Bridget Riley's paintings
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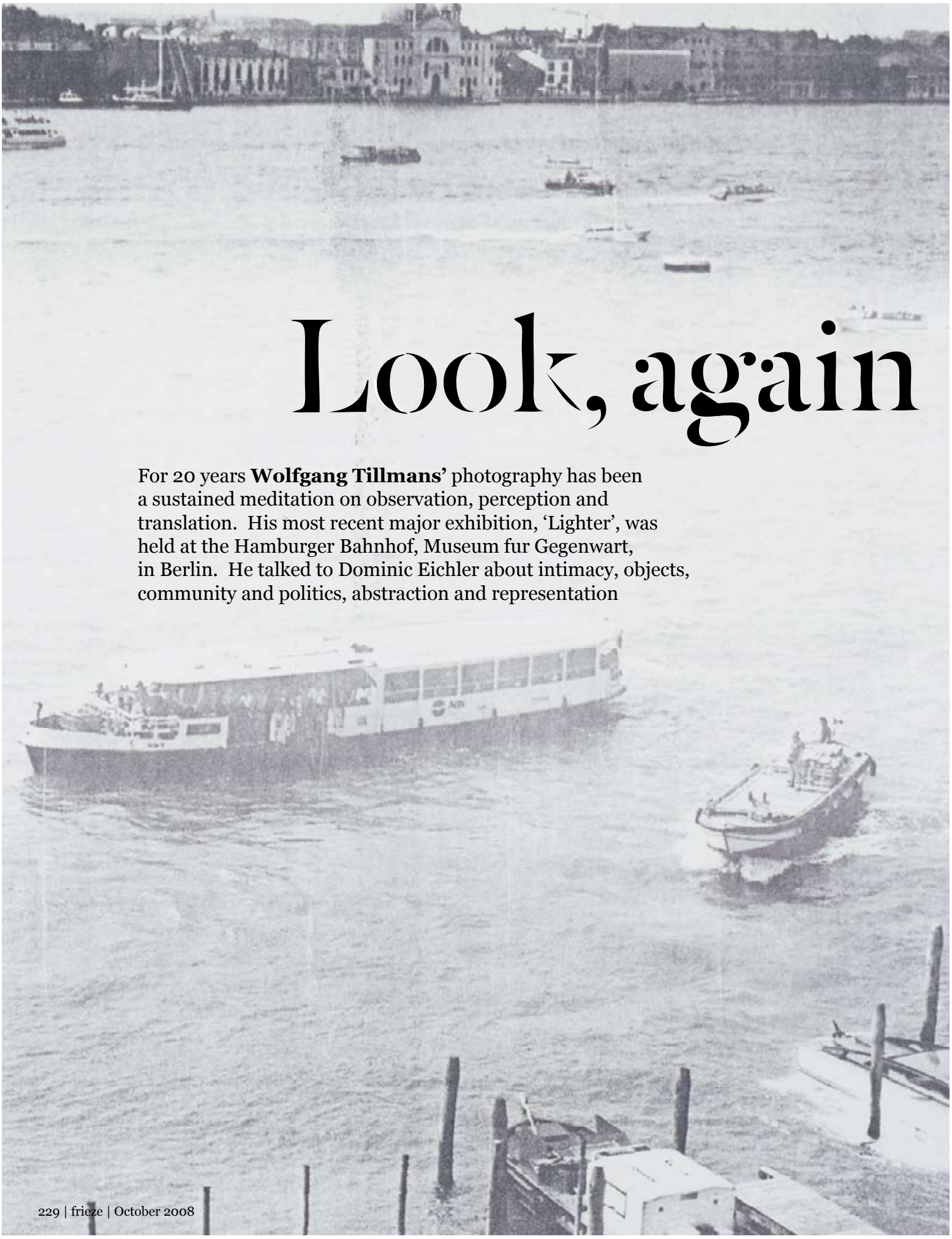


Look, again

For 20 years **Wolfgang Tillmans'** photography has been a sustained meditation on observation, perception and translation. His most recent major exhibition, 'Lighter', was held at the Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum fur Gegenwart, in Berlin. He talked to Dominic Eichler about intimacy, objects, community and politics, abstraction and representation

DOMINIC EICHLER Looking back over the last 20 years of your art-making, it is striking how you have circled and constantly returned to a diverse range of genres, modes of reproduction and printing techniques while exploring both figurative and abstract images, and that all of these approaches still find their place in your recent exhibitions and publications, such as Manual (2007). Do you think there is a particular kind of quality that makes for a 'Tillmans'?

WOLFGANG TILLMANS In terms of one repeated style, no, but there is an underlying approach that I hope gives everything I make a cohesion. I trust that, if I study something carefully enough, a greater essence or truth might be revealed without having a prescribed meaning. I've trusted in this approach from the start, and I have to find that trust again and again when I make pictures. Really looking and observing is hard, and you can't do it by following a formula. What connects all my work is finding the right balance between intention and chance, doing as much as I can and knowing when to let go, allowing fluidity and avoiding anything being forced.

DE Years ago I was in a friend's apartment where there was nothing on the white walls except a photograph of an autumn tree torn out of a magazine. I kept looking at it; it had a kind of aura about it, and in the end I couldn't contain my curiosity any more and so I asked him who the picture was by. It was one of your images. And that's the thing about many of your photographs – their subjects might be something seemingly really everyday, like a tree, friends or leftovers from a party, but there's something singular about them, and it's hard to say what it is exactly.

WT I just think all images should be significant. They should be able to stand alone and say something about their particular subject matter. If they don't do that, then why make them? The picture you mentioned is titled Calendar Leaves because it is so golden it could be in a calendar; I took it in upstate New York during the Indian summer of 1994. Trees have been photographed so many times. It's always a question of: 'Is this possible? Can I take a picture of this?'

DE So making images is partly about some kind of impossibility?

WT Well, I wanted to capture my experience of this tree in the first degree. I wanted to photograph it knowing that it was really hard to do, but on the other hand I didn't feel that I shouldn't take a picture of, say, a sunset or the wing of an aeroplane or autumn foliage. I am knowing, but I try not to be cynical. At least some aspect of the picture has to be genuinely new; it can't be a 'me too' picture. I feel things like these have been photographed or painted so often because they move people and I'm also moved in that moment, and in this I see myself in a long continuum of people making pictures of these larger subjects of life. Trees have interested artists for a long time. I guess they're one of the most consistent things in life and on earth.

DE Are you thinking about the translation of the experience into an image or work?

WT Considering that translation or, metaphysically speaking, the process of transformation, is the central aspect of my work. The experience of something in real life doesn't automatically make for a good work. I can only really photograph things that I understand in some way or another. It's about whether you can look at something for 60 seconds; it's very much about being able to bear reality.

DE The golden melancholy of the autumn tree makes me think of the Douglas Sirk film Imitation of Life (1959). But I get the same mood from some of your abstract colour images, such as the streaky and stained, fleshy and azure 'Silver' pictures (mostly from 2006) or, for that matter, your photocopy-based works like photocopy (Barnaby) (1994), which involve so much longing for what is only partly there.

WT Imitation of Life is a beautiful title but it's not what I aim for because art is always different from life. You can try to get close to the feeling of what it's like to be alive now, but the result of that is an art work, and that has its own reality. When I work on the non-figurative pictures in the darkroom or use photocopiers, it is a direct engagement with physical realities: the colour and intensity of my light sources or the electrostatic charge on the copier drums. I use them and play with them to make pictures possible. For instance, under the burden of all the clichés it's not really possible to photograph Venice, but I still wanted to, so I made the photocopier-enlarged image Venice (2007), in which the details that indicate 'Venice' are reduced heavily. That makes them feel almost appropriated, but in fact all the photocopy pictures are based on photographs, which I took for this type of enlargement.

Above:
Lighter 59
2008
C-type print
61 x 51 cm

Below:
Haircut
2007
Photograph
Dimensions variable

DE The abstract colour works such as the 'Silver' group of pictures (1994–2008) and impossible colour V (2001) also involve signs of their making and process.

WT impossible colour V is a large pink octagon placed on a larger white picture base. It's actually a rectangle with the same proportions as 35 mm film that has been turned ever so slightly against a frame with the same proportions. Unlike my other abstract work, the 'Silver' images are mechanical pictures made by feeding them through a processing machine while it's being cleaned, so they pick up traces of dirt and silver residue from the chemicals. Because they are only half fixed and the chemicals aren't fresh, they slowly change hue over a few days. Sometimes I use this instability to create different shades and lines on them, before scanning and enlarging them to their final size.

DE Then there are your three-dimensional pieces 'Lighter' (2005–8), which are physically creased and folded photographs.

WT Some of them I expose to different coloured light sources in the darkroom after first folding them in the dark, and some are made in reverse order. Some are not folded at all – they only suggest the possibility of a fold – but they are all highly intricate. We are still blind to what it exactly is that makes a photograph so particular, so deeply psychological, even though it's supposedly a mechanical medium. The 'Lighter' works are a continuation of the three-dimensional approach of the 'paper drop' pictures (2001–8) of hanging and flipped-over pieces of photographic paper.

DE What would you say to people who interpret your later abstract work as a retreat into some kind of formalism?

WT Look again. It's not a retreat. If colour is a retreat, then I checked into that retreat early on. The video of the moving disco lights Lights (Body) (2002) or the astronomical pictures like Sternenhimmel (Starry Sky, 1995), are all about light and colour. I never separate that experience from a social one. David Wojnarowicz, one of the most socially engaged artists of recent history, repeatedly says in his video ITSOFOMO (1990): 'Smell the flowers while you can.' How can that be a retreat? You have to be pretty senseless not to allow artists the freedom to deal with the whole width of their experiences and explore their medium to the extreme. The abstracted picture of that golden tree you mentioned earlier on is from 1994, when I was in the midst of making the so-called realist work that I was first known for. I was then, as I am now, involved in seeing and transforming that into pictures.

DE How much system or discipline and control is involved in getting what you want?

WT It sounds a bit square, but I've found that the chances of getting a good result are just so much higher when you spend at least eight hours a day on your work. That work is, of course, all play [Laughing]. Seriously, the biggest challenge is not always to do the right thing but at times to do wrong things, to act irresponsibly in the light of constant demands. When artists start out, they

Above:
Calendar Leaves
1994
Photograph
Dimensions variable

Below:
Memorial for the Victims of Organized Religions
(detail)
C-type prints
Installation View

Alex and Lutz, Back
1992
Photograph
Dimensions variable

'I think people don't observe enough. I'm a great believer in observation. My first passion in life was astronomy.'

all have some sort of alternative vision in mind, and then career and success, or equally the lack of it, grind most of them down to become bored and boring. It's really the biggest challenge not to believe your own system, so the discipline is, strangely, to be undisciplined.

DE You've mentioned before the fact that in learning about the world you also inherit certain kinds of images, and that every image you make is going to have a relationship to the image banks that you've inherited from your culture. That makes me think of your shots of men's bum cracks. [Laughs]

WTThere is always something unsettling about fearless looking as opposed to coy allusion or shockingly flashing. To look without fear is a good subversive tool, undermining taboos. Study the soldier or riot policeman, make him an object of formal considerations, see him as wearing drag. Look at things the way they are.

DE With your cultural baggage alongside?

wtYes, even though I feel that after 150 years or so, the subject matter of a woman's exposed crotch isn't owned by Gustave Courbet. I attribute these overlaps to certain pictures being in your milk from a young age, so to speak. But still, once a picture is in the world as an object, it's impossible not to think about your relationship to it. Is it too ironic? Is it too referential? Not everything is strategy because, despite these considerations, what is uppermost in that moment is to be an awake, attentive being.

DE People often think that there are too many images in the world and that we have become numb to them, but from what you've been saying it's almost as though your practice is trying to prove the opposite – that we're still alert, and that we're still intelligent about images, and that there can be necessary pictures, ones which aren't redundant from the start.

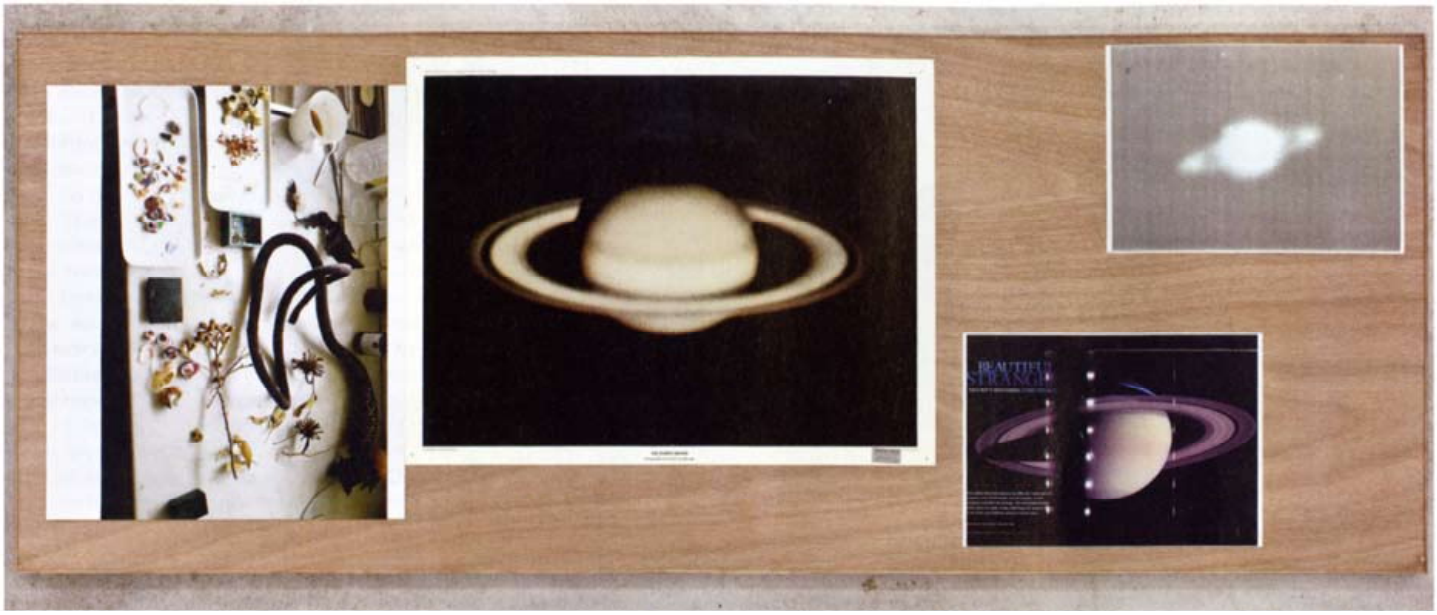
WT Absolutely. There are people who have no joy in viewing – who have no joy in life, perhaps. I think people don't observe enough. I'm a great believer in observation. My first passion in life was astronomy.

DE I remember reading that, and also that you didn't take photographs as a teenager. I suppose your photographs from 2004 of the planet Venus passing in front of the sun – like a blank face with a beauty spot – suggest that the idea of looking at something unattainable and distant, but which still can be experienced and understood, has stayed with you.

WT The experience of relative perception is something that keeps turning me on. The photocopy works I made in the late 1980s, before I found my first direct photographic subject matter in nightclubs, were really about this dissolving of details, of zooming into pictures and information breaking down. What makes me happy is when people pick up on the nuances, when you don't need ten years to realize that there is a composition behind the picture, or that not every elongated object is a phallus, or that questions of authenticity and the identity issues of the 1990s are embedded in the work as deliberate contradictions.

DE I think that one of the great achievements of your work is the way you have navigated those contradictions. You have never shied away from presenting compelling pictures of the world at odds with the mainstream or from addressing major socio-political issues like privatization and AIDS education, to name recent examples. And you have done this with a radical subjective gaze and with a consciousness of the difficulties and limitations of that position and what you can achieve as an artist. I'm also curious about your Memorial for the Victims of Organized Religions (2006). It recalls a serial Minimalist grid: are you suggesting that there is a correlation between religious belief and belief in art?

WT I showed this piece for the first time in Chicago, as part of a three-city US museum tour. It reflects the helplessness I felt at trying to tackle a subject of such magnitude in a country so held in the grip of the more unappealing sides of religion, but at the same time I wanted to explore faith as a subject. The absoluteness of the grid is disrupted



Truth Study Centre (Table 19)
2007
C-type print, offset print, photocopy, wood, glass
77x198x78

by using creased and scratched photographs, but in a way that is only noticeable after a while, and at the intersection point between the pictures the eye creates a black dot, which is not actually there. A third element undermining the rigour of the grid is the inclusion of some not quite black but dark blue photographs interspersed in the piece. Being installed in the corner the grid is reflected in the shiny surfaces of the prints in a totally warped and distorted way. The piece doesn't depict religion in the same way that a picture of, say, a mosque would, but it still tackles the idea that all religions have a claim to the absolute.

DE In the 1990s you often talked about your interest in communal activities and club culture and the possibility of alternative forms of collectivity and togetherness. Do you still believe in these kind of Utopian moments as a viable alternative to ideological, economic or faith-based social constructions?

WT Absolutely. However, it's dodgy territory because so many ideologies were built on forcing people into a pit of togetherness, so it seems odd to go looking for that in subcultures. Still, I was always interested in the free, or at least non-branded, activities that functioned outside control and marketing. Those pockets of self-organization – free partying, free sex, free leisure time – are on the retreat. A less commercial spirit of togetherness is worth defending against the market realities, which are the result of the implementation of an atomized, privatized model of society, of 'free workers and consumers'. At least it's worth asking what choices you have if you don't want to belong to the mainstream types of belonging in the privatized model of society – nation, sport, family values or religion.

DE In your installation Truth Study Centre (2007) all of this takes a major battering from you through your own and collected images and newspaper clippings. It is at times totally harrowing to peer into all of those trestle-table vitrines full of conflict and extremism on the one hand and human tenderness on the other. In a way, some of your pictures from the 1990s, which rightly or wrongly were seen as fashionable or lifestyle-oriented by some, are more confrontational now than they were back then.

WT Yes, a couple of friends and I went to see my show 'Lighter' at the Hamburger Bahnhof a day after the opening in May, and it was really interesting to observe how teenagers were looking at the depictions of bodies in, for example, the Turner Prize Room (2000). The sort of physicality I show in my photographs, which was always so important to me, hasn't dissolved into harmlessness. It seems to have gone the other way, almost as if somehow it's become more provocative.

DE It strikes me that in all your images everyone looks as though they want to be loved. Even the guy doing what the title of one of your photographs says he's doing in man pissing on chair (1997).

WT What connects them, I think, is that, even though they are confident, one gets a sense of their awareness of their own vulnerability. The depiction of other people is terribly fascinating, and even more so if it's a psychological undertaking or a lifelong focus on single people, like a few friends of mine who I have photographed for many years now.

DE So intimacy is crucial too?

WT Yes, because it connects us to the physical world, and there is, of course, a deep loneliness in us all. I find people interesting when they have a sense of their own fragility and loneliness, and that's something that I feel alive in a lot of people, but many of them have problems embracing this or accepting it.

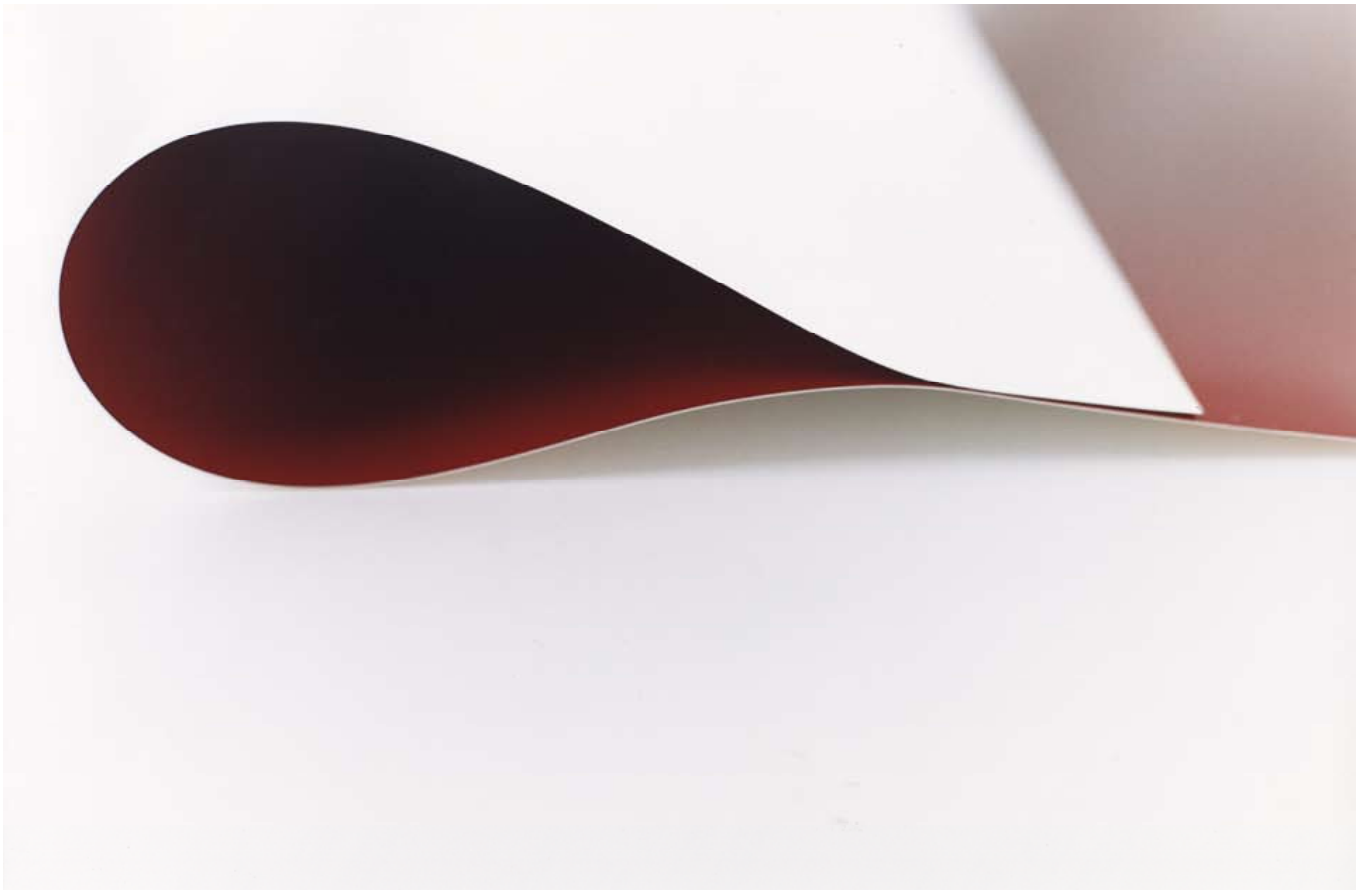
DE Which is fair enough, don't you think?

WT Sure! The title of one of my first books is For When I'm Weak, I'm Strong (1996), and it's not that I can always abide by that, or that I'm always living that.

DE Your abstract works also reflect this fragility too.

WT But, it's a resilient fragility, I hope. Of course, a sheet of paper can be both an image of a person and a metaphor for a person. I truly appreciate the modest contemplation that completely gives in to the circumstances as they are. I don't see anger as the only driving force for change – concentration can be an equally powerful state of being.

Susanne, No Bra
2006
Photograph
Dimensions variable



Paper Drop (Red)
2006
Photograph
Dimensions variable

DE How has your own view of yourself as an artist, and your practice, changed over the past 20 years? You have said that you're an ambitious person. Do you ever get into any kind of conflict about your current status in, or have ethical issues with, the contemporary art world? Do you feel a different sense of responsibility to your audience, and other artists? I know, for instance, that you teach and have your own gallery space in London, Between Bridges.

WT Even though I don't think there's free choice for everybody, there's a lot of choices available for successful artists. You don't have to disappear into your own super-high value systems, as some high-profile artists do. I try to use my voice as an amplifier for what I care about and stay out of gratuitous projects. Between Bridges is a way for me to engage in a different kind of communication, showing artists who I feel for some reason or other have been under-represented in London. It's also a learning opportunity for myself. The next show is work by Wilhelm Leibl, a German realist painter from the 19th century who I came across and paid homage to in a photograph I made in 2002, and who I've wanted to find out more about ever since.

DE How did you feel about your exhibition 'Lighter' being held in the Friedrich Christian Flick Collection wing of the Hamburger Bahnhof? I ask this considering that his family's fortune was partially made through arms manufacturing during World War II, and given the public criticism he attracted for not having paid into compensation funds for forced labourers. He was also seen to be potentially enriching himself because initially he only loaned his collection to the city.

WT I really didn't understand why and had no sympathy for the fact that Flick didn't want to pay the compensation at the time and instead used a similar amount of money to set up a foundation to fight xenophobia among youths in East Germany. He could have easily afforded to do both. At the same time I felt the witch hunt was unfair, because he never personally employed forced labour: it was his grandfather, and the lines drawn between clean and unclean money were drawn much too symbolically. I find it equally unsettling to think of collectors who actively in our lifetime earn their money with politically incorrect or destructive activities. But Flick did pay up eventually, and he's also gifted 160 major works from his collection to the Hamburger Bahnhof, instead of building another private collector museum. Interestingly, these facts were hardly reported or acknowledged by his critics.

DE There is an inherent contradiction in the fact that art is structurally implicated in money and power but at the same time ought to function like a cultural conscience. One interesting part of the debate around the Flick Collection is thinking about the extent to which an artist can or should control the distribution of their work.

WT Yes, and I noticed that the least popular position to take on this is to acknowledge one's own implication in it. It's very attractive to be totally against the market, and it's OK to not say anything at all and just get on with one's work. I try to be as ethically involved in the distribution of my work as possible, but at the same time I acknowledge my inability to control everything.

DE 'Lighter' was an overwhelming round-up of your work past and present. In particular it showed how the various types of abstract works and those that have to do with the basic condition of the image fit and relate to

the more 'traditional' photographs.

WT The exhibition was a new type of show for me. After ten museum survey exhibitions in the past seven years, this one was never meant to be a retrospective. In the first room there are six photocopy pictures from 1988, and in the last room there are another three, and in between is primarily work from the last five years. The Turner Prize Room from 2000 also featured but was a kind of show within a show. I made the exhibition completely irrespective of any retrospective duty.

DE So the only duty was introspective?

WT [Laughs] It was introspective, yes. No, not introspective, it was now-spective. It was what was going on.

DE Even though a good quarter of the show was taken up by the mostly political and science-hugging Truth Study Centre installation from 2007, it seems that many of your concerns have become more abstract.

WT I think it took shows such as 'Freedom from the Known' at PS1 in New York (2006) or 'Lighter' to bring this to the fore. I exhibited my first abstract and damaged, too dark and fucked-up pictures as a Parkett edition in 1998. From that time onwards I think that the abstract nature of earlier works like the drapery close-ups of clothing or the 'Concorde' pictures (1997) became more clear; an abstraction grounded in the real world.

DE In some of the photogram abstract work I can't help but make associations between body, fluid and cellular structures. There's a kind of direct relationship with the body in the image. They're abstract, but there are areas of physical and emotional stuff flowing around inside. Titles like it's only love give it away (2005) or the big and bloody-looking Urgency III (2006) also suggest this to me.

WT The human eye has a great desire to recognize things when it looks at a photographic print. I made use of this phenomenon and found I could speak about physicality in new pictures while the camera-based pictures could be seen in a new light as well. So they kind of inform each other, rather than being pitted against each other.

HMD1
2007
C-type print
Dimensions variable

DEIs the key in the mix or the constellations; how one image sits next to another and how they influence each other?

WT When I was working on the book Lighter earlier this year, which comprises some 200 installation views, I realized that this is actually the first book that shows what my work really looks like. You get an idea of how, in the constellations of pictures, I try to approximate the way I see the world, not in a linear order but as a multitude of parallel experiences – like now I look at you, seeing a portrait, now out of the window there is a landscape, here on the table the cups standing around, there my feet. It's multiple singularities, simultaneously accessible as they share the same space or room.

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'Wolfgang Tillmans', installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2006
Photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans

Network and Community: Strolling the Wolfgang Tillmans Salon

— Lane Relyea

It is remarkable how many pictures we have [...] of informal and spontaneous sociability, of breakfasts, picnics, promenades, boating trips, holidays *and vacation travel. These urban idylls* [...] presuppose the cultivation of these pleasures as the highest field of freedom for an enlightened bourgeois detached *from the official beliefs of his class.* In enjoying realistic pictures of his *surroundings as a spectacle of traffic* and changing atmospheres, the cultivated rentier was experiencing in its phenomenal aspects that mobility of the environment, the market and of industry to which he owes his income and his freedom. [...] As the contexts of bourgeois *sociability shifted from community, family* and church to commercialised or privately *improvised forms — the streets, the cafés* and resorts — the resulting consciousness of individual freedom involved more and more an estrangement from older *ties; and those imaginative members of* the middle class who accepted the norms of freedom, but lacked the economic means to attain them, were spiritually torn by a sense of helpless isolation *in an anonymous indifferent mass.*[1]

Pull open the door to one of Wolfgang Tillmans's exhibitions, such as the recent one at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, and you find yourself literally engulfed by an enormous, book-length and building-sized photo-essay. [2] The arrangement of pictures is aggressively art directed, with the four edges of the museum's rectangular walls — nay, of whole rectangular rooms — used to anchor dynamic compositions. Exposed white space around and between photographs appears no longer 'neutral' but aesthetically activated; doorways, windows, even thermostats and fire extinguishers get enlisted as graphic elements. Squint and you can make out mural-sized Mondrians. Laying out one long, intricately folded magazine spread, Tillmans could be thought to transform the institutional space of the museum into a poetic object, to apotheosise the white-cube gallery into something like Mallarmé's clean white page. But more so, by treating it like a magazine, Tillmans is using the museum as a vehicle of mass communication.

Turn the first corner. There are pictures of Patti Smith, the artist Paula Hayes sitting naked at a typewriter, the bandmates of Supergrass interacting daftly, and Damon Albarn, the singer from Blur, rapturously relaxing his head back in the shower. Celebrity is mass communication. Fashion is also. Other pictures feature a radio, a wall of concert speakers and people touching and kissing. There's a reproduction of a fax ('love Sarah' handwritten in the upper-right corner) enlarged to roughly eight-feet tall. Affect, optic fibres, electricity and signification all zigzag through this vast circuitry, reweaving space and architecture at the service of interactive information. With the photographs so carefully plotted within a matrix of distinct relations, with precise repetitions and differences articulated through size and texture, colour and form, motif and reference, every image becomes subsumed within one massive signifying set, a general Tillmans semiotic. The aim seems nothing short of constructing a personal pictographic language:

When Troubetskoy reconstructs the phonetic object as a system of variations ... when Lévi-Strauss discovers the homologic functioning of totemic imagination ... they are all doing nothing *different from what Mondrian, Boulez,* or Butor are doing when they articulate a certain object — what will be called, precisely, a composition — by the controlled manifestation of little units and certain associations of these units. [3]

1 Meyer Schapiro, 'The Nature of Abstract Art', Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries , New York: George Braziller, 1979, p.193.
2 Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 20 March—13 August 2006.
3 Roland Barthes, 'The Structuralist Activity', Critical Essays , Evanston, Il: Northwestern University Press, 1972, p.215. See Howard Singerman, 'Noncompositional Effects, or the Process of Painting in 1970', Oxford Art Journal , vol.26, no.1, 2003, pp.133—34, for a discussion of this quote in relation to arguments over composition in art in the 1960s.

There are nearly fifty photographs in this modestly sized room alone, roughly five-hundred in the Chicago show overall. But even with so many pictures, it would be misleading to describe their arrangement as 'salon-style'. At least in 19th-century Paris, the actual practice of the salons was to tile paintings nearly edge-to-edge on the walls until little bare plaster was left to 'activate'. The salon aimed to represent, first and foremost, all of French painting, hence the overcrowding. And if, beyond mere space limitations, there was a greater law to be perceived within the arrangement, it was the strictly hierarchical ordering of painting's internal system (from lowly still life to the grand machines of history painting) as well as, within that hierarchy, what the jury thought were the canvases that best accorded with Academic standards. As more and more demanding artists submitted more and more canvases, eventually the Academy's laws and hierarchies were overwhelmed by the horde they were supposed to control. 'The Academic system, in the unprecedented mass of painters and paintings it had generated [...] choked its earlier ability to adapt to and moderate nuclei of radical art.' [4]

As told by the husband-and-wife team of sociologist Harrison White and art-historian Cynthia White in their book Canvases and Careers, what replaces the Academic system by the end of the 19th century is what the authors famously call 'the dealer-and-critic system'. Here, in the more intimate galleries established by the new private dealers, paintings were exhibited not in strict accord with their overall Academic rank and as a result of competition with one another. Rather, the aim of the new private gallery was to illuminate and contextualise the distinctive qualities of each individual artist and piece of art. Even in group shows, works in these galleries competed only for the undivided attention and interest of paying customers.

As in the salon, Tillmans's shows often include every genre: still life, landscape, portraiture, domestic and street scenes, and, if not history painting, then what replaces it today, photojournalism. In Chicago there are even large-scale colour abstractions on display. But these genres are paraded not in adherence to some institutionalised hierarchy. Rather, like in the private gallery, they are composed by, and thus become a manifestation of, Tillmans's personal sensibility. The order in which the photographs and their subject matter are placed demonstrates the poetic malleability of a language, not the immutability of a law. This is an order discovered, felt, intended and expressed, not submitted to. 'I am interested not in individual readings,' Tillmans states, 'but in constructing networks of images and meanings capable of reflecting the complexity of the subject.' [5] What is this subject if not Tillmans? Each of his shows is a self-portrait, an essay the artist writes, or rather curates or graphically designs, about himself.

Lying in wait around the next corner is a labyrinth of roughly twenty long thin tables, each decked with various photographs and newspaper and magazine clippings. Portraits of Kate Moss and Tony Blair shoulder up against articles on wealth redistribution, nefarious US foreign policy and HIV treatment in Africa. If Tillmans is indeed the subject of the show, he is nevertheless a capacious and accommodating one, an individual always already opened out toward larger communities, a self performed and constructed in dialogue with larger systems of exchange. As an artist he not only partakes of every genre, he also subsumes art in general within the larger cultural database of reproducible, mobile imagery. As a photographer, Tillmans embraces the medium at its most unwieldy and complex, as historically entangled with social documentary and journalism, with advertising and fashion, as well as with the everyday snapshot culture of personal mementos and private picture albums. Thus, while on the one hand each show seems to posit Tillmans as its monolithic and unifying author, on the other hand the artist reveals himself to be dispersed by the viral and proliferative photo information in which he traffics. It's less Tillmans's private thoughts than the chattering of infotainment that seems to provide a nearly audible voiceover for most of his shows. (I can't help but think: didn't Tillmans also photograph Paula Hayes coupled with an equally naked John Currin? And didn't Currin art direct the CD packaging for the This Is Hardcore release by the band Pulp, another famed Tillmans client? Why is Supergrass here but no Jarvis? Etc., etc. Gossip is always about contagious circulation, its presumed author always plural and faceless.)

4 Harrison C. White and Cynthia A. White, Canvases and Careers: Institutional Change in the French Painting World, University of Chicago Press, 1993, p.2.

5. Quoted in Russell Ferguson, 'Faces in the Crowd', in Julie Ault et al., Wolfgang Tillmans, Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art and Los Angeles: UCLA Hammer Museum, 2006, p.75.

While the swirl of communication may keep Tillmans decentred, unable to comfortably inhabit the apex of his own shows — indeed of his own overall production — the artist is still able to exert a large degree of control and inflection. But this is felt less at the centre than at the edges. That is, Tillmans asserts himself most aggressively through his highly considered curatorial composing, his classifications and taxonomies which result in elegant silhouettes of photo clusters drawn across the gallery walls. Composition would seem to transcend — stand just outside — the elements it's imposed on and underwrites. And indeed, when it comes to organising his installations, Tillmans is neither casual nor absorbed, as he often is when taking the actual photographs, but rather effects an aesthetic detachment and artfulness. ' This is what composing, seeing work in compositional terms, means,' writes Michael Fried, a devotee of absorption. 'We distance it [...] destroy the intimacy it threatens to create [...] one becomes a spectator.' [6] Granted, Tillmans is a much more romantic composer than, say, Mondrian, an expressionist when it comes to information management, his decisions dictated not by pure reason or Platonic order but by fluctuations of affect. But all the same, he phrases the romantic genius less as a content provider than as a distribution manager, a programmer, an image DJ. Starting with the archive he's amassed, Tillmans personalises or customises through selection, sequencing and juxtaposition. Exhibited here is what Pierre Bourdieu would call 'taste, the propensity and capacity to appropriate (materially or symbolically) classified, classifying objects or practices, [which] is the generative formula of lifestyle.' [7] What Tillmans flaunts is not a signature style — thought of as a sameness belonging to the bodily substance of an artist's touch and oeuvre as it gets re-manifested work after work — but rather a signature code, which is more like a perpetually upgraded computer operating system, valued for the diversity of objects and sites it can be applied to and mapped on, for the number of functions it enables and information it accesses, as well as for the ease with which it welcomes recoding.

'I don't think in media-specific categories,' he says. 'My frame of reference obviously includes more than just the 150 years of photographic picture-making.' [8] Tillmans doesn't want to be identified as a photographer (that is, he doesn't want to be pigeonholed, confined to a single social role and function). And yet: 'I have every intention of keeping the "photographer" role.' [9] That is, he identifies with the viral mobility essential to photographic communication, he demands the access granted commercial photographers, photojournalists and social documentarians (ie. 'members of the media'). Which, of course, is the opposite of being pigeonholed. Indeed, mobility is yet another of the many themes on exhibit here. Tillmans, who's known for his involvement in various underground art, fashion and music scenes across Europe and beyond, includes pictures of Berlin, London, New York, Puerto Rico, Tijuana, etc. There are also photographs taken of, and from, airplanes. Photographs of the beach, the countryside, the city. And over and over again, photographs of feet, boots and gaggles of freshly laundered socks.

'I am interested not in individual readings but in constructing networks.' In the late 1960s, only a few years after co-authoring the book about the late 19th-century French art system, Harrison White began researching network dynamics. His theory of 'vacancy chains' — how people hired into one job often leave behind a former job to be filled by another hire and so on — was novel in its approach: rather than assume individuals to be either isolated, autonomous units or else reducible to tightly knit groups, White instead focused on loose, highly contingent connections and the crucial role they play in social mobility and the circulation of and access to resources and opportunities. One of White's students, Mark Granovetter, carried this research further in his theory of 'the strength of weak ties', which proposes that casual acquaintances are more beneficial than close friends and relatives when it comes to acquiring useful information (about job openings, investment tips, potential professional contacts, project ideas, hip new restaurants, etc.). [10] Recently the

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'Wolfgang Tillmans', installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2006
Photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans

6 Michael Fried, 'Anthony Caro and Kenneth Noland: Some Notes on Not Composing', Lugano Review , vol.1, nos.3—4, 1965, p.205.
7 Pierre Bourdieu, Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste , Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1984, p.173.
8 Quoted in Daniel Birnbaum, 'A New Visual Register for Our Perceptual Apparatus', in J. Ault et al. , Wolfgang Tillmans , op. cit. , pp.17—18.
9 Quoted in R. Ferguson, 'Faces in the Crowd', op. cit.
10 Harrison C. White, Chains of Opportunity: System Models of Mobility in Organizations , Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1970; Mark S. Gronovetter, 'The Strength of Weak Ties', American Journal of Sociology , vol.78, no.6, May 1973, pp.1360—80.

weak-tie theory has been taken up by Richard Florida in his influential arguments about the new 'creative class' — ie. young professionals who, in Florida's words, 'share a common ethos that values creativity, individuality, difference and merit', and who 'work in a wide variety of industries — from technology to entertainment, journalism to finance, high-end manufacturing to the arts [...] work whose function is to "create meaningful new forms".' [11] According to Florida, these young artistic types show a 'preference for weak ties and quasi-anonymity', and thus gravitate to dense urban neighbourhoods with high residential turnover, shying away from 'stable communities characterised by strong ties and commitments.' Members of the creative class are leery of the invasiveness of close, cohesive communities, seeking instead the flexibility and freedom to pursue and shape their lives independently, and thus express their creativity and individuality. 'What they look for in communities are abundant high-quality experiences, an openness to diversity of all kinds, and, above all else, the opportunity to validate their identities as creative people.' [12]

Ironically, Florida regards his theory of the creative class and its attraction to urban lifestyles as largely an affirmation of the continuing importance of geography and place, in contrast to what many claim is the increasing migration of social, commercial and financial transactions to the abstract netherworld of the internet. And yet the main attributes he lists as distinctive of the creative class would seem to apply equally well to online networks and cybersocialising, whose participants (think of MySpace) also wade through diverse contacts while remaining quasi-anonymous, their sense of anonymity and privacy helping to loosen inhibitions and promote exhibitionism and self-expression, the virtual parading of DIY celebrity. By granting anonymity, online networking supplies the requisite sense of distance or detachment needed to compartmentalise and aestheticise one's self and social existence.

More generally, this participatory architecture now ubiquitous among online sites (what's called Web 2.0) re-enforces a leading trait of liberal democracy, wherein high regard for democratic process but low expectation for political involvement and trust results conflicted feelings toward community. Today, political discourse retreats behind the triumphalism over consumer empowerment and more 'democratised' markets and media, an egalitarianism of individual lifestyle choices.

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Entering into the museum's largest room, now remade into the dense centre of the Tillmans image galaxy, it's hard not to draw comparisons with Edward Steichen's 1955 exhibition 'The Family of Man' at New York's Museum of Modern Art, a paean to mid-20th-century liberalism that also added up to roughly five-hundred pictures from around the globe, all mounted photo-essay style, up, down and across the institution's interior. Like Tillmans, Steichen took as his starting point the seeming capacity of photographic image-making and communication to reach into every aspect of life; but acting as the museum's director of photography, he translated that technical fact into an ideological argument about the abstract relatedness of all humanity, thus expressing the institution's supposedly transcendent and authoritative viewpoint more than a uniquely individual sensibility. According to Steichen's encyclopaedic survey, if one could boil down all photographic imagery from every corner of the earth, what would emerge is a single common denominator, an objective universal truth. Conveniently, given the US's emergent internationalist Cold War agenda at the time, what was found to be common to all humanity was none other than the bourgeois nuclear family. At roughly the same time, André Malraux, similarly adept at acting and speaking officially, also chose the word 'family' in his essay 'The Museum without Walls' to describe photography's unique capacity to uncover universals:

11 Richard Florida, 'The Rise of the Creative Class', Washington Monthly , vol.34, no.5, May 2002, pp.17—18.

12 Richard Florida, 'Cities and the Creative Class', City & Community , vol.2, no.1, March 2003. Florida's arguments render a service in today's art world if only because they match so closely the language used to promote much 'social' or 'relational' art while unmasking the direct tie between that language and current neo-liberal policy and its cheerleading for a renewal of 'entrepreneurial spirit'. What's lacking in Florida's account, of course, is the scepticism found in, say, Meyer Schapiro's account of Impressionism with which this essay opened. For a rare instance of more recent scepticism, see Claire Bishop, 'Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics', October, vol.110, Fall 2004. But beside a passing reference to B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore's The Experience Economy (1999), Bishop's argument fails to mention rising entrepreneurialist propaganda and policy, and worries that the socialising currently fetishised by the art world is overly homogenous, its ties too strong rather than too weak — which, however, interestingly does not invalidate antagonism as a counter-measure.

André Malraux with the photographic plates for 'The Museum without Walls' Photograph Paris Match /Jarnoux

To the question 'What is a masterpiece?' neither museums nor reproductions *give any definitive answers, but they raise* the question clearly; and, provisionally, they define the masterpiece not so much by comparison with its rivals as with reference to the 'family' to which it belongs. [13]

Since its inception, photography has held out the promise of erecting a vast image bank, which would not only convert material heterogeneity to a common signifying currency but also systematise the resulting pictorial megastore. Here was foreshadowed a system in opposition to that of the salon and museum, one far-more inclusive, in which the idea of culture expanded beyond the fine arts to subsume all of life. 'Every conceivable object of Nature and Art will soon scale off its surface for us,' enthused shutterbug Oliver Wendel Holmes, and 'the consequence of this will soon be such an enormous collection of forms that they will have to be classified and arranged in vast libraries, as books are now'. [14] Even before the introduction of multiple prints, when there was only the daguerreotype's single, unique image, photographic proliferation was seen as extending on three basic levels: not only a much more rapid production of image-documents, as well as greater participation in production because of the negligible artistic skill required, but also the ability of each photographic document to harbour an overwhelming surplus of detail. And in turn this immense generative power quickly gave rise to speculation over how to manage the subsequent overproduction. Here, too, three trajectories can be traced: there were the social issues involved in photography's egalitarianism, its easy use; there were the institutional problems of how to organise all the documents photographically spawned; and there were the empirical or aesthetic questions raised by the excessive information in the images, how they should be viewed or inspected. Photographs were often accused of accumulating 'a detail and precision [...] more nimble

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'Wolfgang Tillmans', installation view, Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago, 2006
Photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans

13 André Malraux, The Voices of Silence , Princeton University Press, 1978, p.21.
14 Oliver Wendel Holmes, 'The Stereoscope and the Stereograph', in Alan Trachtenberg (ed.), Classic Essays on Photography , New Haven: Leete's Island Books, 1980, p.81.

than we need,' as Lady Eastlake, a famous early critic, put it; however, even she still praised the new invention for how it 'unites men of the most diverse lives, habits, and stations, so that whoever enters its ranks finds himself in a kind of republic.' [15] Governing this unwieldy new republic was a task undertaken at every level, from state archives down to individual photo albums. And so it remains today, from the storage vaults of our museums to the file cabinets of Homeland Security to the document folders on our personal computers, our DVRs and our iPods.

But something's changed. In the past, organising this vast information was imagined in terms of strong ties, of great common languages and ideological unities. This was the early dream of the museum and the university as well, both 19th-century institutions representing the nation-state and devoted to the project of comprehensive knowledge, at once positive and unified, in which all data would collate and cross-reference, assimilate into categories that in turn yield to higher categories, all the way up to the summit of pyramidal knowledge. Today, however, with knowledge replaced by information as the dominant paradigm and the nation-state eroded by globalisation, ideologies of common essence are outpaced by an ideology of individual choice, and photography and all other forms of communication become primarily valued for making available not common bonds but endless weak ties. Archives that once were mined by scholars and converted into libraries now await uploading into databases and commercial mega info-inventories. Mobility rather than totality is now the goal, the point being that all documents should not add up so much as circulate, communicate and interface. Strictly articulated disciplines give way to interdisciplinarity, and classifications open themselves to networks.

This is the new model that the museum must now conform to, what could be called the communicational or network model. The museum must adapt to the demand that it serve communication, but it does this not at the exclusion of former functions, such as judgment and education, or rather canonisation and cultural representation. These still coexist with communication, but their heyday is past. Canon formation is ideally a democratic process undertaken by critics as public citizens who approach the museum as constituting the national culture. Canon formation gives rise to and is undermined by canon critique, which parallels the rivalling of museums by the salon des refusés and private galleries, then by avant-garde internationals, artists' clubs and alternative spaces. Canon critique also parallels the increasing social estrangement of the critic, who attacks standing representations of cultural consensus as historically conditioned and temporary, and in doing so claims an ideological position that projects its own future inhabited by a more ideal constituency and consensus.

Of course, the formation and criticising of canons go together dialectically. But the communicational model marks a radical break. Today there is no canon to form or reform, no grand historical project to advance, supposedly no more oppositional ideologies; global capitalism eclipses not only the nation-state but its whole attendant category of culture, and technological advances allow for more products to bypass any moment of public debut and debate and instead be delivered directly to isolated moments of private consumption. Under these circumstances, the museum exerts political muscle less over questions of value and representation, over what transcends and what enfranchises, than over questions of access, what circulates. Its mission is less to institutionalise hierarchies and discriminations than it is to regulate media platforms and delivery systems and the individuals that might gain use or entry to them. Here images (of art, of culture, of the people, the nation) are superseded by connections: the playlist, the mash-up, the remix, the rolodex, the touchpad. Under the communicational model, culture is not evaluated and enshrined but licensed and distributed; it doesn't belong to society; it is informational and belongs to networks of consumers. (Just ask Marc Pachter, director of the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, DC recently gushed about museum renovations, 'you can choose your portal, you can mix and match as you want.' [16])

This is the museum as database. It's a familiar phenomenon today, now that 'the canon appears less a barricade to storm than a ruin to pick through,' as Hal Foster has observed. [17] Similarly, the walls of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, or any other museum for that

15 Lady Elizabeth Eastlake, 'Photography', in Ibid. , pp.41 and 52.
16 Quoted in Johanna Neuman, 'A Museum with a Patented History', Los Angeles Times , vol.3, July 2005, p.E36.

matter, no longer stand for public consensus or official canon. Nor do they facilitate purely private contemplation, manifesting a purely aesthetic realm of perception. What they do is advertise themselves — as distinctive platforms, benevolent hosts helping make possible our most cherished experiences, providing privileged access to not just art but culture and lifestyle generally. They facilitate not national identity or signature style but rather individual programming, signature code. By taking over the curator's role and in effect making these walls his own, Tillmans has garnered applause for pre-empting the museum from folding his pictures into an official version of cultural hegemony. But he 'intervenes' in the museum largely by privatising it, and this at a time when the museum asks to be treated foremost as an object or database of private consumption. Indeed, Tillmans's gesture is impressively ambitious, but aggressive acts of cultural privatisation are now de rigeur , as more and more private collectors open their own museum-like exhibition sites 'to show off their holdings and assert their aesthetic views', as The New York Times reports, 'often subsidised by enviable tax benefits'. [18] The recoding of once 'official' collections into consumer databases, into so many supposedly open-ended opportunities to craft personal statements, effectively defuses any potential public debate that could erupt to challenge the museum's decisions and antagonise its representations, perhaps even distil counter-hegemonies. It's not that all of Tillmans's photographs participate equally in this: his images of dance club throngs, especially the earliest ones, are some of the least arch and precious in his oeuvre, and suggest a solidarity, both in form and content, that complements rather than opposes urban mobility and anonymity, thus pointing toward a reconciliation between community and diversity. Surprisingly, the same can be said for his most recent large-scale abstractions (as I've argued elsewhere). [19] But too often in his shows Tillmans, despite his professed concern for solidarity, runs the risk of making the public institution look like his personal address book, a page out of MySpace not Mallarmé. It's certainly not just him: the frequent evoking of 'community' by artists is too often only a euphemism for the reduction of social life down to an impressive list of connections and a distinctive set of compartmentalised lifestyle interests, so much aestheticised networking. With the overthrow of the canon, official museum practice today shifts from aesthetic autonomy to the autonomy of individual consumer choice, and from an internal system of art to an internalisation of cultural relations within the seemingly personal systems of lifestyle. Tillmans's adventures in such a communicational universe, though epic in scale, seem pretty much the norm: boundlessly acquisitive and largely self-centred.

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17 Hal Foster, 'Archives of Modern Art', October, vol.99, Winter 2002, p.81. In a related article Foster proposes the 'archival art' of Tacita Dean, Sam Durant and Thomas Hirschhorn as a form of post-canon ruin more oppositional than the database, one more 'fragmentary [...] than fungible', too 'recalcitrantly material' to be easily picked through ('An Archival Impulse', October, vol.110, Fall 2004, p.5). Foster's contrast between the material conditions of the database and those of the archive can perhaps be set parallel to the social conditions of what I've been calling networks and those underlying what Bill Readings has called 'dissensus', which he describes as a means of 'dwelling in the ruins' — that is, of conducting social life and conversation in a post-national, post-cultural situation; see The University in Ruins , Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996. Readings's 'dissensus' occurs in a ruins, not a matrix; its conduct follows the logic of opacity and obligation rather than advertisement and availability; its participants are not subjects or identities but singularities which are resistant, not available or 'fungible', to network transactions, to the market demand of infinite exchangeability.

18 Carol Kino, 'Welcome to the Museum of My Stuff', The New York Times , 18 February 2007, p.30.

19 Lane Relyea, 'Photography's Everyday Life and the Ends of Abstraction', in J. Ault et al. , Wolfgang Tillmans , op. cit. , pp.88—117. Tellingly, Tillmans's installation 'Freedom from the Known', his 2006 show at New York's P.S.1 which included almost exclusively abstract works, was remarkably conventional, for the most part sequencing pictures one at a time, left to right, at eye level. Tillmans's abstractions are by far his most Mallarméan efforts.

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Wolfgang Tillmans

ANDREA ROSEN GALLERY

Individual photographs: a sweeping view of a Venetian lagoon; members of the World Adult Kickball Association gathered on the mall in Washington, DC; a sheet of paper, curled into a teardrop shape and glinting against a reflective surface; a profile of a man's face encrusted with an assortment of mottled stones. All were encountered in the main room of Andrea Rosen Gallery as part of Wolfgang Tillmans's eighth solo outing there, "Atair," where the photographer's characteristic

range of genre and format spurred an initial feeling described once by Thomas Pynchon as "antiparanoia," "where nothing is connected to anything." But if the sense at the other end of Pynchon's continuum "*everything is connected*"-never obtains for a Tillmans exhibition, subtle rapports between works nevertheless eventually emerge. A photograph of a newspaper article about the deleterious effects of gold mining presaged *Gong*, 2007, a burnished disk hanging in the next room, while an image of a thigh anq knee in part of a medieval tapestry reverberated in the muscular legs of the young man pictured in *Gedser*, 2004, a few paces away.

Well timed for New York audiences unable to make it to Tillmans's still touring retrospective in Washington, D.C., Chicago, L.A., or Mexico City, "Atair" was a sprawling show featuring nearly fifty works from the past three years in one of the artist's typically anarchic installations, in which a catholicity of subject matter is underscored by the irregularity of the hang. He frames some works and affixes others to the wall with Scotch tape,presses hallways and niches into service as exhibition space, and positions pictures at varying heights, clustered closely together or spaced several feet apart. Here, his colorful darkroom abstractions (made by exposing photographic paper to sundry chemicals and light sources) were interleaved with shots of interiors of cathedrals and mosques, and a few exquisite images of bowed or looping paper commingled with black-and-white stilllifes of single blooms. Four tabletop assemblages, titled *Paradise, War, Religion, and Work (TSC New York), 2007*, comprised photos, newspaper photocopies,and ephemera under glass. (The *Work* section included, among other objects, a copy of an International Herald Tribune dispatch on voter fraud and a snapshot of an IKEA billboard.) These setups, microcosms of Tillmans's discursivity, distill an operative mechanism of his practice whereby meaning, even truth, is negotiated via juxtaposition and collision.

This was a strong show, but not a surprising one, and one wonders if Tillmans's eclectic subjects and unconventional installations have begun to hazard a certain stylization now that he has reached midcareer. Some themes seem to be running their course; the beer-drinkers in *HMD (01-15)*,2007, are older and paunchier than the club-goers of fifteen years ago, and don't look like they're having nearly as much fun. Still, a few heartening new directions surfaced. The effects of enlarging black-and-white photocopies in a triplet of massive framed photograph-*Venice, Garden*, and *Victoria Park* (2007) are mesmerizing enough to short-circuit any (surely less interesting) chestnuts about reproduction or flatness their making might inspire. In addition, *Gong* and the folding and crumpling of photo paper in *Lighter 30*, 2007, and *Lighter 31*, 2007, signal a long-in-the-making move into the third dimension.

The video *Farbwerk* (Color Work), 2006, provided a braking coda to the acceleration of images as one neared the small back room where it was shown. A little less than a minute long, it's a slow, hypnotic zoom in on the spinning red ink rollers of a printing press. The subject is obliquely self-reflexive, evoking Tillmans's publishing endeavors and work in color printing. Yet the video might also be thought a graceful figure for his practice, in which the mundane thing, caught unawares, rouses equally unexpected reserves of scrutiny and attention.

-Lisa Turvey

“At that point . . .”

Daniel Birnbaum

Three parameters influence visibility in the night sky: the angle the planets make with the sun, the onset of dusk or dawn, and the disappearance of the planet beyond the horizon. Together, these factors result in a window of visibility.[1]
—Wolfgang Tillmans

Window of visibility seems to me a relevant concept when trying to grasp the production of Wolfgang Tillmans, a maker of pictures who usually is regarded as a photographer but whose practice clearly transcends all attempts to explicate art in terms of discipline and medium specificity. In some of his works the very nature of *visibility* seems to be the theme, in others the *window* itself, and then there are those pictures in which someone appears in the open and steals all the attention: a person, a group of friends, or a crowd of people involved in something larger than the individual point of view. In an attempt to define his most characteristic fields of interest, Tillmans points to two radically different centers of attention: on the one hand an exploration of the chemical fundamentals of photography as a pure *writing of light* (i.e., as a kind “alchemy”) without any necessary rapport to a world beyond itself; and on the other hand the social interaction between humans, himself included. The first tendency has given rise to a large body of nonrepresentational works, sometimes referred to as abstract and metaphysical in nature, dealing with the exposure process and with the nature of color, light, and photosensitive materials. The second tendency, the interest in human interaction, is abundantly evident in all those pictures of people and social situations that consistently seem to emphasize the possibility of lifestyles that dodge repressive and reductive stereotypes and instead suggest an alternative, perhaps even a “utopian,” social order. These pictures from rallies, clubs, and parties are what made Tillmans known in the mid-nineties, but the other aspect, the attraction to pure or abstract forms of visibility, has in fact been present all along, embedded in the works, slumbering as possibilities not yet fully developed. And then, some years ago, these abstract works became more visible and were given a more prominent place, which in turn made aspects of earlier works discernible in a new way retroactively. “At that point,” says Tillmans about his 2006 exhibition *Freedom From The Known,* “I had drifted

furthest from the visible human world, the social world." Dominating the show, he says, were "abstract works, largely metaphysical in nature."

"At that point . . ." So what are these explorations of pyrotechnic color, these monochromatic images, barely touched sheet of paper, and virtually blank windows of visibility doing in the exhibitions of the photographer who took the decisive portraits of his generation and made our new forms of living and being together visible in the first place? "I just see these things simultaneously," says Tillmans.[2] And now that the "abstractions" are there, prominently displayed in books and exhibitions, we can see hints and glimpses of that "zone" all over the place: in the reflections of the disco ball, in the empty skies behind the Concorde, in the strange light from the solar eclipse, perhaps even in the shiny ice cubes in a glass of whiskey. And then there are all these vacant surfaces lacking reference to anything beyond themselves and thus verging on abstraction: paper, textiles, skin. Something has been forced into the foreground and the void itself becomes visible and seems to gain new significance. "At that point," says Tillmans, "I had drifted furthest from the visible human world . . ." Into emptiness, vacuity, a zone freed of any social significance? To get a first grasp of this zone and of its role in the pictorial universe of Tillmans is my modest ambition here.

A clear-cut line between representational and abstract imagery is not as easy to draw as is sometimes believed. This, it seems to me, is of particular relevance for a critical assessment of Tillmans's recent work, and in fact it is a point the artist often makes in relationship to the works that appear to represent nothing outside themselves and their concrete process of coming about: "Reality is central to these pictures . . . In this sense, their reality, their context, and the time during which they were created are all crucial components of their meaning, for me at any rate." It seems that *abstraction* here, if that really is the right term (I doubt it, for reasons that will become clear), is not a permanent state fixed once and for all, not a distinct condition with an essence that can be defined and fully exhausted, but rather a feature that can *emerge* in pictures as well as in the situations they depict. And perhaps this *emergent* quality has an appeal to him because it's not a final and stable condition but rather a phase in a transformative process that can be quite explosive and which is present—perhaps in less purified form—also in photographs that do depict things in the world. It is photography in pure form: "I'm always aware that it's a miracle, a photo-chemical miracle. To me it seems like a gift to have this technology at my disposal." The possibility of creating a visually appealing and significant object out of an industrially manufactured sheet of paper must be seen as a gift, says Tillmans: "I won't lose that feeling, and that's what I meant by metaphysical."

Photographs can represent things in the world, but photography can also become self-reflexive and explore its own possibilities as a medium, i.e., the technical and material conditions involved in the making of images through light and chemistry. The abstract works that explore the effect of light on photosensitive materials could perhaps be seen as a kind of painting practice with photographic means, even if it's not clear if the concept of "painting" helps us understand them better (after a few early attempt Tillmans has in fact actively avoided the world of stretchers and canvas as well as forms of display too closely related to the history of painterly abstraction). More interesting, in my view, is the question what role these sometimes strict and seemingly purist but often surprisingly visceral works play it the oeuvre, and what the turning back upon itself of the photographic medium implies for an artist so often seen as the key portraitist of his generation. And what, in general, is the nature of the realm opened up by such a folding back of the medium upon itself?

"I never thought of a picture as being bodiless, but rather as existing within a process of transformation from three dimensions to two," explains Tillmans, and this seems true even of images such as *Blushes, Peaches,* and *Freischwimmer,* in which the viewer tends to see hair, skin, and muscle fibers although they are produced without a lens and depict nothing. Indeed, they are more overwhelmingly visceral than any image showing a real body. They are bodily in the profound sense of the lived *flesh* explored by phenomenology and described in terms of a *living present* that always implies the embodied nature of the perceiving subject. Every form of perception—even of the most distant, abstract or theoretical kind—presupposes a perceiving subject that lives in a body and relates to the world (and to other embodied subjects) through the perceptual and kinesthetic capacities this lived body renders possible. Incarnation—the fact that we are bodily beings—is a fundamental point of departure. In his search for the most original and authentic mode of access to the world, Edmund Husserl tried to reduce experience to a level of immediacy and bodily givenness. Maurice Merleau-Ponty developed this path and discovered the "flesh of the world" as the ultimate origin of all experience.[3]

His original fascination was not with photography, says Tillmans, but with the things around him, with "objects and thinking about the world at large."[4] He emphasizes immediacy and the fact that photographs are themselves objects, which means that they are things produced by the photographer, not just some kind of pure representations floating in a mysterious abstract realm. Color photographs, for instance, don't simply come from the lab, they are actively produced and the process is full of decisions. Even before he started to use the camera, Tillmans experimented with the photocopier and his fascination with the possibilities of

intervening with the mechanical process to produce beautiful and artistically significant objects has remained to this day. He uses the copier as a kind of stationary camera that replicates what is on top of it rather than what is in front of it, that can secure, multiply, enlarge, and frame all kinds of textual material and imagery, and that, although without any status as an artistic medium, is capable of freezing the most riveting pictures. The machine adds what seem to be arbitrary digital patterns and lines, and out of a subtle blend of control and randomness entirely unpretentious objects of great splendor and obvious technical sophistication can emerge, free of the cultural weight and intellectual expectations associated with the technical supports of established disciplines and yet capable of creating links to the grandest of traditions and to issues that nobody expected from such a "low" artifact. A photocopy of an old fax, grayish and illegible, is normally hardly perceived as an auratic object. Regardless of technology, it's the physicality of the picture as a crafted object just as much as its ability to convey a true view on the world that appeals to him—true to his point of view, to his feelings, and to his intentions when producing the image. And the tension between control and chance, intention and liberating accidents is, I think, a constant theme in Tillmans's work, and in the photo-chemical experiments the chance element seems to be affirmed and given a positive role reminiscent of August Strindberg's speculations in the late nineteenth century and his occult "celestographs," produced through the exposure of photographic plates to the starry sky.[5]

Tillmans often emphasizes his attraction to paper not only as a support or medium for imagery but as an appealing body with its own artistic qualities. In fact he makes wrinkled, folded, and doubled photo paper a subject for art in a way that renders it sculpturally rich and fascinating. In the *paper drop* series the seemingly dry subject matter of folded paper is transformed into highly charged territory, and a white two-dimensional world gives rise to enigmatic topologies where an outside is twisted into an inside and an inside into an outside, and where the eye gets lost in a night that gradually gives rise to a day and the white tundra slowly passes all shades of grey and falls into the most impenetrable of blacks. Although utterly formalistic, the *paper drops* turn "abstract" photography into an exploration of psychological and erogenous zones. The *Silver* series, ongoing since the nineties, may seem less spectacular, but closer scrutiny displays a world of weird colors that seem to fit into no established spectrum and sometimes there is a silver quality that reminds the viewer of the metallic base of the photographic medium. The recent book *manual* opens with a series of these images, and we are invited to travel from a grayish pink and a pinkish gray via more recognizable hues back to a dirty crimson world. Everywhere there are marks, lines,

scratches, and stains that indicate a physical process, but these are not the traces of another "reality" beyond the process of creating the pictures. The smear doesn't refer to anything beyond itself and its own making. This goes for *Lighter* as well, a series of works consisting of folded paper in riveting colors shown in Plexiglas boxes that emphasize the three-dimensional nature of the works. This is a subtle game of wrinkled surfaces, sharp folds, and demarcation lines that sometimes generate the illusion of fault lines that in reality are nothing but visual effects produced by the confrontation of colors. In what sense are these modestly sculpted papers pictures, and in what sense are they really photographs?

Tillmans's works are always those of an embodied subject, even when the phenomena depicted are seemingly artificial, technical, or remote. There is something irreducibly concrete even in the experience of the most abstract things and something bodily even in the observation of a cosmic occurrence. The early fascination with astronomy that has remained with him until this day has resulted in unusual images of heavenly phenomena that, although light years away, are rendered as part of a world of concrete, tangible, and material things perceived by someone with an individual perspective. In a Tillmans exhibition a photograph of a Venus transit or a photocopied sun appears next to pictures of the most ordinary of things, next to newspaper clippings and to portraits as well as to images that display nothing beyond their own materiality. A distant star, a close friend, an empty sheet of paper—there seems to be no fundamental difference between how these things are approached, and the pictures themselves are given due respect as objects in their own right, carefully produced, selected, and displayed by the artist.

"I follow an aesthetics of mathematics," says Tillmans in a discussion about astronomical diagrams, but immediately makes clear that it's the concrete appearance rather than the abstract language that appeals to him: "I've always hated mathematics, but I'm interested in visibility diagrams, in the question of when something becomes visible." Even the most abstract of things become tangible the moment it becomes visible to someone, because this concrete someone a located in time and space and at home in a body. That's why the atmosphere in the nonrepresentational pictures is not different from the ones that depict the most ordinary things. They are also displayed as physical object, radically *concrete* rather than abstract. Indeed, the two kinds of pictures have more in common than what differentiates them, perhaps one could even claim that the concrete works makes something in Tillmans's deeply personal approach to the issues of what it is to make a picture visible in a way that is difficult in an image that depicts something outside of itself. In that sense they don't represent a radical break or alternative to the world of depiction, they simply make visible what the

photographic medium is capable of in the hands of Wolfgang Tillmans and what silently and in a less distilled way has been going on in his work for two decades.

((Notes))

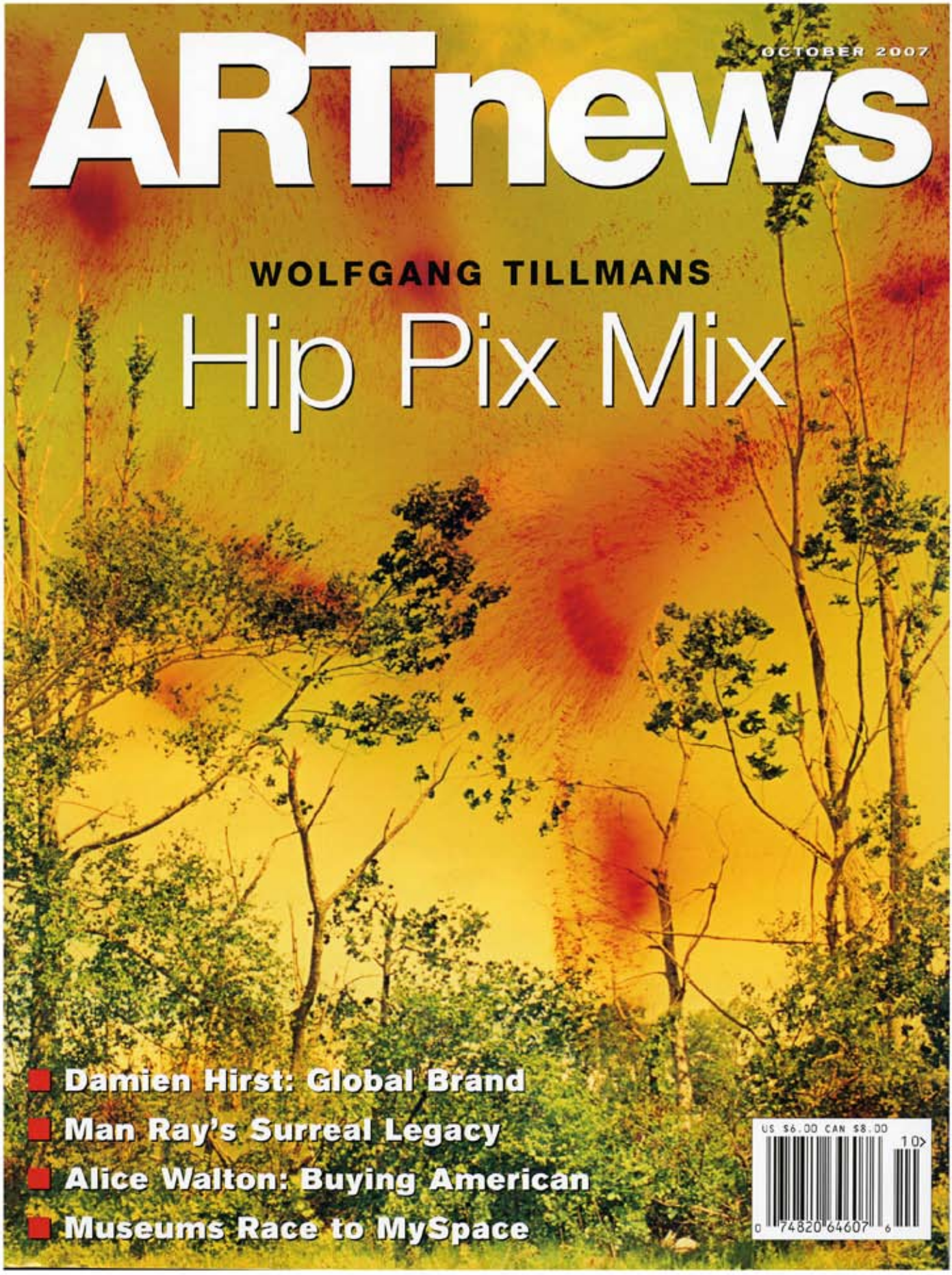
1 If not otherwise indicated citations are from Wolfgang Tillmans and Hans Ulrich Obrist, *The Conversions Series,* Vol. 6 (Cologne, 2007).

2 Personal correspondence with Tillmans, December 2007.

3 In his late texts—especially *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964)—Merleau-Ponty, whose trust in art was far great than his trust in abstract thought, developed a philosophy with a set of new concepts: the visible, the flesh, the chiasm, and vertical Being. All these concepts have in common the attempt to transcend traditional dichotomies and reach a more originary level of givenness where the received dualisms (concept and intuition, mind and body, subject and object) have not yet been separated, but are united in a "positive ambiguity." The flesh is neither subject nor object, neither perceiving nor perceived. The opposites are united according to a logic that breaks down the distinction between activity and passivity. In order to attain this level, philosophy must "install itself where reflection and intuition have not yet been separated, in experiences not yet 'moulded,' offering us everything at once, 'pell-mell,' both 'subject' and 'object,' existence and essence, thereby making it possible for philosophy to define these concepts anew."

4 Personal correspondence with Tillmans, December 2007.

5 August Strindberg, *New Directions in Art: Or the Role of Chance in Artistic Creation* (1894), reprinted in *Strindberg* (Valencia, 1994), pp. 188–94.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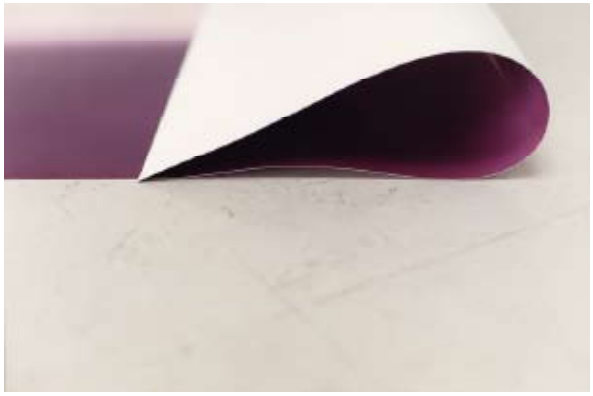
Shooting from the Hip

Wolfgang Tillmans assembles images of hard-partying pals, body hair, and folded paper in installations that run across walls, hover over doors, and linger near the floor

BY HILARIE M. SHEETS



TOP Boys out clubbing in Arkadia I, 1996.
ABOVE Material seduction: paper drop (purple), 2007.

FIRST KNOWN FOR HIS sometimes startling photographs of the European club scene, which positioned his party-going peers as subjects worthy of serious attention, the 39-year-old German artist Wolfgang Tillmans has, over the past two decades, consistently confounded expectations and resisted conventional museum presentations. Tillmans's now-signature installations weave together fragments of contemporary life with images ranging from individual and group portraits to still lifes and pure abstractions concocted in the darkroom. The postcard- to mural-size pictures are positioned inches from the floor or high above doors, framed or hung from binder clips tacked to the wall. "By creating these non-power-language presentations, I make it quite hard for each picture," says Tillmans. "But the installations come out of a desire to include things, to get more information into the room." Although this casualness is often seen as the main message his work sends-like a teenager's wall of memorabilia-Tillmans counters, "It's more the other way around. A teenager knows very well how to use that wall." Tillmans recently had his first major U.S. retrospective, which ended its national tour at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington, D.C., after runs at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago and the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. In February it moves to the Tamayo Museum in Mexico City. Tillmans is concerned not only with individual pictures and their effects but also with how they relate to one another as installations, which can amount to a single evolving work. For this reason, he reconceived the way his show would be installed at each of the venues. He prepared by setting up scale models of the museum spaces in his studio in London, where he has worked and lived since 1995. The models were based on a I: 10 ratio, and as he played with the exhibition's layout, he continually reshuffled images. The creative opportunities inherent in such

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'When you look at the stars through a telescope, it's all only mathematical dots.

an exercise derive from the enormous range of pictures Tillmans is mixing. And it was this diversity of interests that attracted Russell Ferguson, chief curator at the Hammer and chair of the art department at the University of California, Los Angeles, to the artist's work. Ferguson co-organized the show at the MCA with its associate curator Dominic Molon.

"In a traditional sense there's no doubt that Tillmans has an incredible eye," says Ferguson. "He's interested in making a record of his own generation and has a great political and social engagement. I think there's also a spiritual element in his work, a desire for transcendence that expresses itself. He's a formalist in other ways. All these things overlap with each other in work that's extremely fresh compositionally."

In conversation Tillmans slips easily between hipster cool and boyish sincerity. His work is also hard to pin down; he is quick to counter popular assumptions and likes to examine ideas in reverse. "If he feels he's getting tagged as the artist that does this thing or that thing," says Ferguson, "he'll almost deliberately see if he can find another way of working-as a challenge both to expectations and to himself." Well known for his interest in clubbing and dancing, which he wryly refers to as "important research," the 2000 Turner Prize winner is as energetic by day as by night. He has a lengthy exhibition history and 21 self designed books-another form of installation for him-to his name. This fall *Manual*, his most ambitious book to date, is being distributed in the United States by D.A.P., and a show of new photographs opens on the 19th of this month at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York, where prices for his individual works range from $3,500 to $72,000, and for installations of groups of work from $180,000 to $250,000.

TOP **The real thing: armpit, 1992.** ABOVE **An illusion of the real in the photographic print Freischwimmer 16, 2003.**

TILLMANS WAS BORN and raised in Remscheid, a small industrial town near Cologne, where almost everyone, including his parents, was involved in the manufacture and sale of tools. He found the environment conducive to his artistic leanings. "In Germany, particularly in the Rhineland, art was always considered something good," he says, noting his early interest in artists such as Sigmar Polke and Gerhard Richter, working in Cologne, and Joseph Beuys in Dusseldorf, half an hour away. "You know there's a guy who puts fat in a corner, and that could be art. That seemed valid." He says he was first engaged by the visual world when at the age of ten he became obsessed with astronomy. For four years he went to astronomy meetings all over Germany and nagged his parents to buy him ever-bigger telescopes. "When you look at the stars through a telescope, it's all only mathematical dots," Tillmans notes. "It's very abstract in a way, this looking at nothing but see ing everything in it. I think that's been with me ever since"

In 2003 Tillmans produced a chronological compendium of all of his images to date, titled *if one thing matters, everything matters*, published by Tate Britain. It opens with a blurry shot of the moon taken when he was ten, and he has since returned regularly to the skies. He captured images of vaporous clouds during a solar eclipse in 1999 and of a pale pink orb suspended in blackness in 2004. The tiny black dot punctuating the sphere is Venus passing in front of the sun, usually a once-in-a-century event. With the onslaught of adolescence, Tillmans turned from the stars to more earthly pursuits. "It was all about Boy George and Culture Club, gender bending, and dressing up," says the artist, who experimented with making clothes, painting, drawing, and ultimately photography. "I realized around 20 that photography was the language I could speak the best because it's so seemingly nonexpressive, nongestural." He also points to the influence of the Lutheran Church, which encouraged his political activism, and to the experience at age 18 of seeing a Kurt Schwitters retrospective that opened his eyes to the potential of transforming bits of paper into pictures of great beauty. "I felt there was a great expressive freedom in being freed from expressiveness," he says. "With a touch of a button, but with intent, you could transform something from a simple industrially produced object into something that carries great meaning. That's what I loved about Andy Warhol. It is mechanical, but it still has psychological charge."

In 1989 Tillmans, then living in Hamburg, got in touch with the British magazine i-D and began publishing pictures of nightlife, gay-pride parades, and the sexually liberate scene in which he participated. "These self-made, postmodern identities that youth culture allowed you to have were the core of that magazine," he says. Magazines quickly became an importantoutlet for his work. In 1990 he enrolled a bournemouth and Poole College in Dorset, England, to studying photography. It proved a formative experience. "The teaching was like a psychoanalytical exploration of, 'Why do you

It's very abstract in a way, this looking at nothing but seeing everything in it'

think that the world needs more pictures?' and, 'What was the thing that moved you first in your life?'"

The idea of sticking with the subjects that have been meaningful to him has guided his work ever since. "When I first got interested in music, I got this ongoing feedback that it was superficial," says Tillmans. "But there is always much more depth to the things that appear superficial. Or the other way around: things that come across in the language of importance are often not so worthy. Growing up as a gay person, I was familiar with the reversal of things. I had a strong awareness that things aren't necessarily what they seem, but that in the end we have to trust what we observe on the surface."

Whether photographing friends or cultural figures such as musician Annie Lennox, model Kate Moss, or filmmaker John Waters, Tillmans says, "I try to approach that person simply as an interesting creature, a vulnerable creature like myself." The pictures are marked by an informality and offhandedness that belie how precisely lit, colored, and composed they are. Tillmans uses available light or a flashgun that he directs in such a way as to produce even lighting that lends clarity to the subject without excessive drama. He has avoided digital cameras, too, in favor of his 35-millimeter one, which he feels best approximates the sharpness of what the eye sees. "I try to reduce the visibility of the medium," he says of his photographs. "I want them to look easy, to make the viewer not think about me first." While his pictures of people-which have influenced a generation of younger artists-are what Tillmans is best known for, the current museum survey attests to his breadth of subjects and styles. His still lifes, for example, have captured a lived-in hotel room, a bunch of black socks snaking down a hallway, and sheets of curling photographic paper that take on sculptural qualities. The extent to which he stages an image or intervenes in it varies from not at all to 100 percent. His landscapes range from a straight forward grid of 56 small, shifting views of the Concorde flitting through the sky to an oversize print of trees and foliage tinged acid yellow with hallucinatory blotches of red raining down. Tillmans titled this last image Icestorm (2001). It is one of what he considers his "intervention pieces," in which the figuration on the negative is combined with abstract elements he introduces on the printing paper in the darkroom.

TOP Schneckenstilleben, 2004, a still life on the verge of rotting.
ABOVE In Gold (c), 2002, Tillmans combines hard and soft, solidity and abstraction, wealth and risk.

ABSTRACTION IN VARIOUS guises has become a major part of Tillmans's language. It began with a project he did for Parkett magazine in 1998 that involved producing both an issue and a limited-edition work. "Instead of doing an edition print of one image, I gave them 60 unique prints of mistakes and misprints from my darkroom that I had collected since 1992, when I started color printing myself," he explains. "When you understand a mistake, you can add it to your vocabulary."

After that experience, he began developing torches and toolsthat he manipulates directly in front of large sheets of lightsensitive paper. His results are astonishingly beautiful, suggesting close-ups of skin or hair, with blushes of diaphanous color. "They frequently look very figurative even though there is no camera involved," says Tillmans. "I use this human desire to see reality in a photographic object. That allows me to work in abstraction, which would probably be much harder in painting."Seen in concert, the abstract and nonabstract works activate each other. In one room of his show at the Hirshhorn, Tillmans hung an image of a wall of stacked speakers at an outdoor concert near a huge orange abstract picture. On its own, the speaker photograph could be considered in terms of music or sculpture, but in this context, the golden reflection of the sunset set off against the textured speakers itself became the subject. In another room, an image of Tillmans's friend Anders-sitting in boxer shorts and pulling a splinter from his foot- made it hard not to see a nearby wall-size abstraction with swirling black lines as a macrocosm of hairy skin. "I am a little bit obsessed with the question, when does something become something?" says Tillmans. "If something is meaningful to me now, then itimmediately begs the question, when did it come into being? Where is that point of transition? When you think of where things come from, you might be aware in the way you live your life now."

The Washington Post

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Sunday, May 13, 2007

Tillmans's Touch

Artist Deftly Controls His Seemingly Unruly Works

By Blake Gopnik
Washington Post Staff Writer

Wolfgang Tillmans, one of today's most influential contemporary artists, takes snapshot-style pictures of his slackest techno-party pals, but he also shoots impressive images of piles of gold bullion.

He takes almost-abstract photographs of blank sheets of photo paper as they curl back onto themselves on his studio floor. He also presents pared-down abstract sculptures made from sheets of photographic paper, colored and folded. He enlarges pictures found in newspapers until they fill a wall, and reduces his own most famous photographs until they're postcard size. And then he assembles all these absurdly varied kinds of pictures and objects -- some framed as precious works of art and others stuck up with pins or Scotch tape -- into an installation that crawls up and down and all across the gallery walls.

At the Hirshhorn Museum, where a touring show that is Tillmans's first U.S. retrospective opened Thursday, the result is stunning. And it's compelling just because it's so perplexing.

Tillmans's individual pictures are often notable. But what's most impressive is the way they come together into a larger, more substantial whole. It's hard to put your finger on what makes Tillmans's totality so strong. But equally hard, I think, to resist its pull.

Being hard to pin down is part of what gives Tillmans's art so much traction. Most works of art present us with self-contained little worlds that seem sufficient to themselves. The 400 or so images Tillmans gives us at the Hirshhorn seem to open out to a wider world, capturing some of that sense that the lives we live are more open-ended than art is.

That's something that artists have always struggled to capture. And every time they succeed, they also fail. Every time that art seems to evoke life "just as it is" (such a tempting goal, because art can come so frustratingly close to life), it also sets itself up as merely the latest flashy artistic move.

Tillmans has worked harder than most to make his art feel as if it's plucked straight from reality, maybe because he's more concerned than most with how quickly such effects become just more artistic fluff.

Tillmans's first stab at making art that seemed authentic to the feel of life came early on, with his straight-ahead images of the folk he partied with and loved. He didn't want his art to be about art; he wanted it to be about people. So he used a technique that mimicked a point-and-shoot effect, where who's in the shot seems to matter more than how it's taken. But Tillmans is too good for his own good. Whether he wants to or not, he creates piles of striking pictures that viewers can't resist.

"Adam, Red Eye," near the beginning of this show, finds an echo of its subject's flash-induced red pupils in the bright red lockers behind him. That makes its "casual" moment seem as decisive as anything by Henri Cartier-Bresson, whose famous photos tried to catch the instants in the passing flux when accidents cohere into arresting images.

Ditto for Tillmans's shot of his late partner, Jochen Klein, taking a bath in 1997: The apparent accidents of its composition, with a houseplant dead center and its subject and his bathtub barely in the shot, become a perfect, and perfectly compelling, image of what accidents look like. "Empire (Punk)," a hugely enlarged photo of a lousy snapshot sent by fax, captures all the random artifacts of its transmission. This ought to make it about as casual as anything can be -- but instead it seems like an artistic distillation of casualness itself.

Or maybe Tillmans was simply the victim of his own success, like all those dedicated realists before him. An approach that seemed either not concerned at all with beauty, or even opposed to it, came to be one of the dominant aesthetics of our time. It was copied in fashion shoots and advertising throughout the 1990s.

Ever since the Tillmans mode became a fashionable photographic style, his career has seemed to be about finding constantly new ways to achieve his earlier effects -- to somehow be a guy just doing stuff, rather than an artiste striving to engender Art. The seemingly chaotic sprawl of his im-

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ages across the gallery wall, and the apparent accidents of how he frames and hangs them, all speak to that ambition. They all signal that Tillmans doesn't have a settled goal in what he does; he just goes with the flow.

In an installation called the "Truth Study Center," Tillmans fills a gallery with 23 knocked-together wooden tables. He then covers their tops with masses of news clippings and assorted photographs, some by him and others found, some clearly meant to look good and others resolutely not. The accumulated imagery seems to come straight from Tillmans's stream of consciousness, as he contemplates all the objects and issues that have impinged on him. (One unusually spare table in the Hirshhorn version of this installation hosts nothing more than the pages of an article published barely three weeks ago by Naomi Wolf, titled "Fascist America, in 10 Easy Steps.")

Another striking piece at the Hirshhorn, with a somewhat similar dynamic, is called the "Concorde Grid." It consists of 56 photos of that historic supersonic jet, barely glimpsed as it takes off and lands above the scrappy landscapes that surround your average airport. The unruly feel of its images seems to capture the "lifelike" encounter between an insignificant onlooker and an iconic object as they meet by accident within the haphazard flow of time.

But every time Tillmans seems to be doing one thing -- becoming, that is, an artist with a trademark strategy for making art -- he veers off in another direction.

He seems like somebody who avoids allegory and classic symbolizing, right? And then he makes a piece called "Memorial for the Victims of Organized Religions," which consists of 48 sheets of photo paper, in elegiac shades of black and midnight blue, arranged in a grid on a wall. They're like photographs of what it is to shut your eyes, or to focus on a starless night, in mourning for the evil deeds religion has inspired. So a work that seems at first glance to be art at its most formal and abstract -- like the Ellsworth Kelly color patches at the National Gallery, but without the color -- turns out to have the closest ties to issues the artist cares deeply about.

Maybe Tillmans's steadfast contrariness, his determined indeterminacy -- like the sheer, meaning-defeating quantity of information he provides are all part of his attempt to make an artwork that evokes life. That is, taken as a single work, the Hirshhorn's Tillmans exhibition provides a living, mutating, dynamic portrait of the man who made it, in the act of making it. Its shifts, twists, refusals and perplexities provide a faithful record of the shifts and twists and refusals and perplexities that any life is built around, but that most any art will have a tendency to iron out, just because of almost any art's inherent order.

That includes the art of Wolfgang Tillmans.

Even disorder can become an ordering principle; it takes effort and ambition to achieve randomness. Look at the wooden tables in Tillmans's "Truth Study Center": Their inconsequential look is achieved through very careful carpentry. The lifelike energy in Tillmans's agglomerations of images is achieved through very deliberate labor; the dimensions and components of each museum installation are recorded with a tape measure before a show comes down, so it can be re-created in any part of it that is bought.

The Hirshhorn installation is much closer to a carefully considered magazine layout meant to capture a chaotic, energetic feel -- Tillmans was famous early on for his design of magazine spreads of his own art -- than to an actual tipped-out box of old photos.

The true surprise of the Hirshhorn exhibition isn't its disorder; it's how fine it looks. That's not how I felt the first time I saw a similar Tillmans installation. I was sure that it was about a compelling exploration of ugliness and the truly haphazard. But now Tillmans has taught me better.

He's taught me that, all along, his work has simply had the trademark look of the latest captivating art -- or of what captivating art has come to look like, since he came on the scene.

Wolfgang Tillmans is at the Hirshhorn Museum, on the south side of the Mall at 7th Street SW, through Aug. 12. Call 202-633-1000 or visit http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu.

Wolfgang Tillmans at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago.
By Walead Beshty, published in Texte zur Kunst issue no. 64

The recent history of photography presents some intractable quandaries. While the emergent non-photographic practices of the nineties were dominated by a renewed genre-bending interest in bricolage, social networking, and rough-hewn or vernacular aesthetics—a set of concerns that photography's cultural prevalence seemed particularly adept at addressing—the photographic programs developing at the time were engaged with a diametrically opposed array of concerns. As nineties art audiences became increasingly accustomed to a plurality of approaches aimed at democratizing, or at least livening up the cold austerity of the institution, the contemporary photographic practices most often confronted were Plexiglas testaments to objecthood, anxiously committed to the antiquated genre forms of premodern Beaux-Arts pictorialism framed in monolithic ersatz-minimalist coffins. The ubiquity of architectural tropes underscored this phenomenon; in a compulsive imaging of depopulated modernist topographies that offered a reaffirmation of the stark geometries of the white cube for which they were intended. With increasing regularity, the photographic frame was deployed as a proscenium arch for heightened artifice, vacant expanses, and cinematic fantasy, an anxious distancing from the snapshot's quotidian depictions, dazzling and dwarfing viewers with its spectacular accretions, as though allaying photography's historical marginalization, and ideological promiscuity by the force of their imposing grandeur.

Within this milieu, Wolfgang Tillmans work is something of an anomaly. His photographs appear to renounce their autonomy from the outset, confronting viewers with images whose edges seem blurry, uncontained, as if ready to bleed into one another, and offer neither the emotionally charged *mise en scénes* of American street photography, nor the quality of epic disaffection or serial authority characteristic of the new topographic/Düsseldorf school. To put it another way, Tillmans' photographs are distinctly non-theatrical constructions: his formal predilections tending toward pictorial flatness, and a seemingly offhanded compositional arrangement that sits tenuously within the photograph's flat field. This causes Tillmans' photographs to exude a sensation of incompleteness, which is often mistaken for the ill considered, or unintentional indeterminacy of the snapshot. Yet, Tillmans' treatment of the medium varies too widely to fit comfortably within this categorization. In his exhibitions, the faces of the anonymous butt up against those of the famous, a conflation of private memory and the public sphere that renders the membrane between these seemingly opposed mnemonic repositories more porous than our sense of interminable individuality usually allows; lush abstractions hover along side chance observations of the mundane, a similar negotiation with photographic fortuity having brought both of them into existence. It is fitting that Tillmans' earliest photographs found their home in the pages of picture magazines, varied in subject matter and genre, they easily adapted to the editorial strictures that had come to represent the very incompleteness that the neo-pictorialists were hard at work to correct. Tillmans' editorial experience might also explain the seemingly idiosyncratic form of his installations, which favor densely clustered thematic groupings in an exhibition logic that is somewhere between the taped up mementos of a teenager's

bedroom, and the salon style configurations of a magazine page bereft of text; perhaps a nod to photography's most common contexts. This particular reflexivity is called forward in his repeated comparisons between the relation of forms within the photograph, and the relations of objects within an exhibition, as in *Silver Installation Detail*, from 2005, showing a series of Tillmans' monochromatic works taped onto a wall, that by analogy, calls attention to the internal logic of the image as a parallel to that of the exhibition.

These signature strengths of Tillmans' practice are perhaps no better expressed than in his first museum survey in North America, a traveling mid-career retrospective originating at the MCA in Chicago, and currently on view at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles (co-organized by Russell Fergusson and Dominic Molon). Although in this case, both the terms "traveling" and "retrospective" are perhaps misnomers, as only a minority of the work appeared at both venues in identical form, and no strict chronological or categorical logic is overtly proposed. Instead, Tillmans employs his signature approach to the gallery, which is something between that of "installation" and exhibition. Carefully avoiding the isolation of any work, Tillmans proposes each photograph as a momentary stopping point in a larger movement through the show, situating the viewer in a precarious position between distraction and contemplation, forcing them to undertake an interpretive selection process similar to what one would imagine he engaged in while making the images. Tillmans has always used the exhibition context to interweave old and new work, each iteration of his practice acting as a reshuffling of the familiar and the unfamiliar, an operation also at work in his treatment of individual images. His recent *Empire (Punk),* is one such example, in which one of his more iconic early photographs appears as a blown up fax transmission, the clear-eyed lens description of the original sacrificed to the digital artifacts of the fax machine. These momentary echoes of previous moments of reception employ individual photographs as component parts of a system that constantly performs a reexamination and retelling of its own procedures. His constellations of disparate recollections evoke the hybridized cinematic practices of late twentieth century experimental film. The works of Hollis Frampton, Morgan Fisher, Chris Marker, and Yvonne Rainer, each displayed an equally promiscuous notion of their medium, weaving together found images, quasi-autobiographical narration, and abstraction, into a materially based subjectivity that rejected the genre-based purism of their contemporaries, and opted instead for the subtle negotiation with the medium's specific confines.

It was this reflexive quality that Craig Owens associated with photography's operation *en abyme,* specifically its ability to not only exemplify its own reduplication, but depict it simultaneously. Owens saw this as the void from which the photograph could not escape, an endlessly reduplicated failure of meaning

which left only "an overwhelming feeling of absence[1]" as its foregone conclusion. But Tillmans' repetitions eschew this seemingly inescapable reiteration of nihilistic failure through a rejection of photographic transparency (as he said in a recent interview, "the camera always lies about what is in front of it)", and instead emphasizes the epistemic conditions of display that draw the images together (continuing, "and never lies about what is behind it"[2]). Distanced from totalized spectacle, and pantomimed objectivity, Tillmans performs a recovery of documentary photography, materialist abstraction, and appropriation from their strict delineation by self-anointed purists. Tillmans appears acutely aware that the taxonomic separation and categorization of subjects is the most pervasive form of cultural violence enacted on the marginalized, and that further more, this is a process within which photography is uniquely culpable. As the political geography of the United States appears as polarized as ever, purist regimes of righteous indignation and codified cynicism are all to easy to find, even in the art world, where the discussion of politics and form, personal autonomy and public consciousness, are often treated as mutually exclusive. Tillmans cheats these dialectics, producing an exhibition that is rigorous without being rigid, and passionately politicized without being didactic. It is this sensibility that Tillmans perfectly timed exhibition draws to the fore, an insight that aesthetic and social divisions are often one and the same.

[1] Craig Owens, "Photography *en abyme*," in *Beyond Recognition: Representation, Power, and Culture*, Scott Bryson, Barbara Kruger, Lynne Tillman, and Jane Weinstock eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press) 1992, p. 26.

[2] From an interview between Wolfgang Tillmans and Mark Wigley, at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, September 17th, 2006.

LA WEEKLY Art+Books

Wednesday, October 18, 2006

ART

AFTER ARBUS

Wolfgang Tillmans, Seeing and thinking

BY HOLLY MYERS

Susanne and Lutz, white dress, army skirt, 1993

In thinking about Diane Arbus, as one does from time to time, I came to a distressing realization: that I couldn't name a single photographer subsequent to Arbus (and Frank and Winogrand and Friedlander and Eggleston and the other greats of her generation) who ranked on anywhere near the same level, which is to say, who thrilled me near as broadly, deeply or consistently. Looking back from Arbus, one sees Stieglitz, Weston and Evans; Cartier-Bresson and Atget; Fenton, Cameron and Nadar — a long lineage of soul-satisfying luminaries, whose images aren't likely to ever get boring.

But looking forward? There are many who produce admirable pictures, but none who don't feel, in some way, partial, like one chapter in a fine collection of essays rather than a volume unto themselves: Cindy Sherman, Jeff Wall, Nan Goldin, Lewis Baltz, Catherine Opie, Andreas Gursky, Thomas Struth — all important artists who do what they do really well but who, for the most part, do only that. None approaches the poetic scale of Arbus' vision, or the sheer intensity of humanness she manages to encapsulate in a single picture.

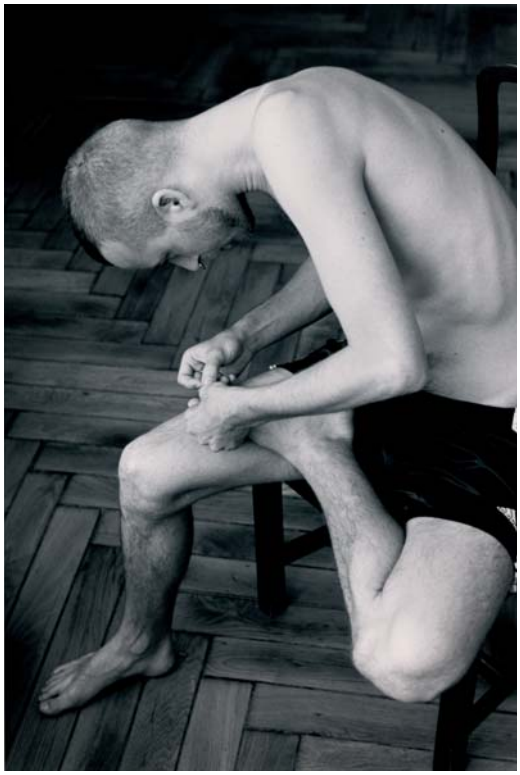
Wolfgang Tillmans would not seem an obvious candidate for heir to the Arbus legacy. In fact, his work has virtually nothing in common with hers, either formally or conceptually. With the exception of the occasional celebrity, he photographs humble things: friends, fruit, piles of rumpled clothing. He prints his images in a variety of sizes, rarely doing them the honor of a frame, and puts such emphasis on the interchangeability of both subject and scale that he is commonly (and mistakenly) criticized for a casual approach to the medium. His current retrospective at the UCLA Hammer Museum, however — his first in the U.S., surprisingly — suggests a reason to be hopeful about the state of photography as a discipline. It's not so much a matter of his being a better or worse photographer than others of his generation (the medium has changed so much in the past three decades that a qualitative hierarchy would be virtually meaningless), but rather that he restores to the enterprise something that was lost back in the '70s somewhere: a certain holistic heroism of vision.

The distinction is more romantic than intellectual, I'll admit — and therein lies the problem. Photography obviously didn't disappear after 1971 (the year of Arbus' death), but, like art generally, went the way of the intellect, exalting concept over impression, thinking over looking. The romantic ideal of the photographer as pure eye gave way to the photographer as typologist, trickster and theorist. With Ruscha's "Every Building on the Sunset Strip," photography became a tool rather than a mode of being, and rarely achieved — or cared to achieve, or even necessarily trusted — the sheer visceral (that is, visual/emotional/psychological) impact that previous generations strove for. It was not the goal of these works to thrill, exactly, but to dissect, analyze, stimulate and provoke. At best, the shift can be said to have rejuvenated a medium that had grown stale and repetitive, bringing it in line with the concerns of the wider art world. At worst, it shuttered the scope. Even the least conceptual of photographic projects today cling to themes, devices and statements; few brave anything nearly so broad and messy as the City, Nature or the Human Condition.

If there's anyone poised to bridge these two divergent currents, it's Tillmans. Born in Remscheid, Germany, in 1968, he emerged in the early 1990s sparkling with voice-of-his-generation promise. If you know his work only casually, these early pictures are probably the ones that you know: tender, snapshotlike portraits of sexually liberated, effortlessly gorgeous (in that loose, organic, European way), techno-era hipsters. Tillmans presented the work, as he has all work since then, in cluttered, frameless exhibitions, printing the photos in multiple sizes and taping them in freeform clusters directly to the walls, as well as in elaborate layouts on the pages of British and American fashion magazines.

The Hammer show, the installation of which Tillmans designed and oversaw (as he does most of his shows), affirms the best aspects of this early promise without indulging the hip factor or trapping the artist in its mystique. A seductive 1992 series called "Chemistry

Squares" — 15 small, square, black-and-white images of sweat-glistening, Ecstasy-glowing club kids, taken on a dance floor somewhere in London — is the show's primary token of this cultural moment and, hung as it is next to a large photo of a sculpture of the Trinity, epitomizes the spiritual aspect that Tillmans clearly ascribes to that moment's communal idealism. His view of humanity is fundamentally optimistic and generous, which makes his portraits particularly engaging. The dozen or two assembled here, both early and recent, of musicians, artists and personal friends, primarily, are among his best and should leave no doubt of his pre-eminence in the genre. Few have such a talent for drawing vulnerability, kindness and complexity out of such a range of faces, classically picturesque or not.



Anders pulling splinter from toe, 2006

The portraits, however, are only a fraction of what the show contains. There are also still lifes, landscapes, documentary works, abstractions, a video and a room-size installation of glass-topped tables containing a collaged assortment of found images, newspaper clippings and other ephemera. There are conceptual threads to the show, sociological threads, formalist threads and political threads, all equally rigorous. There are moments when the work feels cool and cerebral and moments of extravagant visual indulgence; moments of dinginess and moments of elegance; moments of humor and pathos and joy and grief. The essays in the show's catalog go to great rhetorical lengths to isolate and justify several of these aspects individually — Daniel Birnbaum writes on the imagery, Dominic Molon on the conceptual framework, Russell Ferguson on the portraiture, Lane Relyea on the abstraction and Julie Ault on the installation — but what's striking, ultimately, is the perfect ease with which these aspects coexist in the work itself. What might easily have come off as aimless, schizophrenic or showy feels instead naturally and appropriately holistic. He titled his 2003 exhibition at Tate Britain "If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters," and that pretty much says it. His subject is nothing short of existence itself, in all its grandeur and banality.

Tillmans has resisted the strict designation of "photographer," which is understandable given the breadth of his practice and the general unpleasantness of being pinned into any one category, but he has nonetheless become one of the medium's most important visionaries. The show suggests an artist entering into an impressive maturity, moving beyond his stylish beginnings to become a voice of not only his generation but of the medium as a whole, redefining the terms of production and exhibition to propose an approach defined by neither the romantic ideologies of seeing nor the conceptual ideologies of thinking, but by a graceful and often profound interweaving of the two. The camera, for Tillmans, is both a tool and a mode of being, which makes following along the paths he uses it to blaze a deeply rewarding experience.

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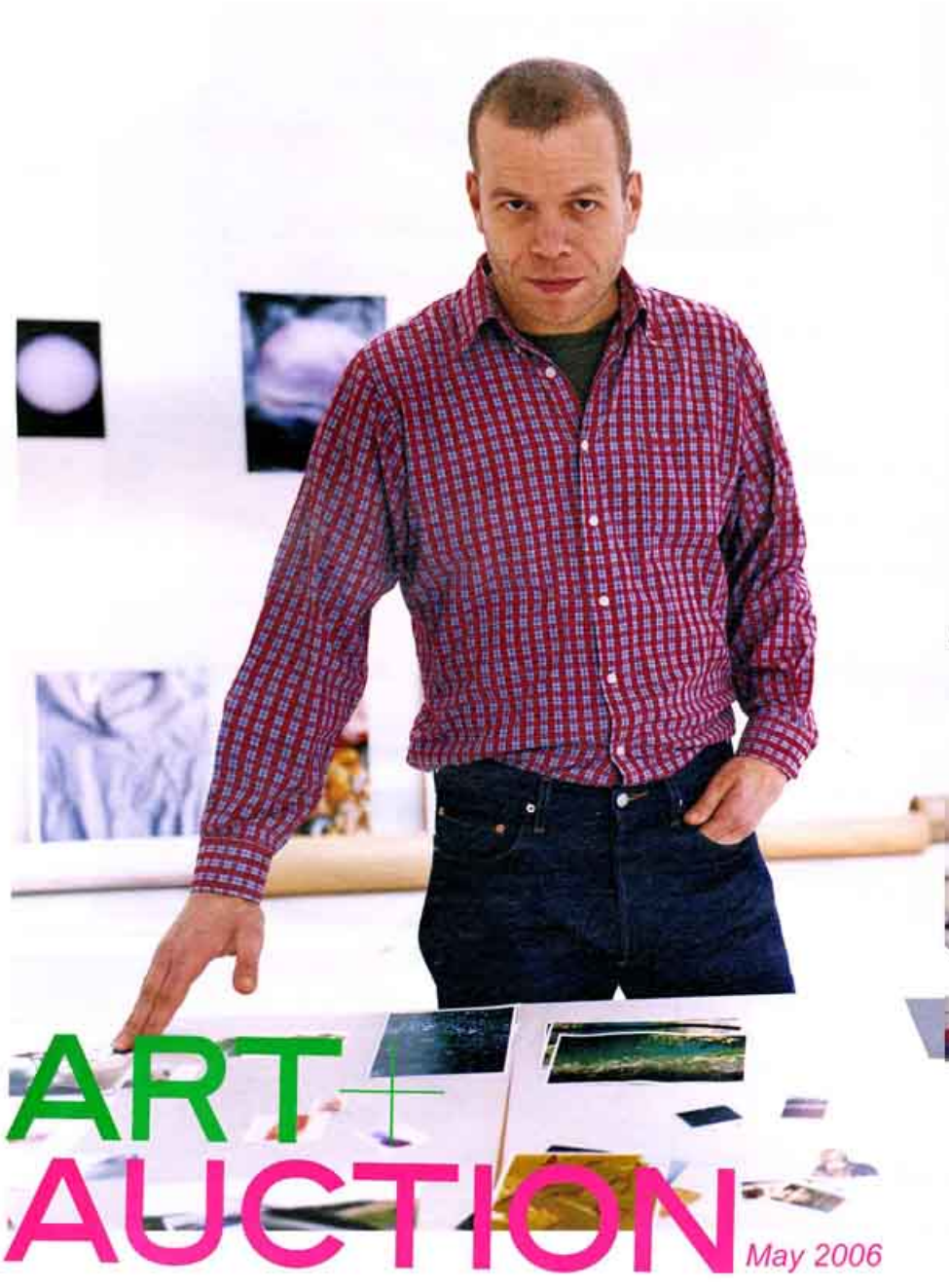
Wolfgang Tillmans

HAMMER MUSEUM, LOS ANGELES

17 SEPTEMBER 2006 - 7 JANUARY 2007

'You can see everything in the world here in isolated examples at least, peculiar characters or people who are for the moment you see them peculiar. And everybody is quite peculiar now and then. Not to mention how peculiar anyone can be at home.' Edwin Denby's sharp observations of mid-twentieth-century New York provide a rich context for Wolfgang Tillmans's photographs - or better yet, his selective (re)programming of them in exhibitions - that can help us keep our eye on what always seems to be the prize (rather than the lesson) of his work: absolutely nothing is normal all the time, and any claims to the contrary are not to be believed. That Denby expanded his discussion of the diversity of 'people in the streets' to include that found in both dancers and buildings reinforces a connection to Tillmans's ideology, aesthetics and, most importantly, material in all senses of the term. Tillmans shows us that even the most minimal and even tautological photograph of a curled sheet of white photo paper - paper drop (white), b (2004) is the one example included in this show - can have all the peculiarity and substance of the most ordinary person (whether anonymous, celebrity, best friend or even oneself) or the far-from-distinctive building. In himmelblau (2005), for example, a view up a nondescript airshaft at a cropped rectangle of pristine sky is upended and transformed into something much more than formal bliss.

With that said, and moving too quickly past some of the other examples of 'abstraction' in Tillmans's output - especially all of the absolutely gorgeous large-scale photographs of colourfully streaking light effects, and his one DVD projection, Lights (Body) (2000-2), which to me is a masterpiece - it was in the very first room in this particular installation of the exhibition that Tillmans has raised his game. (It opened in Chicago, where according to reliable sources it was much more spare and grand; and significantly, it will travel to Washington, D.C., where one can at least dream that it will speak some truth to power.) Tillmans clearly understood that the Hammers galleries call for a sense of intimacy, and any thought I had going in that maybe I'd already seen everything he could do (whether in his high-energy presentation at the Palais de Tokyo, the comprehensive rigour of his survey at Tate Britain or the calm contemplation of the almost otherworldly Tokyo Opera City Art Gallery) was immediately erased by walking into a selection of 13 photographs from his 'Soldiers' installation at Tate Britain that were juxtaposed with a new work, For the Victims of Organized Religions (2006). Comprising a grid of 42 'blank' photographs that moved in colour and emotion from black to blue, this new work changed the way I looked at everything else, which, given the fact that I'd seen a lot of the photographs many times before, goes to show the deepest benefits of never taking anything for granted in Tillmans's work, and by extension, the rest of the world. **Terry R. Myers**



wolfgang tillmans

DECEPTIVELY EFFORTLESS AND MUCH IMITATED, TILLMANS'S EDGY PHOTOGRAPHS ARE INTIMATE REFLECTIONS OF CONTEMPORARY LIFE

BY JORI FINKEL. PORTRAIT BY JASON SCHMIDT

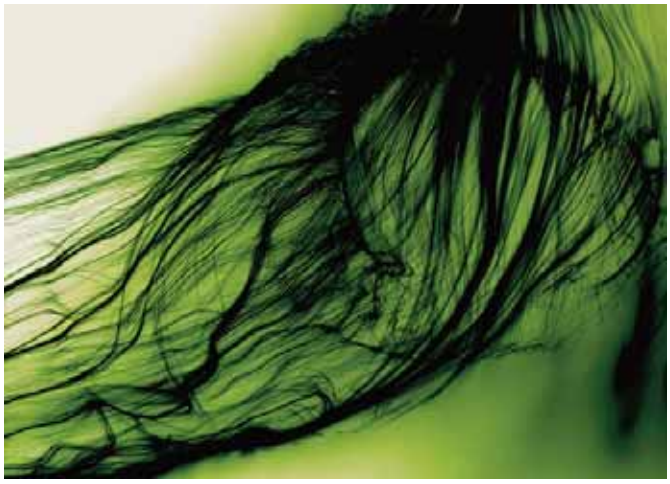
ART + AUCTION May 2006

IT'S HARD TO SPEND any time in Wolfgang Tillmans's London studio without. if only for a moment, seeing the entire place as a dance club. Look up at the skylight, and you will notice the remnants of a party-a mirrored disco ball and a string of Christmas lights hanging from a crossbeam. There's also a pair of turntables in the corner, a reminder that Tillmans made the London tabloids a couple of years ago by spinning at trendy nightclubs like the Cock and Nerd.

"I do clear out the studio for a party once and a while, maybe once a year. And you can see my studio in some of my 'hangover' pictures:' says Tillmans. 37, looking not at all hungover and very clean-shaven in a dark green sweater and black pants. His studio, located in a large loft in the East End, has all the professional equipment befitting an internationally celebrated photographer: darkrooms and computer stations, a dozen worktables and stacks of supersized prints unrolled on the floor and taped to the walls. Here he likes to play CDS when he works, and talks about the connections between music and his photography, his rather fashionable life and his very successful career, openly and without apology.

But do not, his supporters warn, mistake Tillmans for a slick version of Nan Goldin, who is famous for her gritty, diaristic photographs of friends and lovers. "There's a widely held misconception that Wolfgang goes to clubs with an Instamatic camera and shoots whatever happens to catch his attention:' says Russell Ferguson, chief curator at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. "When you see the whole body of his work, it's impossible to continue to perceive him this way." Ferguson is doing his part to correct the myth. He and Dominic Molon of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago have curated Tillmans's first retrospective in the U.s. The show runs at the MCA. May 20 through August 13, and at the Hammer September 17 through January 7. While the exact selection varies between venues, both feature well-known early shots of Tillmans's friends, such as Alex and Lutz, who appear in numerous photographs, and his lover Jochen Klein, a painter who died of AIDS in 1997. Along with his portraits, there is also a strong emphasis on his more conceptual work of recent years, including his "Concorde Jet" series and several abstract prints from his current show at P.S.l in New York, through May 29.

Both the MCA and the Hammer are hosting a room-size installation called truth study centre, first shown last fall at Maureen Paley, the artist's gallery in London. The installation consists of a group of worktables set up to display objects, photographs and appropriated texts and images, such as newspaper clippings about the widespread European dismay over President Bush's reelection in 2004. Thanks to both its archival sensibility and its political orientation, the work figures prominently in Molon's catalogue essay, which argues that Tillmans is not a "snapshot" photographer in the tradition of. say, Stephen Shore as much as a conceptual artist who uses photography as a tool. in the spirit of Ed Ruscha and Richard Prince. Molon goes so far as to compare truth study centre with Marcel Broodthaers's Musee d'Art Moderne, Departement des»



I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN INTERESTED IN THE ACCIDENT, THE CONTINGENT"

"PHOTOGRAPHY NEVER HAS THE SAME SOCIAL POWER WHEN IT SEEMS STAGED "

Aigles, a fictional museum project from 1972 exposing the limits of institutional display. Tillmans himself encourages this reading to some degree. "I'm the total opposite of a diarist of life:' he says. "My job is to think about the world visually, and I do it best through the camera." When asked outright whether he even considers himself a photographer, he says he thinks of himself as a "cultural being" above all else. "In school I painted, drew, made clothes, made music-all the things an overly expressive and observant artistic teenager would do:' he says. "Photography was the last thing I came to. It is not a necessary medium for me, but it is a great gift." Still, Tillmans says he understands where his "snapshot aesthetic" reputation comes from. "You always get stuck with what you're first known for. It's just a function of human nature:' he says. "It's like [the singer] Marc Almond of Soft Cell, who is still, 25 years after the fact, associated first and foremost with the song 'Tainted Love.' It's something you can either accept or despair over." In Tillmans's case, the attitude has been acceptance, and the song that's hard to stop humming is his early work for i-D magazine. Born and raised in Remscheid, Germany, he moved to Hamburg after graduating from high school in 1987. There, a self-described "music-loving and love-loving young man:' he discovered nightclubs and the acid house scene. He began capturing that scene for i-D in the early '90s (he entered Bournemouth I; Poole College of Art in England in 1990 and studied there for two years, then moved to London). For the magazine's "sexuality" issue in '92, he also shot a series of photographs of his friends Lutz and Alex in suggestive positions. Most famously, in Lutz E: Alex holding cock, he appears bottomless while she is topless, "a way of making them both vulnerable," Tillmans says. He stresses that these were editorial work and not fashion assignments, as many have assumed. "Photographing for magazines was not about saying Gucci or Prada is hot:' he notes. "It was not about the fashion industry." As Ferguson points out, there are very few brands or labels featured in Tillmans's photographs. His work is not about commodities. "He likes to photograph things that aren't for sale or are free," says the curator, "hanging out with friends, laughing, dancing, having sex, being in nature, being active politically."

Tillmans's first solo show, which took place in 1993 at the Daniel Buchholz gallery in Cologne, was filled with these kinds of intimate, humble and provocative images. Critics at the time assumed the shots were unscripted glimpses of men and women testing traditional gender roles, but the artist says he often cajoled or guided his subjects and used flash guns for lighting. "I constructed this world from the start, as much as someone like Jeff Wall:' Tillmans explains. "The difference is that I made my staged scenes look as real as possible. Photography never has the same social power when it seems staged." Today that show is remembered for its unconventional exhibition format as much as for its content. It was the first time Tillmans hung magazine spreads featuring his pictures along with unframed photographs of varying sizes in salon style groupings, using Scotch tape and steel pins to hold the works to the wall. (The use

later, as would rampant imitation of seemingly spontaneous type of presentation by younger artists.) The goal was to create a non-hierarchical and nonlinear visual rhythm. "Photography very happily sits in a book," says lillmans, who has designed 19 of the 21 books that bear his name. "I'm doing things in galleries that I can't do in books or magazines."

Since the Cologne exhibition, the artist has offered his trademark photographic installations for sale. Along with selling unique works and multiple editions of a single image (including 12-by-16-inch prints in an edition of 10, 20-by- 24-inch prints in an edition of 3, and one 80-by-52 inch print by itself, all priced between 55,000 to 530,000, depending on size), he reserves one of each image in a show to be sold together as a group.

The Walker Art Center bought one of these installations from the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York as early as 1995; the Guggenheim Museum acquired another in 2002 and the Tate Modern bought one in 2004 from Maureen Paley in London, four years after awarding Tillmans the Turner Prize and one year after giving him his first major retrospective.

Like the Tate show, rather democratically called "If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters," the American retrospective attempts to bridge the gap between Tlillmans's early portraiture and his more recent abstractions, such as "Blushes," 2000-03, a series of cameraless prints made by exposing photographic paper directly to light. While these works look very different, Tillmans sees them as part of the same continuum, pointing out that his "Blushes" invite comparisons to hair, wire and skin, while the early portraits filled with clothes and fabric can be read for their abstract patterning. "There is not a hard line between my portraiture and my abstraction," he says. "There's an assumption that abstraction is more experimental. But all of my work allows for the mistake, allows for chance to come into play in a skilled and controlled environment. I have always been interested in the accident, the contingent. the fleeting."

This sort of mindful channeling of chance extends to lillmans's work installing his own photographs. He doesn't finalize a display until he arrives at the museum or the gallery and can face the actual walls. But that doesn't stop him from trying out (he calls it "rehearsing") a major installation well in advance. This winter, for example, he kept 1:10-scale foam models of the MCA and the Hammer Museum in one corner of his studio so he could experiment with different arrangements of images.

Visit the studio another time, says Paley, and you are just as likely to find Tillmans designing a new book, with a maze of page proofs laid out on the floor. Discussing his steady stream of publications and exhibitions, Paley describes him as one of the most energetic and enterprising artists she's ever met. She compares his studio with Warhol's Factory.

"Wolfgang has such a fascinating mind," Paley says. "He is very organized, very structured, and has a great ability to multitask. lf he weren't an artist, he could run a major corporation."

But Tlillmans himself has another alternate career in mind. "If I weren't a photographer," he says, "I would love to be able to sing."

EB

"I THINK ABOUT THE WORLD VISUALLY, AND DO IT BEST WITH A CAMERA"

PRICE $3.99

THE NEW YORKER

APRIL 3, 2006

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK
ABSTRACT THINKING

Wolfgang Tillmans, the German-born, London-based photographer, has never tied himself down to the literal image. Although he made his reputation in the early nineties for sly insider's views of youth culture, Tillmans has also turned out landscapes, portraits, and a series of charged still-lifes that seem to be only loosely anchored in the material world. Recently he has experimented with pure abstraction, and massive nonrepresentational photos are at the core of "Freedom from the Known," his sprawling new show at P.S. 1. Putting his camera aside, Tillmans manipulates light and chemicals applied directly to photographic paper. His bruised monochromes, agitated color fields, and scratched-up swaths of foam recall psychedelic light-show effects, but they're more mysterious. Juxtaposing these almost empty images with photographs of a vase of peonies, pyramids, open windows, a crouching soldier, and a man's scrotum, Tillmans invites us to see all these things as potential abstractions—buoyant, atomized, melting into air.

—Vince Aletti

WOLFGANG TILLMANS, "IT'S ONLY LOVE GIVE IT AWAY" (2005)

SPIKE 06 - 2005

spike
ART QUARTERLY

"The Spirit of a Time is in fact the Spirit of a Time"

Rita Vitorelli spricht mit / speaks with *Wolfgang Tillmans*

Rita Vitorelll: Let's talk for a moment about the title of your most recent book truth study centre.

Wolfgang TiIlmans: I've always liked the names of research institutes and I like inventing them, too: some sort of name for a hypothetical research institute. Behind that is a playful pleasure in phonetics. Institute for Geodesy and Photogrammetry. I always found that very attractive. Sexy. The neutral position you have when you know nothing. Actually nobody knows what the result of the research will be, and yet we brive it this authoritarian, neutral name. We are, after all, the authorities in this case.

RV Truth is the subject of study in your fictitious study centre?
WT *(laughter)* Well, that is a research insitute that doesn't exist and something that never will exist. but it's something that would be needed. The fact is that I have noticed in recent years that this idea of truth is coming closer and closer to the sentre of things. After the 1990s, which seemed to be such an undogmatic time, people are suddenly demanding "Truth" again.

RV Who are you thinking of In that context?
WT Islamic fundamentalism or the South African President who denies that H IV causes Aids. Or the fact that Blair and Bush did¬n't accept that Hans Blix found no Weapons of Mass Destmction in Iraq. That a large number of themes that concern us from day to day have their causes in different definitions or interpretations of truth. We suffer because other people have laid claim to truth for themselves. By contrast, I find scientific relativism extremely attractive. The evidence of how things appear has to be taken on board somehow at the very least. That the visual appearance of things also creates the facts. For example, in my own case homosexuality is always a good test for finding out a great deal about people's willingness to look reality in the eye.

RV The question Is. what one can contribute as an artist toward the dis-
WT covery of truth.
Yes, exactly. The book title is not a promise that I can find that out or that I hold up my truth as something fixed. It is also recog¬nition that the work of an artist cannot perform the work of a research institute. I was more interested in the poetic possibility of setting this concept in the centre - Tmth. And to do this against the background that we also have to take it over. You can't simply leave it to the Pope and Al Qaida and Bush. The word Truth is like a hot potato. You don't want to make a grab for it; as a cool person you would prefer to stay away from it. And that is always the problem: that unscmpulous people squat right down in the middle of it. For me it was important to help take over this word.

RV So the book title Intends to give the work a certain push?
WT It wants to provide a side-thought, an auxiliary thought. What is in the morning paper will also affect the way you read the book in the evening.

RV And the blank sheets every now and then, what Is their purpose?
WT That is a desib'll level, simply to break up the rhythm. Sometimes it simply looks good if there is an empty page on the lefl. That is one of my main design principles when I'm making books"because I am actually very strict about the layout. People also ask me why the books don't look like the exhibitions. But in my opinion they do: in the way they arc sequenced they arc similarly clear and unclear, like the installations. And then, there are experiences and expectations. For > example, you don't expect the right-hand page to be blank with a picture on the left-hand side. If the right side is blank on one double page and the left one on the next, you suddenly have a white page in your hands. All of my work takes place on paper. Everything i do is ultimately paper - with the exeption of the new exhibition, which is paper and tables and glass. I am simply interested in paper as a material. I have even taken photos of photo paper.

RV There are various formats for one work or one subject.
WT Every work is an edition by itself. The edition with the dimensions of 40 x 30 cm is a "different" work from the one with the dimensions of 50 x 60 cm, because it then "does" something different. I start with the object. This sheet is this size or that and consequently has an effect that is different from that of a smaller sheet with the same motif.

RV But you see them as single works, or are the wall installations sold as a whole?
WT Yes, that happens, too. Well, I don't see it as a necessity that the wall installation has to stay together in its given form in every case, but there are central walls which are as they are, a work in themselves, including a title.

RV When do you decide what you need in what size for the large-scale installations? Is there some sort of starting point?
WT In some cases I choose them in advance, thinking about the city, the location, the gallery and the connections. On site I can then see what is important to me in this or that place. The size is then a formal matter, with the formal concerns being no less important than the subject matter. A small picture can be just as important as a really big one. The decision to show it so that it looks good, that the colours are right - those are not superficial questions but have something to do with the way you talk. Either you speak clearly and well, or don't.

RV But in principle each motif would work in all sorts of formats?
WT No. I found my formats in 1992 or thereabouts, from experience. And I have always remained faithful to the basic grid. There are photos of 10 x 15 cm where I see the pictures for the very first time, as they come from the laboratory: Then 30 x 40 cm, 51 x 61 em and about 535 x 210 cm. That is the basic structure - which I then produce as editions of 10, 3, and 1. And the big format exists both as an ink-jet print and as a framed C-print.

RV Why?
WT Because both are in turn so different in their material quality, and I find both interesting. In 1999, when I introduced the framed C-prints, I was interested in simply doing the opposite of what I was known for, namely the ink-jet prints on clamps.

RV Do you notice a trend? Does one work better than the other?
WT There are people who see the ink-jet prints as more typical. But many don't like to take responsibility for this frail object, where you have to be careful when you open the window, that a gust of wind doesn't rip it from the wall. And so there are people who prefer to have a solid presence.

For me the important thing is the purity of the object. This *sheet* interests me. In the exhibition I came to a point where I wanted to take away everything that put the sheet on a pedestal. I wanted to be able to experience the sheet as a sheet. I then invented a special adherence technique ... You can keep that for three or six months, that purity in spacc, but when

it has been hanging on someone's wall at home for five years and he smokes or there are flies in the apartment (flies settle on pictures, for example, and shit on them), the dirty sheet has less of the purity of the object than when it is protected in a frame I chose for it and where it can, hopefully, remain for many years. But in fact everything passes. That is also what is special about photographs: that they come into the world as this extremely perfect object and are always at risk from that point on.

RV Now about the way you hang things. You were the first to present photography like that. Why did you do that back then?
WT Like so many things that are fundamentally new, it didn't feel like that at the time. Not in the way that I might say now I'm going to do something revolutionary. Of course a certain spirit, a cer¬tain mood and will of mine was involved in that. But I believe that most things that have new force come about not because you have that intention, thinking in advance about how it is going to be received, but because there are certain reasons for it .:.

RV That is something like a lucky moment.
WT Yes. Of course I can be pleased that it came to me, but on the other hand it is of course the case that I made many little impor¬tant decisions at many points, and that led to what ultimately resulted. For example, I simply rejected the existing hierarchy between magazine pages as throw-away objects and manually processed photos as objects of value. But not in a mere reversal, but rather in a conjunction of the two: both have special haptic qualities. That was definitely a conceptual decision. Whenever 1 designed magazine pages myself, which I was able to do for i-D in 1992, 1993, those pages were fully authentic works as far as I was concerned.

RV How large was the conceptual share in your work. This reminds me of strategies in the 1960s, where the aim was to be as unhierarchl¬cal as possible with all sorts of materials, trying to pull down the hierarchies by sticking or pinning them to the wall, etc.
WT There was a huge intuitive consciousness for that. The fact that one only buys a wall drawing with a certificate was something 1 was familiar with. When I chose ink-jet prints (at that time they were large-format colour photocopies) as medium in 1992, I saw a conceptual solution in them from the very beginning; in particular, that I can travel to some other place with these small original photos and make a big exhibition there. Which I even did in the early years.

RV That Is a practical economy of resources.
WT Yes. Precisely, that is something that still goes with me today, a pleasure in photography as an economical resource that helps make it possible to think about space and objects. A lot of my work is actually three-dimensional. That protects me from having to make all sorts of unnecessary objects and casts, replicas and things. (laughter)

RV Was this conceptual aspect even noticed?
WT There was so much happening in the pictures in terms of content that all this conceptual thinking was not noticed by critics at all. The people who concerned themselves intensely with it liked it and found it interesting, but to this day it does not determine the way my work is seen. Of course people know that I have gone through all possible models for "pictures in space". But it is interesting that in the case of photography the subject is always absolutely in the foreground and people actually don't think much about the object. And the object is made insignificant in many photographs because it is pasted up, placed in a borderless frame ...

RV One thing I found very interesting was that you see the journal works as editions, but simply as much bigger ones. I really find that funny. When I read that back then, the process, the way of dealing with the thing really interested me. The approach to the picture and to the subjects themselves corresponds to each other very strongly In terms of attitude - because the way I see them your works are extremely unpretentious.
WT Precisely, because this kind of action, making a picture of something, needs in the first place to be severely questioned. Why? What's it all about? What added value can I provide? What is the meaning of this act of changing a real object into a two-dimensional one? I think it was very good that I had a wonderful teacher when I was a student, who conducted the course with pure psychoanalysis. He always basically asked why you think that you have to contribute something more to the huge quantity of pictures that already exist.

RV Were you able to find an answer for yourself?
WT No, it's not a question that demands an answer in the classical sense, although, fortunately for me, I had the feeling that large numbers of things were not represented the way I see them. For example, taking photos of my peers as I see them, as complex persons, both serious and to be taken seriously. Which was sim¬ply not the case in the media at the end of the 1980s.

RV That would be portrait photography with a tradition as long as photography has existed.
WT But young people were not photographed in that way at that time. Today, of course, there are 20,000 portraits of young people and the scene.

RV But there were people like Nan Goldin, Larry Clark ...
WT They were much, much earlier, two decades earlier. Nan Goldin started in the 1970s ..

RV But Juergen Teller, ok, more in fashion...
WT I mean the idea that things like House Music or disco could be something serious simply didn't exist in the world of art. That is why I was interested in *i-D.* As a teenager, on the one hand as a Boy George fan, and on the other as an artist, I always noticed that something which is not completely new, of course. Andy Warhol also started up his own journal. But this allegedly ephemeral aspect of culture was not really represented in art. And yet I experienced profound truths in a disco night and was able to think about abstraction in disco lights and fall of textiles. All sorts of so-called high art themes were perfectly evident to me in subcultural contexts. That was not represented in the world of art.

RV But your work did fit into the crossover trends of the 1990s. Otherwise that would probably not have worked - if there was not a larger context in the air, in visual art I mean.
WT Absolutely. I am very gratefull for people like Nan Goldin or William Eggleston, who were the first to make colour photography possible as an art form. One should never forget that colour photography was in itself a no-go area in art at the end of the 1980s. Cindy Sherman also has to be

named in the front line. And I was lucky to be born later, so that this whole question, "Is photography art?" never had personal relevance for me. It is strange, all the same, that 15 years later incredibly many people - in particular photographers - have still not understood that photography can be art; which doesn't mean that all photos are art. The fact that art can also come about in the context of fashion doesn't mean that all fashion is art. But the potential for it to be so was always quite clear to me. Even though I had to work hard on it for myself ... At first I thought, too, that making exhibitions is my kind of free art while making magazines is my applied art. Because that is simply the way it is in the world, even today. Absolutely, through and through. And then I had a sort of break through for myself, where I told myself, you have to go wherever the energy is right for you. And that was indeed i-D- and not Face, where a different idea of glamour was involved. At i- D there was, at that very moment, a chief editor who wanted exactly that.

RV And so you were In the happy situation that you never had to do anything for money?
WT *(laughter)* That was not as specifically happy as all that. Somehow I never had any special advantages from home, although it does help to come from a middle-class background, as many of us do. But I made quite clear decisions against making money; for example, rather 40 pounds for a page in i-D than 500 Marks for a page in Wiener. They had asked me whether r wanted to do a home story with MTV presenters, a thing sponsored by MTV.

RV But why did you do that?
WT Because I again wanted to do the opposite of what I otherwise do.

RV And that simply didn't interest you.
WT No, not at all. r noticed that that was a corporate thing, with some kind of interests behind it again. I did that in situations when I could really use the money, when I had just gone to London. With the *i-D* publications r became known or interesting to all sorts of people. I didn't do any of that and also rejected much higher amounts of publicity money. Always because r felt r wasn't interested, I can't do it as well as the others, and also, of course, I have to say really honestly, from a strategic point of view.

RV What point of view was that?
WT Of course, I am perfectly aware that not being corruptible is also a kind of capital.

RV Namely, credibility.
WT Exactly. But that should not be seen as cynical calculation. It is simply the way things are. I made a mess of that in 1996 when I shot Kate Moss for the American edition of Vogue.

RV But why did you do that?
WT Because I again wanted to do the opposite of what I otherwise do.

RV Did it have anything to do with the fact that it was Kate Moss and not someone else?
WT Yes. American Vogue asked me what I would like to do. I had oftne tried before with a stylist and a model, but i always failed at it. And so I said, I can only do it under my own conditions, on my territory, with someone I find intersting. The only super-model I did find interesting was Kate Moss.

RV And why, what about her?
WT She is a fascinating person because she is not at all beautiful in a technical sense. Her eyes are far too far apart, her teeth are uneven and

pointed; she is small....She is the person who stood for my own background in the London scene. The fact that this aesthetic, embodies by Kate Moss, suddenly embodied the Zeitgeist all over the world as well is very interesting. Just like Twiggy for the 1960s, or like Verushkaa. That is simply fascinating, it's a talent, it's not just anything.

RV Zeitgeist is a good word. Your portraits struck the Zeitgeist, the spirit of the time. That is definitely a point, that they are so strongly rooted in time. If they had been more documentary, with a less involved eye, something like an observation of a youth culture, I don't think they would have carried that forward, to become valid outside their time.
WT I thought to myself, how can I make a portrait of people today? And I was best able to do that with people I understand and who were close to me. I never said I will now become the chronicler of the 1990s, but what interested me was the way a hand hung onto a body. But, at the same time, I was also not afraid to do that in a contemporary context, which is something a large number of "serious" artists are really afraid of. You shoulnd't forget that people are horribly afraid of being mortal. And that's why they want to be timeless or to stay at a distance from the things of the Zeitgeist. The word Zeitgeist has actually been a swear-word in German-speaking countries since the 80s. For good reason, and yet again for no good reason, because the Zeitgeist is something much bigger than fashion. The spirit of a time is in fact the spirit of a time. And if one manages to strike it ... I am proud of that after the fact, proud that I didn't reject it but was rooted in it without artificiality. Then one helps to create the spirit; it's a two way thing.

RV Would you say that your work has changed very much over time?
WT I hope so. On the one hand it has extreme continuity, and I am surprised how much of what is important to me today was already there at the beginning. But on the other hand, I have always concerned myself consciously with the reception of my previous work in order to develop what comes after in opposition to my own context. And, of course, in opposition to what is happening around me. That again is not being vain, but it is something necessary, to trouble oneself with all these interconnections. I have taken quite conscious steps forward, pushed themes into the forground ... it must remain interesting. But on the other hand some people, who are not well disposed to the whole project, say that they only see repetition. That is simply absurd. There are clear factual things that have been added. And I don't see why I should leap about, either. If I once believed in something I want to know today whether it is still right. That's why I also like to use old pictures to test that again and again.

RV Are you interested in the time factor in your work? Photography has so much to do with immobility. In particular, when you go back to old material. ..
WT I have recently had an interesting experience in that regard- with an exhibition in the Meerretich Gallery in Berlin. There I showed sixteen-year-old pictures that I had never exhibited before. They were made at the Polish market in Berlin, where people from Poland sold the last little scraps to get a few West German marks. That was a totally historical moment, the fall of the wall, then the free market, all the things that are still affecting us today. We are today in a continuous line of development which began at that moment. It is fascinating that so much time has passed, that the pictures are now historical, that the fashions can be identified. But photographically, the pictures are actually not old, just a little bit old because they are early works of mine. But they could have been made in Moldavia today. There I made active use of the time element.

RV You're also interested in Hanne Darboven, aren't you?
WT I take note of her, this kind of extreme use of time. That interests me. I am a passionate fan of Isa Genzken but not a passionate fan of Hanne Darboven. But she occupies a position, somehow ... the word "Position" is a German disease ... Position and positioning ...

RV What do you like in the work of Isa Genzken?
WT It's again the question of how to make abstract sculpture today. How can we move on from there? That is certainly an impressive work when you see how she goes on pushing herself forward without going to rust, and never gives up. Not a bit of "now I have reached my status quo and now it's enough, now I have solved the problem". But rather an unyielding search and research, always questioning what one has already done and opposing it, but never anything like "I'm turning away now, because the last thing was shit". To keep that up and to go on growing "younger" - that is a strange description but a true one: she is getting more and more radical, she is more radical than many 25- or 35-year olds. For me, that's a kind of energy that creates a constant challenge.

Translated by Nelson Wattle

WOLFGANG TILLMANS
1968 in Remscheid/ Deutschland geboren.
1990-1992 Studium am Boumemouth and Poole College of Art and Design.
2000 Turner Prize. Seit 2003 Professur an der Stadelschule in Frankrurt am Main. Lebt in London. *Born in Remscheid/ Gmnany,1968.*
1990-1992 studied at Bournemouth and Poole Colkge of Art and Design.
2000 Turner Prkt. Professorship at Stiithlschuk, Frankfurt/Main.
Lives in London.

2005	Truth Study Center, Maureen Paley, London (solo)
	Covering the Real, Kunstmuseum, Basel I Bask
	Arbeit an der Wirldichkeit, The National Museum of Modern Art, Tokyo
2004	neugerriemschneider, Berlin (solo)
	Regen Projects, Los Angeles (solo)
	Friedrich Christian Flick Collection, Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin Inventory, Scott King, Donald Urquhart, Portikus, Frankfurt
	(kuratiert von / curated by Wolfgang Tillmans)
2003	View From Above, Louisiana - Museum Of Modem Art, Humlebrek, Danemarkl Denmark (solo)
	if one thing matters, anything matters, Tate Britain, London (solo) Galerie Daniel Buchholz, K61nl Cowgne (solo)
	Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York (solo)
2002	Veduta dall' aUo, Castello di Rivoli - Museo d'arte contemporanea, RivoH, Turin (solo)
	Vue d'en Haul, Palais de Tokyo, Paris (solo)
	Moving Pictures, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York
2001	Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York (solo)
	Aufsicht, Deichtorhallen Hamburg (solo)
	Uniftrms, Order and Disorder, Pitti Immagine, Florence;
	P.S. I Contemporary Art Center, New York

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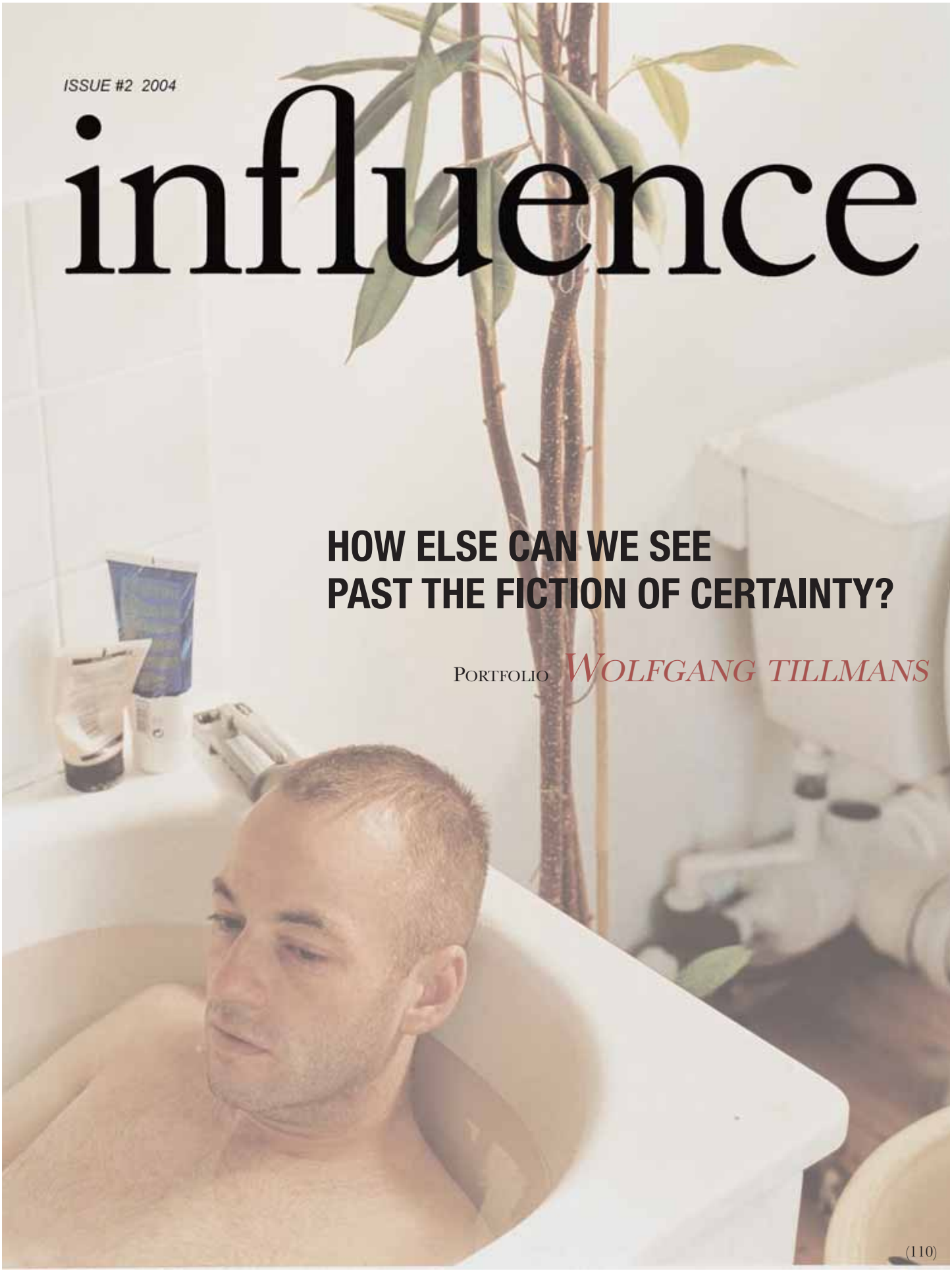
influence



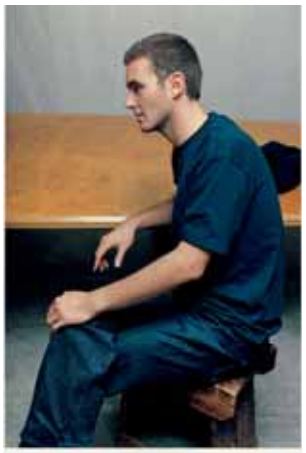
HOW ELSE CAN WE SEE PAST THE FICTION OF CERTAINTY?

PORTFOLIO *WOLFGANG TILLMANS*

(p. 110) TILLMANS, Wolfgang
Jochen taking a bath, 1997. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 111 feft) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Mauricio, profile, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 111 top-right) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Zietungsstapel, 1999. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.
(p. 111 bottom-right) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Blushes #89, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



FOR MUCH OF ITS HISTORY, PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE HAS SOMEWHAT PATHETICALLY ECHOED ITS PRECEDENTS in painting, continuing to reflect the compromising relationship between patron and artist. Portraitists often go to confectionary extremes to pad a sitter's chosen mythology, most awkwardly demonstrated by the work of Julia Margaret Cameron, Edward Steichen, and Annie Liebovitz. Likewise, photographic dissent rarely extends beyond hijacking the presumed objectivity of the process to artificially (and negatively) hyperstimulate our perception of the subject, as demonstrated by Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, and most photojournalists. Both methods depend on and promote the fallacy of the clarifying gesture, the singular image that captures essences and reveals mystic truths. In fact, what photography has more consistently shown, despite its practitioners, is the opposite: the infinite ambiguity of the human experience, a flood of implication that by its elusive nature denies explicit understanding. Genuine portraiture reflects that continuum, rather than attempts to act as an isolated document superior to it.

The artist Gerhard Richter, who creates work of supreme rigor, has said that the amateur's family snapshot, as an unself-conscious and direct recording of information, is a more reliable method of depiction than the cleverly composed art photograph. In his formulation, both of those attempts at understanding human experience are doomed to frustration anyway, but the snapshot at least is uncontaminated by ridiculous delusions of grandeur. It is, in his words, "pure picture." Maybe it's a bit cynical to contend that any single snapshot, as an embodiment of careless resort, is more profound than a purposeful but vain attempt at establishing meaning. But there is great originality in the thought that a lifetime of such images, a compendium of them, the result of an ongoing, fractured, subconscious but active routine of searching, comprises a more viable kind of compound "portrait" than any single image that teeters dangerously on the verge of propaganda. It's not merely a matter of volume: Nan Goldin has an ample cache of solipsisms, but their sum never reaches a critical mass that can lift them above the weight of individual anecdotes. They become a foreseeable routine. What might instead render the quotidian as sublime is an approach from oblique angles, from the indirect and always limited information we more realistically know life to afford, so that the attempt at depiction itself reflects our finite capabilities and knowledge of experience. A new and viable portraiture then might serve not so much as a terminus or distillation, a "decisive moment," but as a catalyst for reconsideration, a point of departure rather than one of absurd, convenient, and obviously false finality. Wolfgang Tillmans' work is an open-ended example of this kind of new portraiture. If the most common criticism is that it lacks focus and

resolve, that same sense ofloss and existential capitulation grants his portraiture an anticlimactic fragility that's unexpectedly strong, convincingly intimate, and never once surrenders to patronizing homilies. No single Tillmans portrait fully coalesces or completes itself. No single portrait is ever a portrait. Rather, each gels by the same process as memory, through the unending accretion of multiple and imperfectly formed instances, a synthesis of glances, always incomplete and peripheral, constantly realigning our knowledge, as snow accumulating over a landscape dynamically and randomly defines the thing observed. There's no question that Tillmans' anarchic, threadbare style can be troubling to eyes more conditioned to photography in a mode of perfected majesty. It's no help sinking to the contemporary indulgence of calling it "real", but the work is honest, and gratifyingly upfront in its copious shortcomings. It makes no assumptions and, in a way that is exceedingly rare, never attempts to inform. The totality of Tillmans' oeuvre, consisting of thousands of pictures of maddening variety, serves as a single, plainspoken document that paradoxically diffuses our knowledge and expectations. It contradicts all of the demands of historic portraiture, and so is uniquely photographic.

GIL BLANK What's the basic motivation for your photographic portraiture? Is it at all distinct from the remarkably wide variety of other subjects you seek out? WOLFGANG TILLMANS When I began to define my portraiture, in 1990 to 1991, I wanted to communicate both the feelings I had for my contemporaries as well as the sense I often had of a single person. I wanted to communicate the complexity of that person in its entirety, that lack of a singular reading. I wanted to channel the multilayered character of a personality and its contradictions, the way it's revealed in clothes, in styles, in attitudes, and the way a person lives. It's the fractured reality of identity that fascinates me. I didn't feel myself well represented in the late-eighties media as I was growing up. Perhaps I did in some magazines like i-D, but everything else depicted people making odd gestures, or acting crazily, or smiling. They were always apologizing for being the way they were, always giving a single reading of their mood, of what they were about. It took me a while to get my own photography of people in line with the way I saw people. That happened around 1991, when I realized that I needed to strip all the pictorial devices away, so that the subjects wouldn't have to apologize for who they were, and the picture wouldn't have to justify its observation. It wouldn't hint at being more of an artifice than necessary. I got rid of everything that's artistic in portraiture: interesting lighting, recognizably "special" techniques, and all the different styles that divide us from the subject and are usually considered to be enhancements of the subject or the picture. I found a way of indirect lighting that looks like the absence of artificial light. That's often been misunderstood as a lack of formality, and dismissed as the dreaded "snapshot aesthetic." I know what people are referring to when they say that the immediacy they feel from my pictures-but what's mistaken about the term is the lack of composition and consideration that it implies. GB But why should that be considered a pejorative term, except in the shallowest reading? Obviously, the "snapshot" label is for some a lazy way of critiquing the aesthetic or formal value of the work, but I'm not so sure that the lack of consideration that it also implies is necessarily a bad thing. It goes directly to Richter's idea of "pure picture," of a direct, unmediated pictorial experience that doesn't suffer from all kinds of overbearing artistic effect. WT It does release me from having to meditate on the picture. I take a picture to perceive the world, not to overthink what's in front of me. Pictures are an incredibly efficient and

CAMERON, Julia Margaret
After she was given a camera at the age of 48, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815-79) became an ardent and accomplished amateur photographer, creating portraits of friends, family members, and Victorian celebrities, as well as allegorical images with costumed models. Her work was rediscovered and embraced by Alfred Stieglitz in the twentieth century, and there were similarities between her photographs and the atmospheric, soft-focus work of the Pictorialists.

STEICHEN, Edward
Born in Luxembourg, the photographer, painter, and curator Edward Steichen (1879-1973) spent much of his life promot¬ing photography and modernist art in New York. In his photography he moved from soft-focus Pictorial ism to New Realism; as a curator at The Museum of Modern Art for fifteen years, he is best remembered for organizing the tremendously popular exhibition "The Family of Man." In 1905, with Alfred Stieglitz, he founded the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, at 291 Fifth Avenue, and in 1923 he became the chief photographer for Conde Nast Publications. In addition to fashion and advertising photography, Steichen also shot portraits, landscapes, cityscapes, still lifes, and images of sculpture.

LIEBOVITZ, Annie
The commercial photographer Annie Liebovitz (born in 1948) is best known for her splashy, flatteringly elegant celebrity portraits. She got her start in the early seventies, when she became a photogra¬pher for Rolling Stone, after acquiring her first camera while studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute. In 1983 she became a contributing photographer to Vanity Fair. Liebovitz has also shot advertising campaigns for the Gap and American Express.

(p. 112 top-left) TILLMANS, Wolfgang *Central Line,* 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 112 top right) TILLMANS, Wolfgang *Still Life, Talbot Road*, 1991. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

(p. 112 bottom-left) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Conor Sun Burst, 2002. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

economical way of visually absorbing the world. If I have an immediate feeling, then it's actually a very good language for me to translate that into a picture. I agree with almost everything that is said about the positive side of the snapshot, but not with the conclusion that one could draw from that, that every snapshot is the same. GB Despite its apparent ease and immediacy in the short term, your working method requires a certain degree of counterintuitive thinking to be effectively turned into a meaningful life pursuit. It's a complete abandonment of the patterns of identification that are most familiar to a photographer. For many photographers it's easier to settle for the cliches of portraiture-the exquisite technique, the overly constituted moment, the conventional signs of an archetypal personality-then it is to forego that, to vacate one's familiarity and create something that shows few overt signs of consideration. At this point, so much in your work revolves around the seemingly tangential moments, the synthesis of unexpected or apparently unimportant elements, that I wonder if it's become a conscious part of your process to specifically avoid photographing subjects that are too ideally photographic. There are a few aspirationally iconic pieces like Deer Hirsch and Untitled (La Gomera)-but is this kind of endowed single image something that you resist? WT A lot of them are just given to you when you make yourself open and vulnerable to the human exchange that takes place in the photographic situation. That's how I try to negotiate a portrait. The desire to control the result, to come away with an interesting image, is simultaneous with the admission that I'm not in fact completely in control of it. Ultimately I have to be as weak as the subject, or as strong. If I go into the situation with a pre-con¬ceived idea, then I'll limit the human experience that I might be able to have. The outcome of such a situation is unknowable, and that's something very hard to bear; people prefer to know that what they do will have a good result. I've possibly developed the faith or strength of letting myself fall each time. I risk not knowing what might come out and I also risk making an important work. That's what I like about the magazine portraiture that I've been doing now for fifteen years. It always sends me back to the zero-point of human interaction, the point of not knowing. I know that I'm likely to make a printable picture, but I'm not forced to make an artwork. And I quite like that, that I have no responsibility to the sitter or anything beyond the act itself. That's also why I never take commissions from private parties or collectors, GB That would make no sense at all, diverting the centrality of the interpersonal experience. WT The essential fragility of the outcome would

(p. 116 top) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Circle Line, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 116 bottom-feft) TILLMANS, Wolfgang grey jeans over stair post, 1991. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 116 bottom-right) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Sternenhimmel, 1995. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 117 top) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Untitled (La Gomera), 1997. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 117 center) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Arkadia I, 1996. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 117 bottom) TILLMANS, Wolfgang Richard James, 2001 © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

only a truly powerful outcome would be possible. There would be only that useless certainty. GB One of the fundamental impulses for any portraitist, especially apparent in your work, is to approach experience, to make sense of what we experience and the people in our lives. Photography, because it's so accurate in its registration, always contains the implicit hope that we can somehow obtain a vestige of proof, of knowledge: this is how things are, this is what exists, what I know. We live in hope, but it's an absurd hope, because as soon as you move toward that or try to build on it in pictures, you automatically begin to assert a control over the situation that prevents it from ever being anything beyond your own preconceived ideas. And so for you, it's vital to maintain that position of vulnerability. WT Yes. And of course with friends, I'm like that much more naturally. In the end the pictures that matter to me most are of people that are close to me. GB And when you consider the sketch you made for your retrospective at the Tate, which functions like a diagram or flow chart of your working method, you put the "People" category at the very top. It's quite disorienting, and I imagine purposely so, because you do break things down into large categories, but obscure that with the insertion of smaller and smaller notes, and cross-referencing paths and connections, so that there is no real separation. Everything is cross-contaminated. WT But you can separate, for instance, "Crowds/ Strangers" from "Friends Sitting." Then again, that can be extended into "Nightlife," which gives you a big family of extended friends you don't immediately know. The whole chart was made in the full knowledge of its own absurdity. Likewise, the catalog for the exhibition, If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters, which is an encyclopedic catalog of over two thousand images from the present back to when I began making pictures, is all about the audacity implicit in the attempt to make a map of my world, something that can never be drawn or defined. The thing that makes working this way both harder and much more interesting is that it's also how I experience my life: there never are sharply circumscribed experiences or fields. I admire other artists that work in very strict patterns, but it's interesting to note how that strictness or seriality is often associated with seriousness in our culture, with more thought and more depth. I find it more challenging to try to reconcile all those different fields that constitute experience as I live it day to day. GB And that's what can be so difficult to accept about your work. For years, it was a constant source of aggravation for me. It requires a renunciation of the assumptions we have about photographic forms. A beloved motivation for photographers is the isolation of perfect meanings, singular visions. You're adamantly seeking the same kind of reconciliation with experience that photographers have always attempted, but you're doing so by abandoning the status of photographs as exceptional objects, and that naturally disturbs people who are conditioned to placing a high degree of value and faith in them. WT Or let's say the language of them. Because truthfully I'm also after refinement and precision; I'm only abandoning the preferred language of that, the signifiers that give immediate value to something, such as the picture frame. First of all, I see an unframed photograph as an object of great beauty, in its purity as a thin sheet of paper, but I'm also resisting the statement that one image or object is more important than others. I want it to battle it out for itself. That doesn't mean that I don't believe in singular, great pictures, though. Some images function in different ways, some more or less loudly, but in terms of quality, I would never throw something in that I don't believe has the potential, on its own, to be really good. The totality will always reflect more of what I think than any single picture can, but the single picture functions as the definitive version of the subject for me here and now. GB What? You really mean that? WT Yes! That feeling might change in a year's time, when I have a different angle on the same subject matter. But take the Ecstasy and nightlife experience of early-nineties techno as an example.

After '92, I made very few pictures in nightclubs. Those shots are that feeling for me, that Ecstasy feeling. I wanted to have that and I got it; I'm satisfied that they're a true reflection of what I felt and thought. I never have the desire to do more of them. Similarly, with the still life images, even though the genre is repeated over the course of thirteen years, I somehow always try to divine what the situation is for me now, in the best possible way, and not necessarily allow twenty variations of that. GB How, then, do you determine the overall arc of your picture-taking? If we are to take the pictures as a compendium, an articulated personal history, how, then, do you prioritize the meaningful events in your life? WT I quite like the term "quantification." By observing the number of times I use a certain picture, by seeing how much it shows up in the installations, which ones become a postcard, which ones become featured in books. I know what's significant in my actual life. Thinking backward I know what felt significant, and though perhaps in the here and now you can never fully face that, I don't think there's any need for it either. GB At first sight, your work can seem scattershot, and randomized. With more time and attention, connections and coincidences can emerge, with one photograph "activating" others, as you've put it. How much of that is planned and controlled, and how much is left open-ended, for the pictures themselves to spontaneously create a unique system of meaning? WT I do leave it pretty open to the pictures. I know everyone of them; I do have thoughts about them and that was another reason why I did If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters. But the reassessing of pictures isn't a process that goes on indefinitely. I wanted to wrap up all the pictures that meant something to me. Ultimately, though, they all stay free, and in an installation I never say how they should be read. There's no narrative that

(p. 118 bottom-left) TILLMANS, Wolfgang *Adam*, 1991. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 118 bottom-right) TILLMANS, Wolfgang *Concorde*, 1996. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Aasen Gallery, New York.

(p.119 top) TILLMANS, Wolfgang *Kiefer StraBe (self)*, 1988. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Aasen Gallery, New York.

(p. 119 middle) TILLMANS, Wolfgang *Isa with pool of water,* 1995. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Aasen Gallery, New York.

p. 119 bottom)TILLMANS, Wolfgang *Young Woman (Chemistry),* 1995. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Aasen Gallery, New York.

binds them sequentially in the books, even though I know why I placed them as they are. GB In your installations, everything is incorporated into a heterogeneous mix: genres, sizes, wall placements, even print formats. But in that book, for the first time, every image was treated the same way: you made them all identical, placed them one after the other in a relentless stream. WT There's a rigorous system of only a few sizes underlying the intended sense of heterogeneity. I'm certainly not embracing everything. Even though there are so many subjects in the work, there are also so many things that aren't. I tried to show that in the flow chart. It is something specific that I'm looking at, and not everything. It's not about trying to control the whole world through pictures, or to get the process of seeing and experiencing out of my system. It's more that I'm trying to bear life, to bear the multiplicity of things, and that's what people find very hard. They find it hard to bear the lack of answers, so they strive for simple solutions and concepts, for simple ideas. Letting things stand on their own is about giving up control over them, it's the attempt to bear them. It's finding the pleasure in that experience, but also giving witness to the fact that there are no simple answers. I do think the work is optimistic, but perhaps in the harder way that an existentialist might come around to that realization of freedom. GB Let me then come right out and ask the fundamental questions: What kind of faith do you place in photographs, and portraits in particular, as a way of helping us understand or access personal experience? Is there any hope, or help, or any need for either? WT I like the idea of the photograph as something that joins me to the world, that connects me to others, that I can share. I can get in touch with somebody when they recognize a feeling:
"Oh, I felt like that before. I remember jeans hanging on the banister, even though I've never seen that exact pair. I've seen my oranges on a windowsill." It's the sense that "I'm not alone." That's the driving force behind sharing these things-that I want to find connections in people. I believe that every thought and idea has to be somehow rendered through personal experience, and then generalized. GB Can that kind of approach ever be completed? Or might it not actually doom itself, a restless desire to move and to know and to see that because of the foregone conclusion of our own deaths - implies its own impossibility? WT Yes, but it is all impossible! Like the Eva Hesse quote I love: "Life doesn't last, art doesn't last, it doesn't matter"! GB [laughter] WT [laughter) WT I mean that of course you have to give as much love as possible into your life and your art, not only despite the fact that none of it matters but precisely because of it. I don't feel a restless desire at the core of my work. I feel it's about stillness, about calmly looking at the here and now. These are real issues, the biggest ones, and particularly in regard to portraiture: Why take pictures of others? It's not the same as taking pictures of non-portrait subject matter. When you show a person to another person, why do you do that? Do you show a role model, do you show an ideal of beauty, or power? Why should somebody else regard someone they don't know? Why is it necessary for me to circulate pictures of people in books and magazines and exhibitions? Isn't that part of the omnipresent terror that we're faced with merely by being alive and part of this non-stop normative process? GB Then is that the central affirmation of the work? It won't rely on the pathetically heroic devices of traditional portraiture, so you force your subjects into a proxy war in which their portrait images "battle it out." as you say, to somehow identify themselves within a tide of beauty and banality. WT I certainly feel a responsibility when using my power to utilize media of any sort, such as an exhibition. I've always felt very strongly that whatever I do involves using a position of privilege and power, because I'm the one

that's talking. But I've also thought that my point of view deserved to be heard, because I always felt that neither I nor the way that I look at the world was adequately represented. That of course changes, and we're now living in a completely different image world than we were ten years ago. GB One in which there's tremendous-and perhaps dubious value placed on perceptions of authenticity and the authentically lived life, particularly in the representations that we fashion of each other. How do you react in your work to that dangerously hypocritical impulse? WT First of all, I never denounce it publicly, because we're all part of the argument. You can't possibly have an uncompromised relationship to authenticity. As soon as you represent something, it's always a mediated, invented situation. What is genuine, though, is the desire for authenticity. So, absurdly enough, that's something that actually is authentic about this moment. Personally speaking, I feel somewhat post-authentic. What's authentic to me is whatever looks authentic. GB Perverse. WT Well, that's the gift of late birth! Certain ideas are just worn to death. All the sorts have been played out. Images had been so outspokenly formulated by the time I started to speak with them that I didn't feel a need to add to that. I don't have to be part of anyone school. The authenticity label is tricky, because I immediately want to denounce it, to say it's not true, that everything in the work is consciously constructed, but that's also untrue. I do respond quite immediately to situations, and I think the pictures should come across on an intuitive level. You shouldn't have to get caught up in the artifice; you should try to be hit by an authentic experience. At the most basic level, all I do every day is work with pieces of paper. I shape colors and dyes on paper, and those objects aren't the reality they represent. I understood that early on, and it was the beginning of all my work. How does meaning take hold of a piece of paper? Why does this paper carry a charge? It's the brain, it's our humanity that brings life to it. What matters is how we shape the things on the paper, somehow forcing it to become a representation of life, or experience. People always think that a photograph is bodiless, that it's not an object unto itself but merely a conduit, a carrier of some other value. GB And that's the reasoning behind your darkroom abstraction pieces, to short-circuit photography's representational value by foregoing lens-based images and simply exposing photographic paper to light by hand. WT Yes. I'm trying to challenge people's assumptions that every photograph is reality by presenting abstract forms that somehow look figurative. People inevitably use all sorts of words and allusions to describe them, saying they look like skin, hairs or wires or sunbursts, but they only bring those associations along because the images are on photographic paper. If they were on canvas, they wouldn't say the same thing. GB But I think that kind of challenge to photography's formalist character is a well-established concept. More relevant to the work at hand is whether the abstractions are a conscious subversion of the rest of the oeuvre's totality. Because the uniqueness and aesthetic value of the other images as a totality is so inherently photographic. The abstractions feel like a deliriously utopian attempt to bring things

back to that hypothetical zero-point, the state of surrendering photographic knowledge. WT But I always have a good excuse for them because they are purely photographic. They're as true as my other photographs, because they do exactly what photographs are designed to do. GB Which is what? I'm challenging you to spell that out. WT They collect light and translate it into dyes. I expose and manipulate light on paper and I let it do exactly what it's supposed to do. I'm not doctoring the process. GB But that's ridiculous. It's like saying the only point of language is to produce sounds. Both language and photography only have value in so far as they're human systems, and that they produce human meanings. Kangaroos have no use for photographs, only we do. And just because I open my mouth and make noise doesn't mean I've said anything. So here's the trap we're in: photographs are permanently bound to experience, to the recounting of events with a precision that's exceptional but incapable of ever completely explaining those events to us. If your abstractions provide none of that explicit signification, however ambiguous, if in fact they are made as negations of meaning, are they really photographs? Perhaps simply by virtue of their process, but I don't think at all by what you state as their human value as objects. WT But they are photographic in pleasure. GB What?! WT They're great pleasures for me. They're a fascinating phenomenon that I take great pleasure in. GB That can't be all there is. WT But it is! GB All of this can't be that insubstantial. WT But it's part of that research into how meaning gets onto paper. Part of that's hard work, but it's also being open to the pleasure of being and playing. Without sounding too corny, I think play is very important, very serious. I'm exploring what happens when thinking and being become matter, because photographs don't just come into existence on their own. GB I think I Don't Want To Get Over You is the key example of that, because it shows within a single image the kind of cross-contamination we see in your work at large, with the abstracting light trails that break open the underlying straight representational image. It has a duality, the connection to experience mated to the desire and the attempt to break free of that condition. Then there's also the transposition of the image formed automatically by a lens, by a machine, and the trails left by your own hand as the author. WT It has that inherent quality of being manmade. GB Not just manmade, but Wolfgang-made. It yearns for universality but is tied to your own everyday, like all the other images that are distinctly of their time, of their author. WT Because they can't be achieved any other way. I've never been afraid of being of my time, and I often find it problematic when people try to avoid that in order to achieve timelessness. They cut themselves short in the process. All great art is strongly linked to its time. The paradox is how to achieve that universality while acknowledging specificity. It's quite hard to handle, this open-endedness. The lack of clear answers, handling the contradictions, not thinking, and yet not giving up either. Not going the easier route of pretending that there are simple answers .•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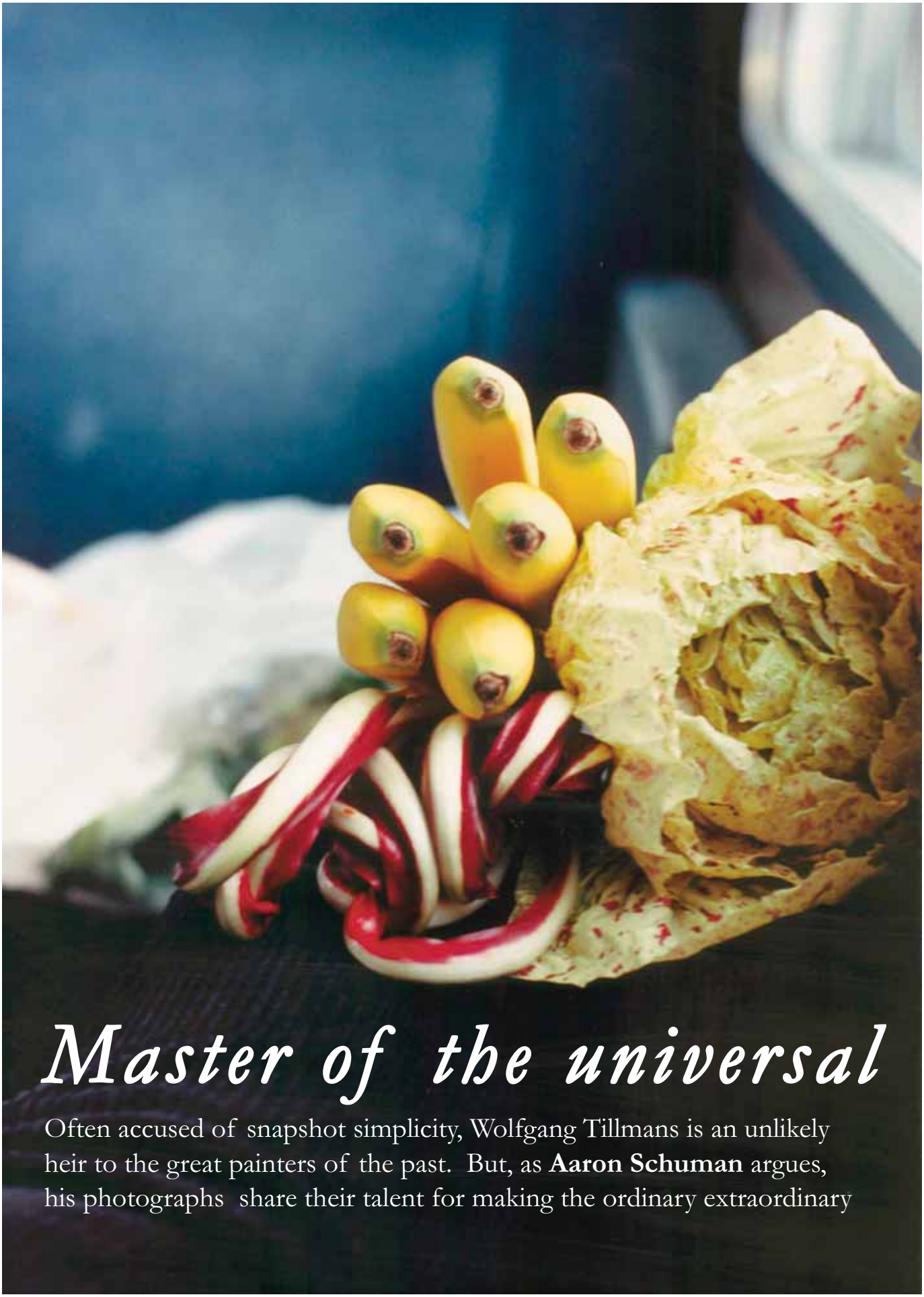

Master of the universal

Often accused of snapshot simplicity, Wolfgang Tillmans is an unlikely heir to the great painters of the past. But, as **Aaron Schuman** argues, his photographs share their talent for making the ordinary extraordinary

At the age of 35 Wolfgang Tillmans has already achieved more success than most artists manage in a lifetime. With the Turner Prize under his belt, frequent shows in the most respected contemporary art museums around the world, a book shelf full of monographs, artists' books, exhibition catalogues and magazine spreads to his credit and a professorship at one of Germany's most prestigious universities, Tillmans' biography reads like a fairy tale. Yet precisely because he has accomplished so much while still quite young,Tillmans now faces a crucial challenge. Last year's solo exhibition at Tate Britain, 'If one thing matters, everything matters', was a pivotal moment for the photographer. 'I feel that the Tate show was the marker of an end of a development,' he says with a sense of both pride and apprehension, 'because everything until then was a step towards something. But then, suddenly, everything came together beautifully in this show, and it all seemed to connect and make sense, at least to me. Since then, I am facing this question, what's next?' Tillmans glances down into his lap, and then quickly looks up again, wearing his distinctively mischievous smile. 'And there's a lot more juice in this lemon!'

Throughout his career Tillmans has continually expanded his own photographic repertoire, and in doing so has cleverly eluded the constraints placed upon so many photographers who often find themselves pigeonholed within one particular genre of the medium, a fate which Tillmans fears more than failure itself. But having earned his reputation as the excitingly unpredictable enfant terrible of contemporary photography, the question of what next is a daunting one for Tillmans, especially as he approaches his forties. He is beginning to realise that in order to sustain the intensity and momentum of his work, he must now develop entirely new creative strategies which better suit his new-found status as an established and mature artist.

Much of Tillmans' initial success was due to his own boyish confidence and determination, as well as his passionate enthusiasm for the youth culture that he discovered as a teenager. His early photographs are remarkable for their unapologetic portrayal of youth itself and their powerful displays of individuality, sexuality, camaraderie, liberty, experimentation and self-discovery. Furthermore, despite the apparent casualness of his camerawork, the consistency with which Tillmans made certain aesthetic decisions reveals that, even at this early stage in his career, he understood the visual complexity of the photographic image and had very sincere creative intentions in mind when taking each picture. '[As a teenager] I had developed a sense of vision,' he explains, 'and I wanted it to be shared and communicated. I wanted to represent my vision of the world, primarily because I felt that my vision wasn't represented in the world. It was because I didn't feel like a certain sense of truth was out there. And that word is a very dangerous one to use, but I find it fascinating, because I think that was my creative impulse originally.'

By the time he was 23, Tillmans had already accumulated an extensive portfolio of images and was so certain that this work was both important and substantial enough to be published that, in a meeting with Angelika Taschen, who had just purchased some of his pieces, he suggested that she put out a monograph. In 1995 *Wolfgang Tillmans* was released byTaschen and the book became an immediate sensation, propelling Tillmans to art-star status both within the artistic establishment and amongst the general public.

His work has undoubtedly matured as he has grown older. He has learned how to apply his keen sense of observation to quieter moments of contemplation and has expanded his oeuvre to include all sorts of subject matter. But aesthetically Tillmans has remained dedicated to the photographic language that naturally came to him as a teenage photographer. This is not to say that his vision is unsophisticated - it is exactly the opposite, having been carefully honed over years of development - but at first glance Tillmans' photographs can seem quite ordinary, even amateurish at times, and as a result his work has probably attracted as much derision as it has adulation.

"I like to make picturers that stand for a thousand other pictures"

Throughout his career Tillmans has regularly fielded accusations of being a 'snapshot' dilettante, whose work, despite its popularity, lacks any artistic merit or true historical relevance - criticism which, in his opinion, has even turned 'malevolent' at times. When one looks back at the conventionally accepted history of photography, it is surprising to discover how little precedence there is for Tillmans' work. But there is, of course, one canonical photographer whose imagery greatly resembles his in its directness, diligence and diversity. William Eggleston not only introduced colour photography into the medium's artistic history, but also developed the practice of photographing 'democratically', treating all potential subject matter - even if it was nothing but asphalt or dirt - with equal attention and respect; in other words, understanding that, at least in photography, 'if one thing matters, everything matters'.

Like Tillmans, Eggleston has also been hounded by allegations of 'snapshot' simplicity because of his provocatively straightforward imagery, but the photographer has always been dismissive of such attacks, having little patience for the narrow-mindedness of his critics. 'The blindness is apparent when someone lets slip the word "snapshot", he stated in 1988. 'Ignorance can always be covered by "snapshot". The word has never had any meaning.' Like Eggleston, Tillmans can also become quite defensive when his work's artistic merit is called into question, especially since he too believes tl1at his intentions are both simple to understand and founded on sound photographic principles. 'In a sentence, my photographic strategy is this: To approximate the impression of how I see something with my own eyes. And I think when you know about photography, you know, of course, how difficult that sentence is. Anybody who really knows how to do pictures, knows that it's not a simple thing.'

Of all the people who have tried to rectify the misunderstanding between the critics and the creators of seemingly simple photographs, it is John Szarkowski - the former director of MoMA's Department of Photography and the first to champion Eggleston's 'democratic aestl1etic' - who has presented the most compelling argument. His defence of Eggleston's work, written nearly 30 years ago, could just as easily apply to Tillmans today:

Left: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Carciofo II,* 2002

'It could be said - it doubtless has been said - that such pictures often bear a clear resemblance to the Kodachrome slides of the ubiquitous amateur next door. .. [But] it should not be surprising if the best photography of today is related in iconography and technique to the contemporary standard of vernacular camera work, which is in fact often rich and surprising. The difference between the two is a matter of intelligence, imagination, intensity, precision and coherence.'

There is undoubtedly an air of 'vernacular camera work' in Tillmans' images; indeed, he credits this as one reason why many viewers - especially those outside the traditional art establishment ¬have warmed to his work. But Tillmans' photographs may also be recognisable simply because so many of us have tried to take the exact same picture - the difference being that, for reasons of 'intensity, precision and coherence', Tillmans' final product is ultimately more successful. He agrees with this theory wholeheartedly and admits that he knows he has produced a truly great picture when he notices similar images in other people's photo albums. 'I can't achieve that with every subject matter for everybody, but I like to make pictures that stand for a thousand other pictures.'

Perhaps another reason why Tillmans' imagery seems so familiar and so effective is because it also derives from some1ing more deeply rooted within our aesthetic memory. The first time I visited his studio, shortly after he won the Turner Prize in 2000, I noticed that there were small postcards of famous paintings tacked sporadically throughout the rooms; works by Caravaggio, Velazquez, Vermeer, Zurbaran and others. Since then I have often wondered if in fact these paintings have had some influence on his work. Once you begin to see tl1e similarities between Tillmans' photographs and great paintings of the past, it is difficult to avoid making comparisons. His images of clothing - wrinkled white T-shirts, socks, jumpers and jeans, piled nonchalantly around his flat - betray a preoccupation with the play of light upon fabric, similar to that seen in the paintings of the High Renaissance. His informal portraits of young men, often naked and vivacious, recall the candid playfulness with which Caravaggio frequently depicted boyish musicians and nubile gods. And his still lifes, with their shimmering shells, wilting flowers, broken pomegranates, peeled fruit, scattered utensils and half-eaten meals, persistently remind one of traditional Dutch still lifes, such as those by Pieter Claesz or Will em Claesz Heda, of tables and window sills found in 17th-century Haarlem, as much as of those found in contemporary London.

Tillmans' unorthodox photographic aesthetic may actually be much more conventional than one might have thought, founded on some of the most basic themes in art. He perceives many parallels between himself and other artists and, as he has gradually become more informed, has come to realise that much of his work is backed by solid art-historical precedence. However, he denies that he was ever consciously influenced by certain paintings or that he has deliberately referenced any such artwork in his photographs. 'I attribute this more to the fact that these are the things that attract artists. I did the first window-sill still lifes in the late 1980s without really knowing of the tradition of stilllifes. I honestly did them purely because I was attracted to probably the exact same tl1ings that other artists were attracted to; the play of light between inside and outside. The window sill is a very special place and it probably was 400 years ago.'

Although Tillmans admits to having an awareness of art history as a teenager, he insists that when he was young he was usually put off by the religiousness of older paintings. 'But once you get over the religious subject matter, you realise that it's all about humanity. Now, when I see a Caravaggio, with dirty feet on a saint, I see that, like me, he wanted to show things the way they are. Not saying, "This is gross" or "This is superrisque." Just showing that, sometimes, we have dirty feet.' Today Tillmans likes to consider the artists of the past as if they were his contemporaries, and regards tl1em as his friends, insisting that any sort of artistic rivalry between the past and the present is a waste of potential creative progress. 'If you're in the right frame of mind then they are your friends because ultimately you are dealing with the same things. We are all human.""

"His portraits of young men recall the candid playfulness of Caravaggio"

The most recent addition to Tillmans' repertoire are handmade abstractions, which he creates in the darkroom by exposing photographic paper to various sources of light. With their ethereal 'light-strokes', seductive colours and evocative titles such as Blushes or Freischwinzmer ('freeswimmer'), these photographs are absolutely mesmerising and appear to be a radical departure from his previous work. But as Tillmans points out, their apparent abstract facade does not necessarily mean that they are without basis in either experience or observation. 'The first thing that was visually important to me ¬my visual initiation - was astronomy. The abstract work is a reflection of this. It is really connected to the sky, to looking at the phenomenon of light. It is totally grounded in real life for me and tl1erefore I don't see the differences that much. I find that abstraction is obviously in nature. I'm not the one who first thought that thought, but it really is, especially in the stars.'

For Tillmans, these abstractions are as intrinsically photographic as the rest of his work; they are still, at their most basic level, a record of light passing over a chemically enhanced piece of paper; they are still an approximation of what he sees with his own eyes; they are still photographs, only reduced to their most essential materials. Although he can no longer claim to be the Young Turk that he once was, Tillmans has again proved to both himself and his audience that he is capable of great originality, intensity and innovation.

With such encouraging developments in his work, there is no doubt that Tillmans has the ability to push the boundaries of photography even further. And one wonders if in the coming years he will use the experience of middle age as a source of inspiration, in much the same way that he mined his youth for photographic material. As he says, 'I vividly experience this mid-30-ness now and it's great fun, actually, once you give in to it. You can just make constant jokes about it; how everything is falling to pieces, you know! Because everything is hilariously tragic when you think about it. So I'm not really afraid that I will run out of inspiration. I am determined to face it and to laugh about it and to experience it. It's fascinating.' Perhaps tl1ere really is a lot more juice in this lemon.

Left: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Window/Caravaggio,* 1997

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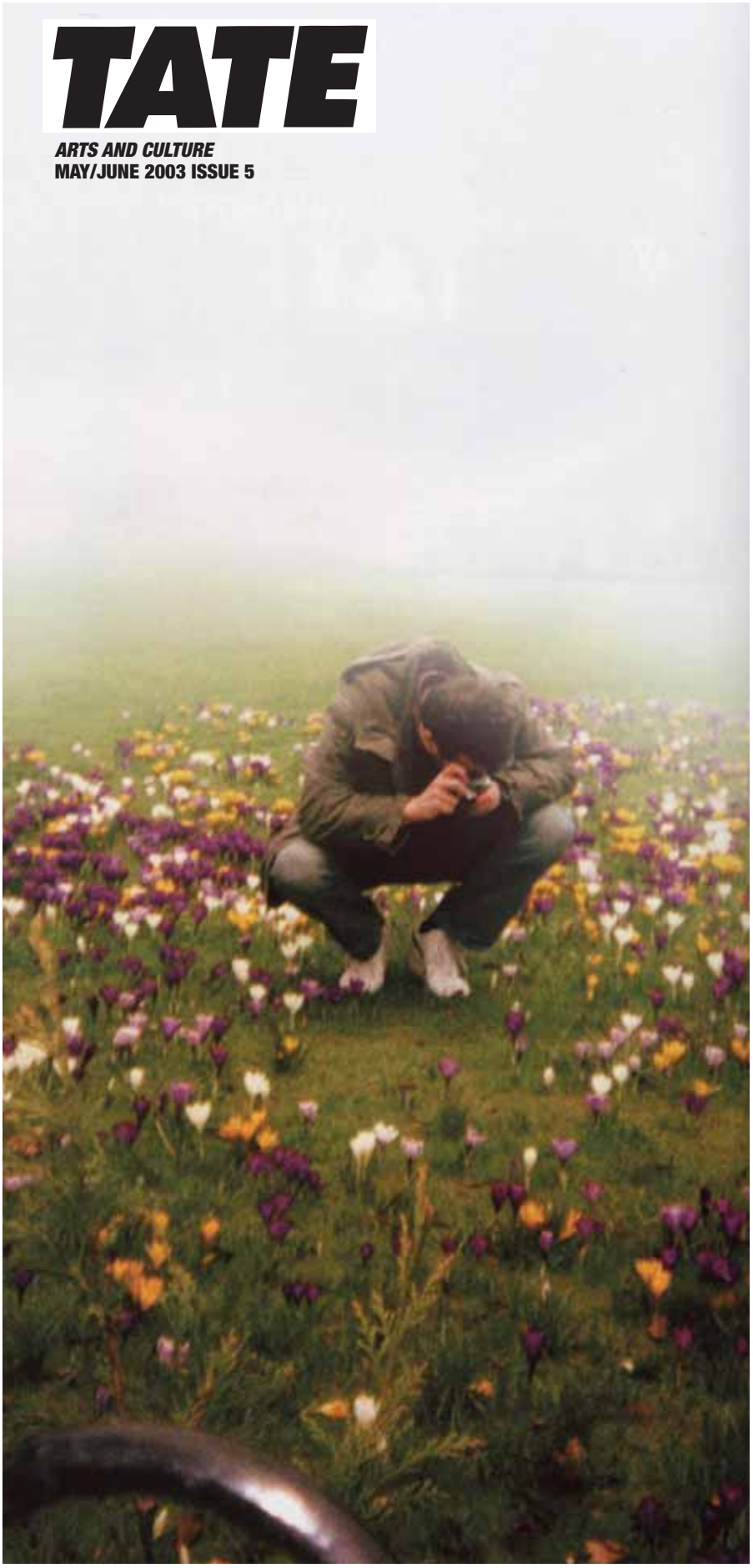


CASUAL BEAUTY

Wolfgang Tillmans has scoured his archive to prepare his retrospective exhibition at Tate Britain. Jeremy Millar surveys the photoscape of this Turner Prize winning artist. Portrait by Norbert Schoerner

The sun is bright in Wolfgang Tillmans' studio, warming and expansive. Outside, a commuter train sends arcs of light across the roofs of the surrounding industrial landscape as it shakes its way on to the City of London. I am here to look through the artist's working copy of his new book, If one thing matters, everything matters, which will be published this summer to coincide with his exhibition at Tate Britain.

In making this book, Tillmans has revisited every film he has ever exposed, every work he has ever made, compiling more than 2,300 pictures and placing them into a strict grid. Their ordering is ostensibly chronological, but based upon two systems: the year in which the photograph was taken, and then, within each year, the order in which the photographs became 'works'. Some pictures took time to be accepted by Tillmans in this way and thus occur out of the sequence of their taking. There is a general sense of an historical flow, but readers are likely to swirl through eddies of time and find themselves moving back upstream on occasion. Each image is held within a six-centimetre square; each matters as much as any other, no more, no less. The uniformity of the layout emphasises the extraordinary diversity of the pictures: portraits of friends and intimate revelations of great tenderness to experiments with abstract forms, tendrils of light curling around the blank paper or across empty landscapes.

There is so much here in this book, and so much that is different, that it might be difficult, at first, to see how it all comes together, how to make sense of it. I look up and around Tillmans' studio. Exotic flowers are casually arranged in mineral water bottles, although the >

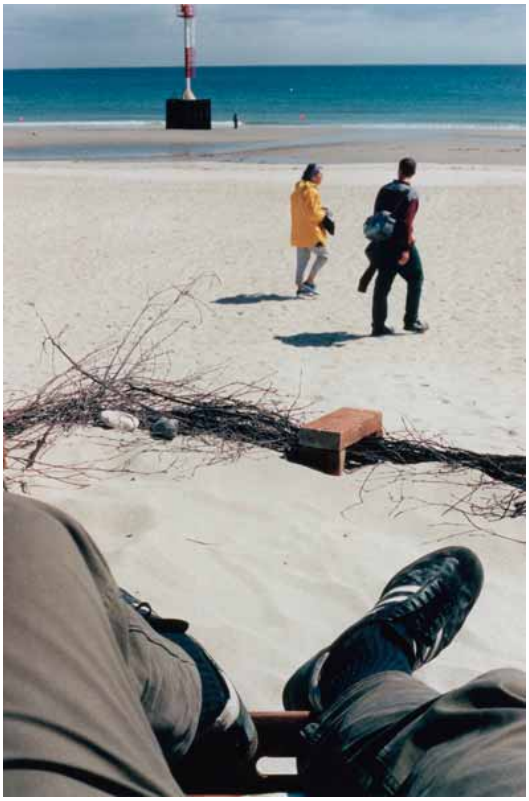
THIS PHOTOGRAPH HAS THE CASUAL BEAUTY OF MUCH OF TILLMANS' WORK. INDEED, BEAUTY IS SOMETHING THAT DOES NOT SEEM TO TROUBLE HIM, AND CONSEQUENTLY HE HAS LITTLE TROUBLE FINDING IT

>water they stand in came from the tap. There is something appropriate about them here, something recognisable from the photographs in front of me - the beautiful found within the make-piece and sustained by the most ordinary.

All photographs are of light, are made by light, although not all are about light. Not all of Tillmans' photographs are about light either, or about it solely, but looking at a collection of them one gains a sense of its immense importance for him. It is not simply a technical necessity, or a formal device, but rather suggests a transformative process that is fundamental to photography, where the world around us seems to glow with meaning. Indeed, while looking at a photograph such as Shaker Rainbow (1998) one might ask whether light has meaning of itself. Here we see a beautiful white timber-clad house, caught in the thickened late-afternoon haze. Its symmetrical fac;ade is mottled by the shadows of trees that stretch into the frame on the right. Two overhead cables slice acutely through the picture while, arching from the top-left corner towards the bottom-right, is a rainbow, its graceful curve arrested by its meeting the gable of the building just behind. The sky is darker above the rainbow, as though the building is caught within a bubble of light.

The photograph was taken by Tillmans at a Shaker community in Sabbathday Lake, Maine, during an artist's residency in 1998. It has the casual beauty of much of his work - indeed, beauty is something that does not seem to trouble him and consequently he has little trouble finding it - and might in some way be seen as emblematic of his relationship to the world, the miracle in the backyard, the everyday sublime. Tillmans has photographed the Shaker community several times now, returning to them as he has with other forms of community. >

above: *Shaker Rainbow*, 1998. Courtesy Maureen Paley/Interim Art, London. Left: *Icestorm*, 2001



Shades, 2001

> Indeed, it is a community that - for all their differences - shares a great deal with those whom we might more readily associate TIlimans with, the groups of musicians and c1ubbers who come together in New York, London or Berlin. As Dan Graham relates in his classic video work, Rock my Religion (1984-85), the Shakers were founded by Ann Lee, an illiterate blacksmith's daughter from Manchester, following a revelation that she had experienced in a trance 'produced by the rhythmic recitation of biblical phrases'. Believing herself to be the female incarnation of God - Christ having been the male incarnation - she decided to create a utopian commune in America, leaving for the country in 1774. Here, the familiar nuclear family was replaced by one of co-equal Brothers and Sisters as the 'Bible showed heterosexual marriage to be the unnatural result of Adam's sin'. Each Sunday, the Shakers would meet to perform the Circle Dance, in which lines of men and women would form four concentric, moving circles. They marched, chanting, stomping their feet, shaking their bodies, clapping, jumping. Some removed their clothes. They would reel as a group together, each individual freed from their own sin within a form of collective redemption.

Although the Shaker movement is close to disappearing, its rituals continue within our contemporary societies, albeit in new forms. Just as within the groups of chanting Shakers the saved would 'reel and rock' so, more than a century and a half later, the crowd would lose itself in 'rock 'n' roll', a form of self-empowerment generated by the individual's subsumption within a group. This is obviously of great interest for TIlimans; not simply the representation of shared experience, important though this is, but the forms of individual transcendence that only become possible through the experience of ecstasy. 'It can be spiritual.' he explains. 'That's one of the strongest points of it: this idea of melting into one. Paradise is maybe when you dissolve your ego - a loss of self. being in a bundle of other bodies. It's really the most regressive state you can be in on Earth. The other way to it is sex. Neither of the two is ideal as a permanent model for living. Clubbing and sex have great potential to go stale and become boring and repetitive.'

One sees throughout TIlimans' work a longing that moves between engagement and retreat, a fascination for the crowd and all that comes from a shared experience, the 'sensuous community', but also those things which reveal themselves only when we find ourselves alone. These are the moments of reflection upon what has come before, an attempt, perhaps, to re-establish the sense of self that had previously been dissolved.

ONE SEES THROUGHOUT TILLMANS' WORK A CERTAIN LONGING THAT MOVES BETWEEN ENGAGEMENT AND RETREAT, A FASCINATION FOR THE CROWD AND ALL THAT COMES FROM A SHARED EXPERIENCE

During the summer of 1997, the late American filmmaker Stan Brakhage bought a Bolex camera to replace the one he had worn out. It was not long after this that, passing Boulder Creek near his home in Colorado, he decided to test out the camera and, attaching some extension tubes he had been carrying since his father had bought him his first camera over 30 years previously, he began to film the stream.
He did not film the surface of the water, however, but rather below it, that which bubbled underneath, not immediately apparent but important and real nonetheless. He had just discovered that he may have developed bladder cancer. The film which followed, Commingled Containers, featuring these underwater shots with sequences of blue painted celluloid, was completed between his learning that the growth was cancerous and the removal of the bladder and subsequent chemotherapy treatment. The critic Scott MacDonald has written of Brakhage's film: 'The imagery of the bubbles is both ineffably beautiful and suggestive of the spiritual dimension of human life that lies just under the surface of everyday experience.' One might say much the same about TIlimans' work. Coincidentally, 1997 was marked by illness for TIlimans also. The day after the opening of his solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery in London, entitled 'I didn't inhale', his partner, the artist Jochen Klein, fell ill with Aids-related pneumonia and did not recover. He died a month later. These events are, of course, unrelated, but they do share that sense of tragedy that trickles and stains the everyday.

Perhaps it is this spiritual dimension lying just beneath the surface which brings together the many diverse elements of TIlimans' work, and which can be seen in his most recent pieces, such as Icestorm (2001), which contain abstract shapes floating within a representational landscape. In another recent work, Quarry /I (2001), a faint red trickle seems to run down in front of trees that stand before the rock face, a distinct artistic intervention upon an otherwise realistic scene. Yet, as the artist pointed out, one does not interpret the light green forms at the top of the picture abstractly, but rather as leaves which have fallen out of focus. In this context, perhaps we might see Shaker Rainbow as a precursor to these later works, where dramatic optical effects transform their surroundings, although in ways that might not be so easily understood. Light has a meaning here, certainly, as its absence does elsewhere in numerous photographs taken during a solar eclipse. It suggests a way of looking at the world, a way of looking that TIlimans has developed with remarkable sensitivity, and an awareness that the most powerful abstractions - life, death, love, fear, despair and happiness - are the most real of all, and can only be found within our own everyday. ***T***

What They Are

A Conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans

by Nathan Kernan

Photographer Wolfgang Tillmans was born in 1968, in Remscheid, Germany, a small town not far from Dusseldolf He moved to Hamburg after high school to do community service in lieu of being drafted into the army, and there he continued to make the Xerox art that he had begun to produce during his last year in school. He had his first show of this work at Cafe Gnosa in Hamburg in 1988. Needing pictures to use in the Xeroxes, he bought a camera and soon became more interested in his original photographs than in their "degradation" as photocopies. Tillmans first made a name for himself taking pictures of club kids, which he published in i-D and other magazines, but after deciding he was "too young to be a professional photographer " he moved to England and enrolled in a two-year photography program at the Brighton and Poole College of Art. Since 1992 he has lived mostly in London. In such books as For When I'm Weak I'm Strong (1996) and Burg (1998), and in gallery and Museum installations, he combines still-lifes, portraits, landscapes, scenes of communal celebration, and, recently, abstractions, with a seeming casualness that is anything but casual. Tillmans was the winner of the 2000 Turner Prize and a large retrospective of his work will open at Hamburg's Deichtorhallen this fall, later traveling to the Castello di Rivoli in Turin. At the time of our conversation there was a show of his new work at Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York.- NK

Nathan Kernan In your current show you include a lot of cameraless abstraction, in addition to, or sometimes as interventions upon, “straight” photographs. Can you tell me about how you started to make these abstractions?

Wolfgang Tillmans Ever since I started printing in 1990, I've been collecting things that went wrong in the darkroom. I've always taken great pleasure in intereting accidents, and as I saw them happening I would then use that as a chance to experiment, shaping the accidental. But I never showed any until

I was asked by Parkett in '98 to do an edition, and I gave them 60 of those darkroom accidents. I don't really like gratuitous editioning-all my work is editioned already-so usually when I do editions I try to play with the actual concept of multiples and uniqueness. So for Parkett, everybody got a com- pletely unique picture.

But, in a way, abstraction is something that I have always done. I don't know if I mentioned those black-and-white photocopies to you, which I was doing from '87 till '89, using found photographs, newspaper photographs, or my own holiday photography. I was enlarging them on a digital photo--

copier by Canon, which had this huge enlargement facility of 400 percent, and I would zoom into the image, and then enlarge that enlargement 400 percent, then that one, and so even after the first step the picture would be very grainy-pixilated-and after three steps what was left was just a pure graphic design. And so this exploration of the image surface, of the very nature of what constitutes an image, has always been of great fascination to me how in a way it's all just a likeness and never the real thing, but also how something you mark on paper is transformed into something that you look at and see something else in. It's the same today with the Blushes in the current show, for example, which are almost on the border between something and nothing; and when does "something" become "something ... else"? So in a way I started being interested in photography through deconstructing or destroying photography.

NK The new pictures of riders in the London Underground are also very abstract, very unspecific and formal.

WT And that's the interesting role that the abstract pictures play: they activate shapes in the other pic¬tures. So the fact that they are abstract isn't really that important. Because all the different abstract pictures look like they are pictures of something. And that's important to me, that they are not necessarily just another exercise in abstraction, but also somehow in dialogue with photography and the illusion, or the assumption, that a photograph must be oj something. And of course, every single one is an imprint and a trace oflight that has happened to the paper.

NK How do you make those Blush marks, those wire-thin lines and tiny particles?

WT They are all done with different light sources, like flashlights, and the Super Colliders with a laser, and it's quite an involved process which I don't really want to go into because, again, I want them to be what they are, and not just how they're made. The initial question everybody asks when confronted with a photograph is who is it, when was it made, how is it made, and when you're confronted with a painting you don't ask that. I mean, why can't it be enough to look at the object in front of you?

NK Yet to me the Blushes are very close to gestural abstract painting, which is not about the object only, but also about the gesture and the act of making it. Do you feel that plays a part in your work too?

“This exploration of the image surface, of the very nature of what constitues an image has always been of great fascination to me.”

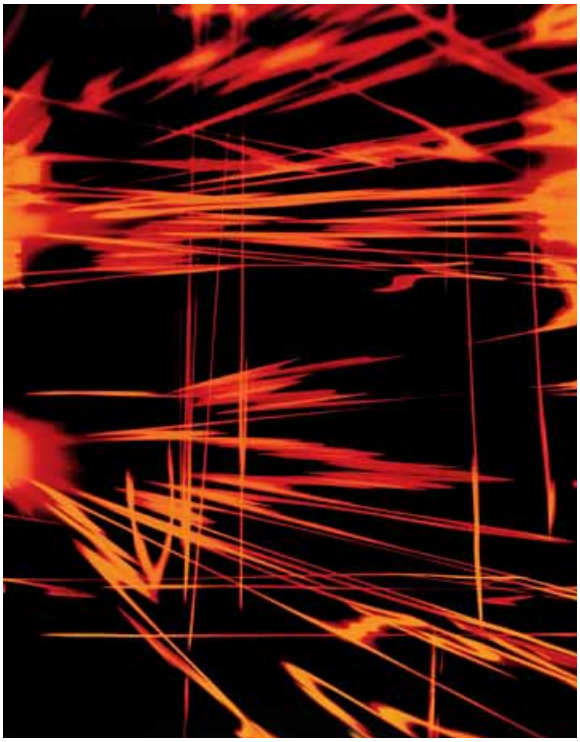
WT It is an act, I mean it is a time-based process which I have to get into. I don't want to over-romanticize it, either, but it is kind of an intuitive process, and I need to kind of bond with the material that I'm using, and then over time I develop a sense of, for example, how to filter to get the color I want, or time the exposure exactly, or make a movement quick enough so that the paper doesn't get too dark-and all that is, of course, very much like what a painter does. So it is a very physical thing; and I love this sheet of paper itself, this lush, crisp thing. A piece of photographic paper has its own elegance, how it bows when you have it hanging in one hand or in two, and manipulate it, expose it to light-I guess it is quite a gestural thing. And now I have set up a new darkroom where I can be more involved with that.

NK "Painting with light."

WT Well, you know, it's an obvious term that comes to mind, but, on the other hand, I think it's been used in the past in an apologetic way, in the past decades, trying to sort of bring photography to some level of perceived higher-well, to painting's status. But I don't want to mimic painting, and I think it's actually crucial that they are photographs. In a way, they are not doing anything that photog-

(Right)
Wolfgang Tillmans,
Super Collider #3,
color photograph
(medium, edition size, and
dimensions vary), 2001

(Far right)
Wolfgang Tillmans
Lutz & Alex looking at crotch, color photograph
(medium, edition size, and
dimensions vary), 1991



raphy doesn't do anyway, because they are recording light. They're inherently photographic, and they are not like painting. I mean they are not abusing the photographic process to do something else and so in that way they are as truthful as any photo can be. I think that it goes back to just letting them be what they are in front of you. Another thing that is important about them and which ties them into all the rest of my workis the simplicity of how they are done. And even though I don't want to explain the exact technical process, the fact is that they are made very simply, and, as with all my other pictures, I am interested in how I can transform something simple, or even something complicated, into something else.

NK After you started taking pictures in clubs, you took pictures with your friends that were not spontaneous, but were collaborations with the subjects.

WT Yes, in '89, or shortly after, I started to use people as actors of ideas, or actors of their own ideas, like a kind of collaboration, or a way for me to see what I would like to see. I soon realized that photography is a good way to see situations with your own eyes that you would like to see, like scenes of togetherness, for example, and you can't -it's kind of strange to ask people, "Could you hold each other because I want to see what it looks like?" But with a camera everybody instantly agrees, they understand that that is a good enough reason. And this is actually one thing that I really enjoy about photography and have used ever since I noticed it is possible: a camera gives a good rea¬son to be allowed to look at things.

NK Were the Lutz & Alex photographs structured as fashion in some way? They were done for i-D weren't they?

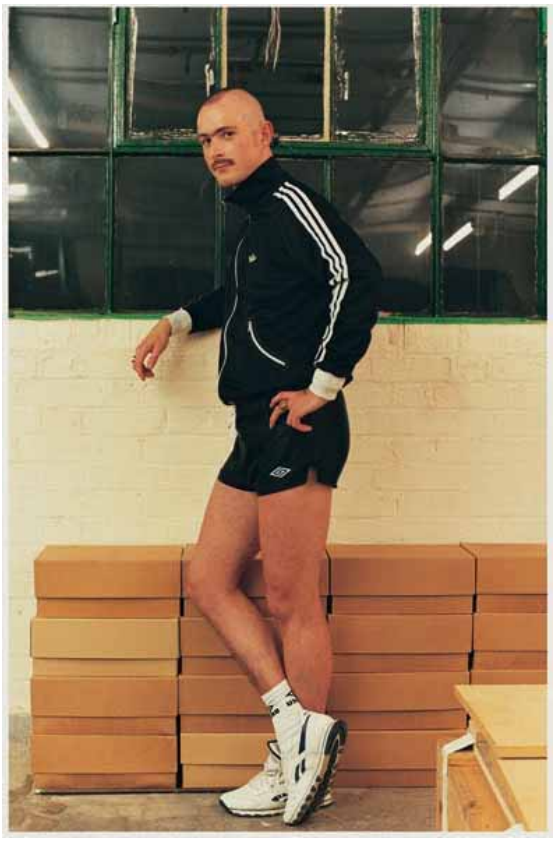
WT They were in *i-D*, yes. I realized that the fash¬ion pages were actually the' only pages in a maga¬zine where you could think about these things and publish pictures without having to tell a story or be documentary or report something. It's the only space in a magazine where you can just show pictures for what they are. And they were using a magazine as a reason to enact something I wanted to see. I really wanted to bring my ideas of sexuality into this context of *i-D*, to represent a man and a woman as partners, rather than the woman as the sexploited one and the man in control. The man is, in a way, as exposed as the woman, since toplessness isn't equal in the genders, it's only equal when [as in these pictures] it's topless for the woman and bottomless for the man. So there were a lot of ideas which I had gathered over the years which in ti1is weekend all crystallized. And so the pretext was, yes, it is a fashion story for *i-D*, but what was going on there were things that I wanted to do and the clothes idea I had, and so it's just been my work. Saying it's fashion but meaning that it's not my work is wrong; that it said what it ciid in a fashion context was totally intentional.

(right)
Wolfgang Tillmans,
Faltenwurf (twisted)
c-print 2000

following page:
Cliff, c-print, 2000

NK I loved it when you said once that you don't believe in snapshots, because it made me wonder whether maybe we're all too visually aware to even be able to take a snapshot anymore.
WT The big misunderstanding of the '90s was people thinking it's all about "anything goes," people snapping snapshots. The notion that you can take anything has been around a long time; in terms of art it's not a very interesting idea. But, on the other hand, I am always interested in how I can make photography do for me what I want it to by any means possible, including carrying a small camera around with me at times. So there are moments when I just try and see, well, can I take a picture of this at two o'clock in the morning somewhere? It is possible that a great picture can come from that.
NK AA Breakfast.
WT Yes, for example. Exactly-in that moment it was the appropriate camera. No other camera would have given me that picture. In a way, that is a good example of when a very of-the-moment, in-the-moment readiness of the camera is the only

way for the camera to be. But that's not my dogma. That it does happen now, here, this second, doesn't make it any better or any more authentic. I think that's what I've wanted to say. I don't want people to assume that my pictures are any more or less real than anyone else's-they are all real because they all happened in front of the camera. But then at the same time they are all constructions, they are not real, they are photographs, and they are my way of making the camera do what I want it to do, or trying to. And it's always more like an attempt. And it's a lifelong process to get better at it.



NK Some of your new works, such as the ink-jet prints of the Conquistador series, are editioned rephotographs from one-of-a-kind originals. Is that how you edition your non-abstract work as well?

WT No. Normally I have a negative and I print from that. But conceptually the uniqueness of the abstract ones is not important to me, and so I only keep them unique when it's technically necessary, that is, when they can't be re-photographed in a good enough quality.

NK Would that apply to the Blushes?

WT Yes. To be exact, they stay unique because the shifts in color are so faint that I can't really photograph that again. But in general, whenever I can, I edition them because I do believe in that image, and I want to use it at least a few times, rather than it just being done once and then gone. But because I either do all the prints myself, or they are done in my studio, I can only do a small number, and that is why my editions are always small, either one or three or ten.

NKWhat about the ink-jet prints? I remember you referred to them as "manifestations" of the image, and that if one deteriorated out in the world ten years from now that you would replace it, is that right? You seemed to acknowledge their inherent Impermanence.

WT Yes, with those it is actually part of the work. I know that they will deteriorate, but there is nothing I can do about it, and the qualities that I get from the ink jet are definitely worth it for me since they offer something that no other technique can offer. And, to be honest, I think they are probably the most archival conceptually, because you can just store the original master print that was used to print the ink jet from, in whatever safe, dark, cool conditions you need to, and then you can reprint the picture as many times as is necessary-as long as you destroy the previous one-and also given that ink-jet printing will always become better, it's actually a very safe medium. In a way this fragility of the ink jet is kind of an image of paradox-this sort of fragile and perishable quality which is also its beauty. I guess I could have an easier life if I didn't care so much about all those different manifestations of an image, you know, didn't care about making the prints myself or in my studio, but somehow that is my work also, and the time spent dealing with a print is also time spent with the work. And I do understand my work better through that. I can judge it better, because if I have spent many hours making it I do have a closer eye on it than if it just arrived from the lab at the gallery ready-mounted, ready-framed.

NK You mentioned that you would be going back to-not that you ever left-taking more portraits of people again, like the portrait Cliff in this show.

WT Yes, the whole last year I've been taking more portraits again and it's something I guess I won't ever really tire of-sometimes I don't feel I have anything to add to that, and then suddenly after a year or two I find there's a renewed, a refreshed interest in people, because in a way being tired of people as a whole would be a dangerous thing to happen, for me. The act of taking a portrait is just such a fundamental human act-it's a fundamental artistic act-and the process of it is a very direct human exchange, and that is what I find interesting about it. The dynamics of it never change, no matter how successful you are or how successful the sit¬ter is or how famous anybody involved is, the actual dynamics of vulnerability and exposure and embarrassment and honesty do not change, ever. And so I found that portraiture is a good leveling instrument for me. It always just sends me back to square one. I'm not saying it's something you can't get better at of course, it develops. But it requires me as a person to be sort of intact and fluid. +++