

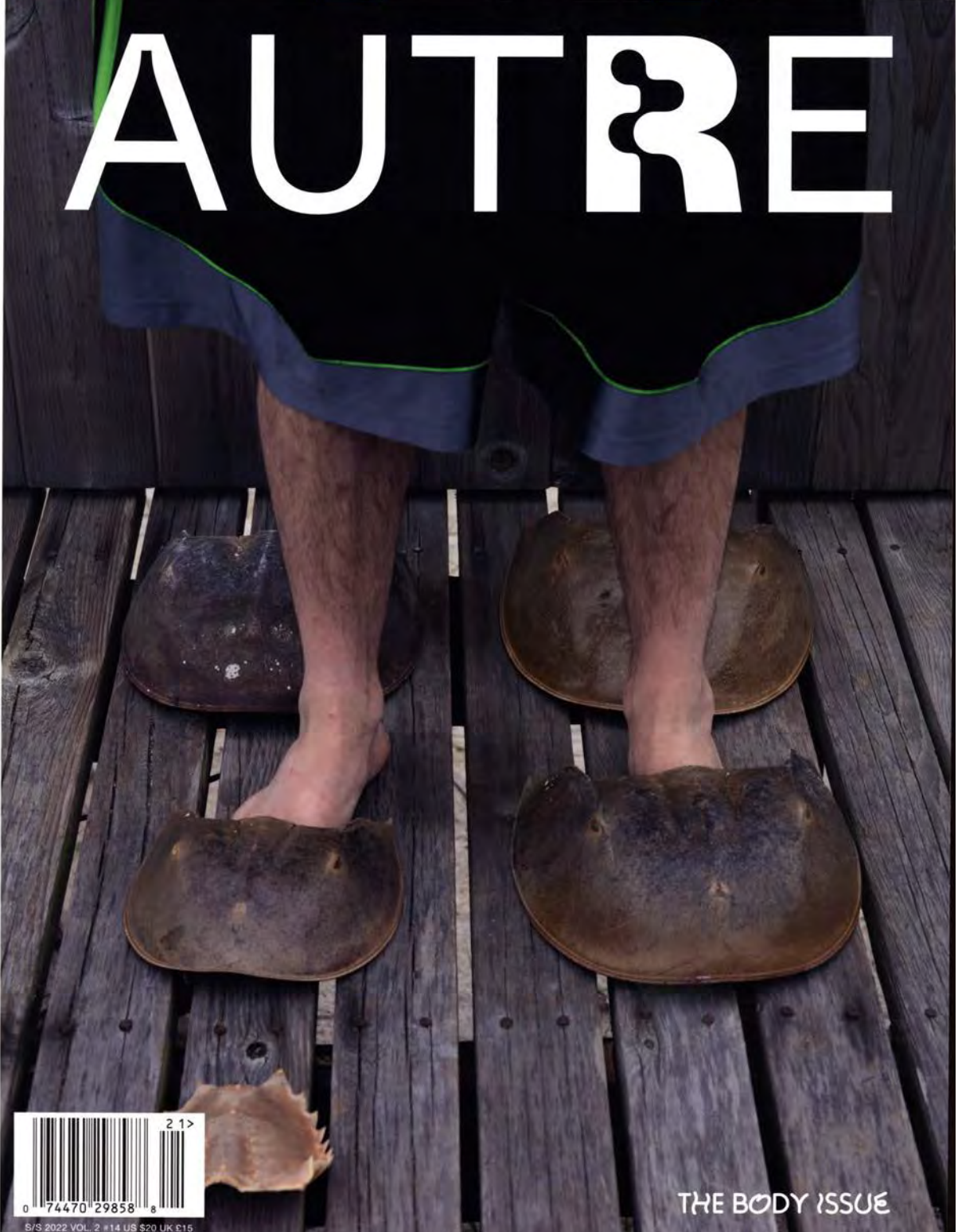
# REGEN PROJECTS

Frere-Jones, Sasha. "Star Gazer." *Autre* (Spring/Summer 2022) [ill., cover]

## AUTRE

14

WOLFGANG TILLMANS



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THE BODY ISSUE

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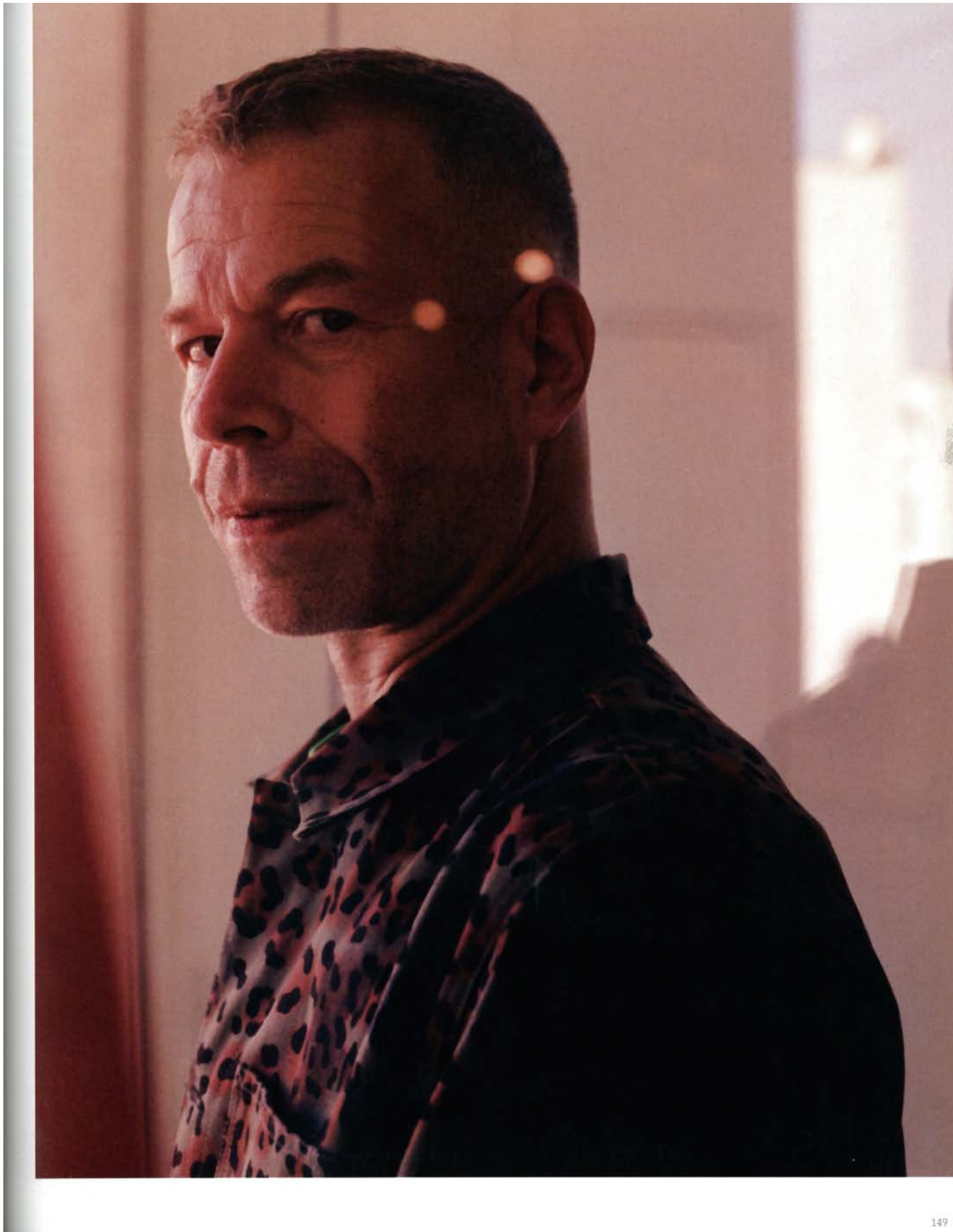
WOLFGANG TILLMANS

# STAR GAZER

Interview SASHA FRERE-JONES  
Photography PAT MARTIN  
Portfolio WOLFGANG TILLMANS

Internationally recognized and lauded photographer, musician, and political activist, Wolfgang Tillmans, always keeps his eyes wide open. As a photographer, no other artist has reimagined the potentialities of the medium more than Tillmans. As a result, he is within the pantheon of the most important photographic artists of all time. From human bodies to celestial bodies, Tillmans has been at the forefront of the zeitgeist for the past three decades—from capturing the nightclub scene, for which he is most well known, to his obsession with astronomy, and the poetic minutiae of our life here on Earth. Tillmans is an unbridled and uninhibited witness who has abandoned artifice for truth, superficialities for the profundities of love, desire, and loss; political turmoil, geopolitics, and climate change. His images—whether they are of friends in trees or concrete pouring into rebar—are alive, naked, free, vulnerable. They are nerve endings—exposed, breathable, and airborne. A kiss is not just a kiss, it is resuscitation. Dancing isn't just somatic kineticism, it is ancestral yearning. As a musical artist, his songs have a similar ambition. From his collaborations with Frank Ocean to his recently released debut album, *Moon In Earth Light*, which premiered in the form of a listening room at Regen Projects in Los Angeles last fall, Tillmans utilizes field recordings, electronic tempos, and his own voice as an auditory immersion into his psyche as an artist. This fall, he will take over the 6th floor of the MoMA for his first large-scale museum survey in New York (*Wolfgang Tillmans: To look without fear*), which will include over 350 photographs, videos, and multimedia installations. In the following conversation, Tillmans speaks to writer and pop music historian Sasha Frere-Jones about his expansive musical practice. Tillmans has also created a special portfolio of images for our Body Issue.

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**SASHA FRERE-JONES** How long did it take to make the album?

**WOLFGANG TILLMANS** The first bits are from the past four years. The lockdown was very productive because the musician I work with, Tim Knapp, his studio is on the same street as mine. So, we were able to use our time very fruitfully. The eighteen elements that make up the album came full circle to how I started to make music again around 2015, when I had collected an archive of field recordings that I had been doing over the previous five years. I saw them as audio photographs—photographing sound—but I had never really had the time, or peace and quiet, to do something about it. I finally committed time to it, and these different sources, from spoken word, to field recordings and jams, and proper studio productions, culminated in a 100-minute sound and light work at Tate Modern in London, and then I spent some time working more on single song structures, only to this year bring back the different elements, and fuse it into a 53-minute track of sorts.

**FRERE-JONES** It very much works as one long thing. I've listened to it a bunch of times, and I like having it just be one thing. You say the guy you work with, Tim, is on the same street. Where do you guys live?

**TILLMANS** In Kreuzberg, in Berlin.

**FRERE-JONES** When you're making the more song-like structures, what's your way of composing, or of putting stuff down?

**TILLMANS** It usually starts with words, a line, and a melody that comes with it.

**FRERE-JONES** Like "Late For The Webinar"?

**TILLMANS** Literally! Something like that pops into my head, and instead of discarding it as just a silly idea, I decide that sometimes silly ideas are worth holding onto. For example, "Device Control"—the song that made itself onto Frank Ocean's *Endless* album—I recorded the vocals to that in one take on an iPhone one morning while slightly hungover. I had mused about the new technology and the weird shift from living life to broadcasting life for some time, but then, one morning, I had these words, and it just came out. It happens sometimes with sentences that stay with me over decades, like, "we can't escape into space, we're in it" and the other line is, "he wants to change but not be seen changing," and that's something that

stayed with me all my life. It's about myself, but it's about seeing others, and I vary it from he, she, and I. Like many writers, I work with a library of notes that then either come with a particular melody or line, and I don't always get the verse. Often, they are more hook-only.

**FRERE-JONES** People don't have a lot of time now. The hook is all they want. I figure you're doing them a service. It's too bad you didn't get a song about the metaverse on there, now that Facebook has changed its name.

**TILLMANS** I don't want it to get too dark.

**FRERE-JONES** Yeah, that would get dark. I'm really curious about your whole journey. You started pretty young, if I'm not mistaken.

**TILLMANS** Yeah, there was a period when I was seventeen to nineteen that was very productive with some songs, which I later put out in 2016, but were never performed, and then I stopped for twenty-five years.

**FRERE-JONES** What kind of stuff was it?

**TILLMANS** I guess it was 1985, '86, very electronic, post-punk, new wave type music. Pre-house. This was just before house music hit.

**FRERE-JONES** Was there somebody you wanted to emulate, or be, or to play with? At that moment, who were your heroes?

**TILLMANS** Clearly, Soft Cell.

**FRERE-JONES** Okay. Let's go, let's go.

**TILLMANS** And New Order, and Pet Shop Boys, Psychedelic Furs, like a Northern English sense of electronic melancholy, and emotional yet arty, or experimental. It was also the time of Einstürzende Neubauten and noise, but I always had a strong affinity for more serious, electronic, industrial stuff and on the other hand, Italo disco, which was a genre that is nowadays held in great esteem.

**FRERE-JONES** Not then. Everything has changed so much, but I'm also curious about where you were when you were hearing this stuff. What was the mood where you were? I don't know what would've been popular in Germany at the time.

**TILLMANS** In the mid-80s, there was still a very large divide between serious music, guitar-made, handmade music, and electronic music, which was considered

not so serious because it's easy to make. Apparently, it's only pressing a few buttons. It seems ridiculous nowadays that there were such value systems applied, but I lived in a medium-small, industrial city in the larger area of the Ruhr in Germany, near Cologne and Düsseldorf, which is an area of rich culture, and musical history. Kraftwerk was from Düsseldorf, all sorts of people are from Cologne, and lots of English bands would come through the area to play. I feel really blessed having grown up at that time in that neighborhood where Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, and lots of great artists were living and working. I was a little bit too young for that. It was only when I left the Rhineland, and moved to Hamburg after school, that I was old enough and close enough to a burgeoning scene, which was an acid house scene, and that marked a tectonic shift in European music, and to a lesser extent all across America, but it had a huge impact in the urban cities of America.

**FRERE-JONES** When you were into acid house and you were in Hamburg, was that when you made those first recordings?

**TILLMANS** No, I did them in my hometown. But I was projecting into London.

**FRERE-JONES** I think we all have our ideal cities. Wherever it is, it's not where we are. It's somewhere else.

**TILLMANS** I once had an assistant in Berlin who was born on Tottenham Court Road in London, the street where I first saw Boy George when I was fifteen, and I thought, *wow, so incredible to be born in the West End*. Or I had an assistant who was born 200 meters from Alexanderplatz in Berlin, and I found it glamorous in itself, but on the other hand, I don't envy them because they never had this imaginary space; because they come from a place where other people project their dreams and ambitions.

**FRERE-JONES** It's like growing up in Las Vegas. Wait, so you said you stopped. Why did you stop?

**TILLMANS** Because my partner, Bert Lessmann, surprisingly, literally left town overnight. There was some personal drama with his girlfriend, and he just left. I didn't muster up the courage to find somebody else to work with and didn't want to start again in Hamburg. But then, being in the house scene, I wanted to capture the energy of this newfound solidarity and democracy

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on the dance floor. This house movement was like, it doesn't matter what you wear, t-shirt and jeans, whatever. It had a very egalitarian spirit, and that totally inspired me. I wanted to communicate that, which meant preserving it in pictures. That's when I took my first editorial photographs. Before that, photography had a different role because I was making artwork with a black-and-white laser photocopier—at the time a very modern instrument—and I only took photographs really to photocopy. So, it was the intersection of this much more contemplative work that I made with the photocopier with this extra vivid house music, and then the visuality of the dance floor, and the club lighting. Clubs are very visual for me, which is maybe not surprising.

**FRERE-JONES** It's interesting that when you moved to Hamburg, you started taking photographs in a very musical setting; that your response was visual rather than musical.

**TILLMANS** Yes, and that translation and that fascination with music, that love for music, has lived on in my portraiture of musicians, finding closeness to it through that. But also, for example, in an early group exhibition in Paris, at the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris, the exhibition called *L'Hiver de l'Amour*, there's a huge painting, basically the largest painting in the world, called *La Fée Électricité* by Raoul Dufy, and it's in an elliptical-shaped room. I placed a tower of speakers in and behind it, an amp with a cassette player on ultra-reverse, and on the cassette, I had ten of my favorite techno songs. This was in 2014. I then embarked on a project called *Playback Room*, which was creating rooms for listening to studio music—there are thousands of spaces for live music, but almost zero spaces for listening to recorded music. Twenty years before, I was so infused by this sense of how culturally significant these particular techno tracks were that I convinced the curators to allow me to exhibit, but in reverence, not in submission to them. They were doing something that I couldn't do at the time, and that's how I see my work, because I'm also a journalist. When I can use space in publications, when I use gallery space, I feel like I have a responsibility for being given this space, and I like to be an amplifier of ideas, showcasing other people and their ideas.

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**FRERE-JONES** It's interesting you say that thing about a listening room. I happen to be writing a piece that touches on listening rooms, as they have them in Japan—a listening environment where you get together and listen to jazz. It's starting to happen in America, but it's been going on in Japan for decades. Obviously, the last eighteen months have affected how we experience music.

**TILLMANS** For the past twenty-five years, I thought, *I'm not good enough,*

me much further back than I normally remember. I was like four or five. The rest of the album is not terrifying at all. You use words like "webinar," which is a very reassuring timestamp of the present moment. It couldn't have been twenty years ago, and it couldn't be twenty years from now. It's reassuring to have that in a record. Somehow, when you timestamp something, like Digital Underground talking about Burger King, it helps ground it. What I was trying to say before is the

a filmic sense from it that needs maybe less structured times and moments, which has been a breakthrough for me that I feel works.

**FRERE-JONES** It's an album that doesn't have lots of showy moments. It begins and takes you calmly through a series of sounds and songs. In terms of the field recordings, I'd love to know how and where you made them. What is your practice with regards to making those recordings?

**TILLMANS** Just like with my photography, people often assume photography is either 100% found or 100% staged, but in my practice, there are shades from 90/10, to 50/50, to 40/60 of how much I influenced a situation, or how much I let it happen. With sound, for example, this piece called "Rain Gutter" was a drip from a rain spout in Nairobi, which I just noticed behind my seat, and I couldn't stop fixating on how this rhythm was actually super musical. I recorded it, but I also allowed for some of the voices of my friends to be there, which, if one was absolutely pure, you would have to shut all of that out. I always like pollution, or not always pollution, but bleeding in. Another one was a traffic light with a sound for the visually impaired, which is something that I also focused on in a sound piece called "Sound of Central," Central being the part of Hong Kong called Central. I walked with my sound recorder between the traffic lights and created a stereo image back and forth. Walking around, people may have thought I was a bit weird, but it then felt performative in itself. Is that only a naked recording, or is it a performance of recording? There is not one rule for how I do this, and when it comes to working with fellow musicians—the two New Yorkers, Jay Pluck and Kyle Combs, plus the Colombian, Juan Pablo Echeverri, and from Rhode Island, Tom Roach—together with Tim, the six of us, we occasionally meet as a band project, and I've always recorded everything we do, coming from an observation that I repeatedly have in which musicians seem to say, "Oh, let's do another take of this," as if one can just do another take. As a photographer, I know from my experience that there often isn't another take. I see the jam recordings also as a kind of field recording.

**FRERE-JONES** Lawrence English does a lot of field recordings, and he

## "You don't want to fetishize authenticity because there isn't such a thing as straightforward authenticity."

*that's not what I'm doing anymore, and there was just a shift when I started doing the Playback Room series. I realized it is actually a deeper calling in me, that I want to do that again.*

**FRERE-JONES** So, that's the moment you decided that you want to make music again. Did you end up making music for *Playback Room*?

**TILLMANS** No, I never had my own music in *Playback Room*, but here in the exhibition at Regen Projects in LA, I do have a listening and video room where the album is playing.

**FRERE-JONES** One thing that I really like about the album is that it's very comfortable. Considering how much music I listen to, I never know what to call music that is experimental. Especially when you're dealing with things like field recordings. Maybe that bird wasn't experimenting. Maybe that bird is a bird. You know what I mean? It's just the presence of life, but there's also lots of singing. The Simon & Garfunkel song "El Condor Pasa" is a song from my childhood that I found really terrifying. It always sounded very funereal and dark. I really fucking hated it. It's obviously very beautiful, but there was something about it. I heard you start singing the words, and I was like, is he singing *that* song?

**TILLMANS** And did it terrify you again?

**FRERE-JONES** No, no, you made it a lot more approachable. It's an incredible cliché to say that music can trigger a strong emotion, but when I heard it, I was like, *that's the scary song*. It brought

comfort level you have with a certain kind of undefinable sound, and then back to melody and words. It doesn't feel particularly forced in any way. When you were working on the album with your friend Tim, did you have a way of speaking about those approaches? Was there a time when you said, "Now we're going to do a sound piece, and now we're going to do a song piece," or did it just happen organically?

**TILLMANS** The recording with Tim and Bruno, who also works at the studio, came to a pause in late spring, because that was when the lockdowns ended and exhibition activities started picking up again. I realized I was running late with the exhibitions that were happening here in Los Angeles, and I have a touring exhibition on the African continent, and next week I'm going straight on to Vienna, to Mumok. So, I stepped away from music for a couple of months and had a moment when I came back to realizing, *you know what, I don't want this structure of ten three-to-five-minute songs*. That's when I came back to this whole variety of different recordings that I love. I threw them together in a single Ableton session and did the mix myself. In the end, there are only four songs that are made with Tim and Bruno on this album, but the other six that are also in that more catchy, pop genre are, I felt, comfortable. There was suddenly an ease with bringing this together and creating time and space for the listener to not be experiencing a musician pushing ten songs at them, but to be in different spaces, times, and places. People have told me that they get



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wrote a paper about something he calls “relational listening,” which came to mind when you were talking about recording the stoplights’ sound, and you were doing this performance, because that means when you’re hearing something, you’re not just hearing the sound. You’re hearing the act of that person hearing the sound and recording it. You’re hearing a person hearing. Any act of recording is a little similar to the photographic process, and multiple takes makes you wonder, how can we say that the first take is good but we want to fix something about it? It’s always the balance between execution and concept.

**TILLMANS** You don’t want to fetishize authenticity because there isn’t such a thing as straightforward authenticity. It’s always a negotiation, but for me, there is something to be said for the moment when something falls into place. The looseness of that moment has a quality that would be lost when it’s put into place.

**FRERE-JONES** Do you have any interest in playing this stuff live? Do you have a history of doing this kind of thing live?

**TILLMANS** I’m in this group constellation. We did about five concerts in New York, at Union Pool, or at this sound installation we did at Tate. In 2019, at the Kantine am Berghain, we did this one song called “Kantine” on the album, which was recorded from that concert. I do like it, but it is something that doesn’t fit so easily into my other work. Ongoing life practice is basically what I can do time-wise, so I feel like I’m more drawn to working on a different form of music, visual presentation. I do like it, but I’m also shy about it.

**FRERE-JONES** You spoke so strongly about moving into photography with this whole acid house club scene, and being in the club is also a very physical thing. I doubt that anyone experienced acid house and just stood there. We were having a good time in New York too, and dancing was just so important to me when I was younger. How does that entire practice relate to how you make music now? Is any of that club feeling there for you in the same way, or was that more of a foundational movement?

**TILLMANS** It’s still a strong reference. There’s this song, “Can’t Escape Into Space,” that also has a rolling bass in there. There is something dance buried in it, but instead of pulling it out fully myself and

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developing it, I asked Honey Dijon to remix it, and she did better than I ever could in that department. In the last three years, I found that I don't need to do the actual club track. The last song on the album, "Give Me a Shadow" also has this beat but without a beat. I find that more interesting nowadays. Not that I'm too old.

**FRERE-JONES** I know what you mean. You can carry the club with you. The club can manifest in all kinds of ways. It doesn't have to be normative and obvious. Have you played this for friends who are both photographers and musicians, and obviously I couldn't help but wonder, did you play this for Frank [Ocean]?

**TILLMANS** Yeah. I did send it around and got some very positive feedback from other musicians who have told me this is actually a step forward. That meant a great deal to me.

**FRERE-JONES** It feels like a very solid, legit piece of work. I hear a lot of stuff that definitely does not hold up the way this does. It also feels like there's a mood. I don't want to project, but if there is a mood moving into the next stage of what this pandemic is, I would say there's a real love of softer things. When I was a kid, there was such a love of aggression. Kids don't want aggression these days. They really, flat-out, don't want it. I feel like your album fits into that feeling of intentional health. You're not trying to shock, or excite, or stab anybody; it's very much inviting you in. People don't really want extreme forms of anything because we've gone through so much extremity in the last few years. It's been a long time since I've heard music that was really interested in energetic catharsis. There's no new Jesus Lizard. There's no new Big Black, or even Nine Inch Nails. I don't know if that resonates at all for you.

**TILLMANS** I found for quite some time that it is not clearly predictable what will be successful, or what shines with an audience. In 2016, I had an exhibition in Porto, Portugal, at the Serralves Museum. The natural thing would've been to give them a survey of popular things that I've been working on, but I didn't want to do that. I was working on pictures of air, water, the sky, the different aggregates of water, and basically pictures of borders, horizon lines, and it seemed very relevant to me. When the exhibition happened, young people especially felt completely into it. I still photograph people dancing.

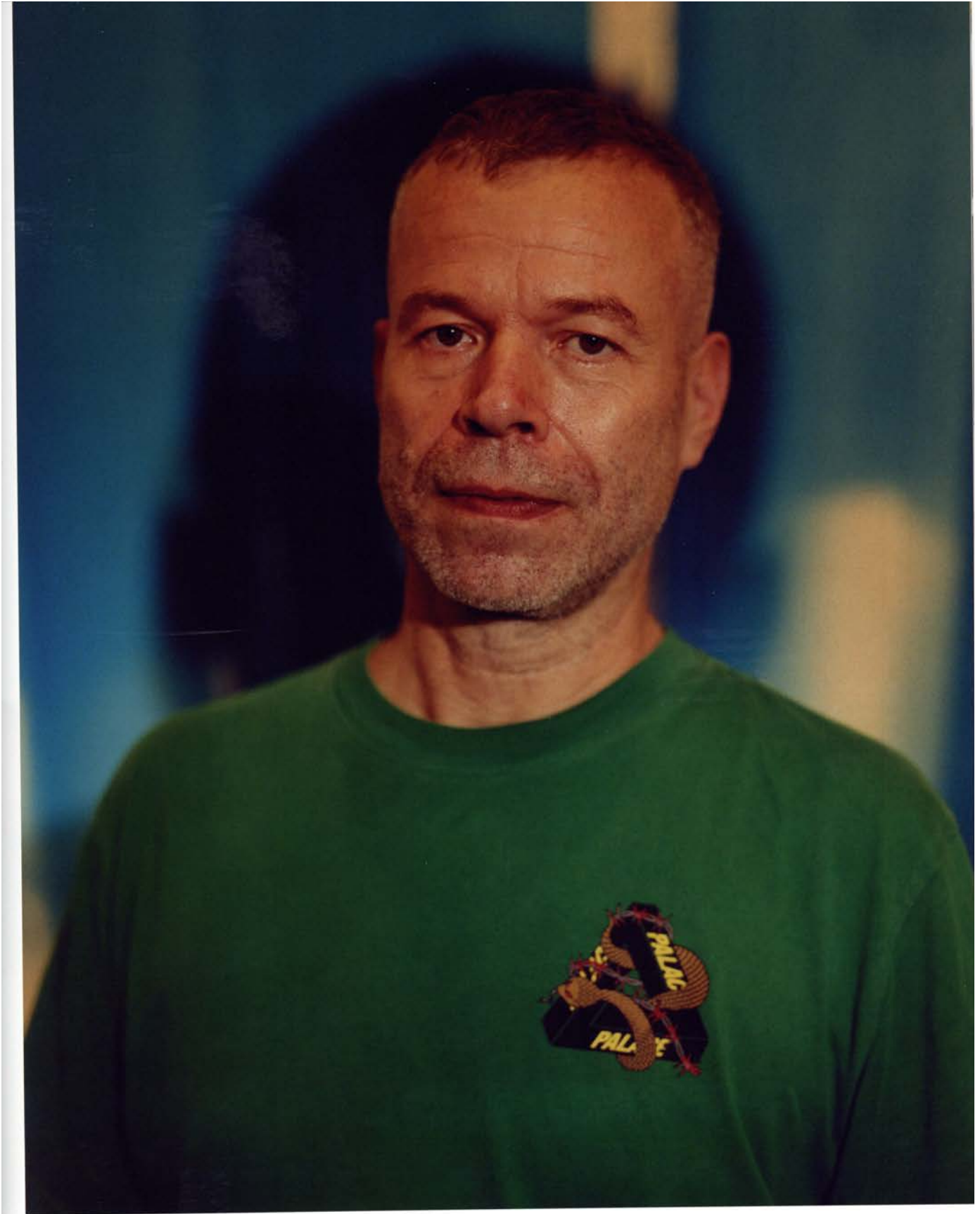
The subject matter hasn't really changed, but the key pictures in this exhibition at Regen Projects are studies of concrete being poured; liquid concrete just before it goes solid. So, intricate studies of material, rock, and sand. I didn't calculate twenty years ago that the sweaty skin of a dancer would resonate with its time, it just felt right. Now, even though there's no arrow that points at concrete, it is something that I do, and I feel it altogether connects. The exhibition has no clear signifier of *hey, this is for young people, this is relevant, this is cool*. And yet, I hope that it resonates with people of all ages.

**FRERE-JONES** I'm in the middle of making a record myself here, where mainly we're playing on a computer, but otherwise, fairly traditionally. Having been pretty immobile for the past eighteen months, I listen to the recordings and find myself acutely aware of when I was standing up to play. It felt like a massive experiential change. There was a point when that wouldn't have been a very big deal, and I was wondering if that has any kind of relevance to how you made this music, or if you have a physical relationship to how you record.

**TILLMANS** That's fundamentally what inspired me to move back toward using myself as an instrument, rather than the camera—that very sensation of doing something in this very split second. My work is all about the visible world in one way, and on the other hand, as a person, like many of us, I try to do whatever I can to not feel myself, or to escape, or to postpone myself, but the act of singing or making sounds is 100% linked to real time, because there's no postponement; there's no further development or post-production. I mean, there is post-production, but the actual act is in the here and now, and that brings the body into a different perspective for me, like an actual-ness that can't be negotiated.

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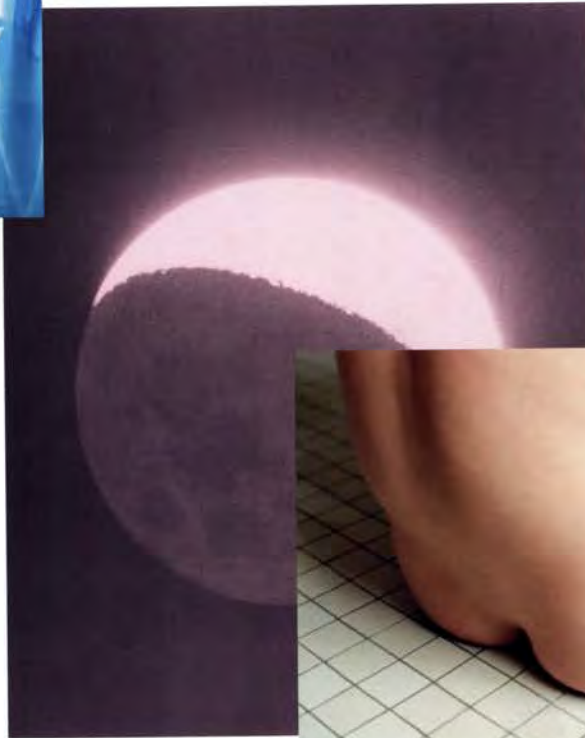
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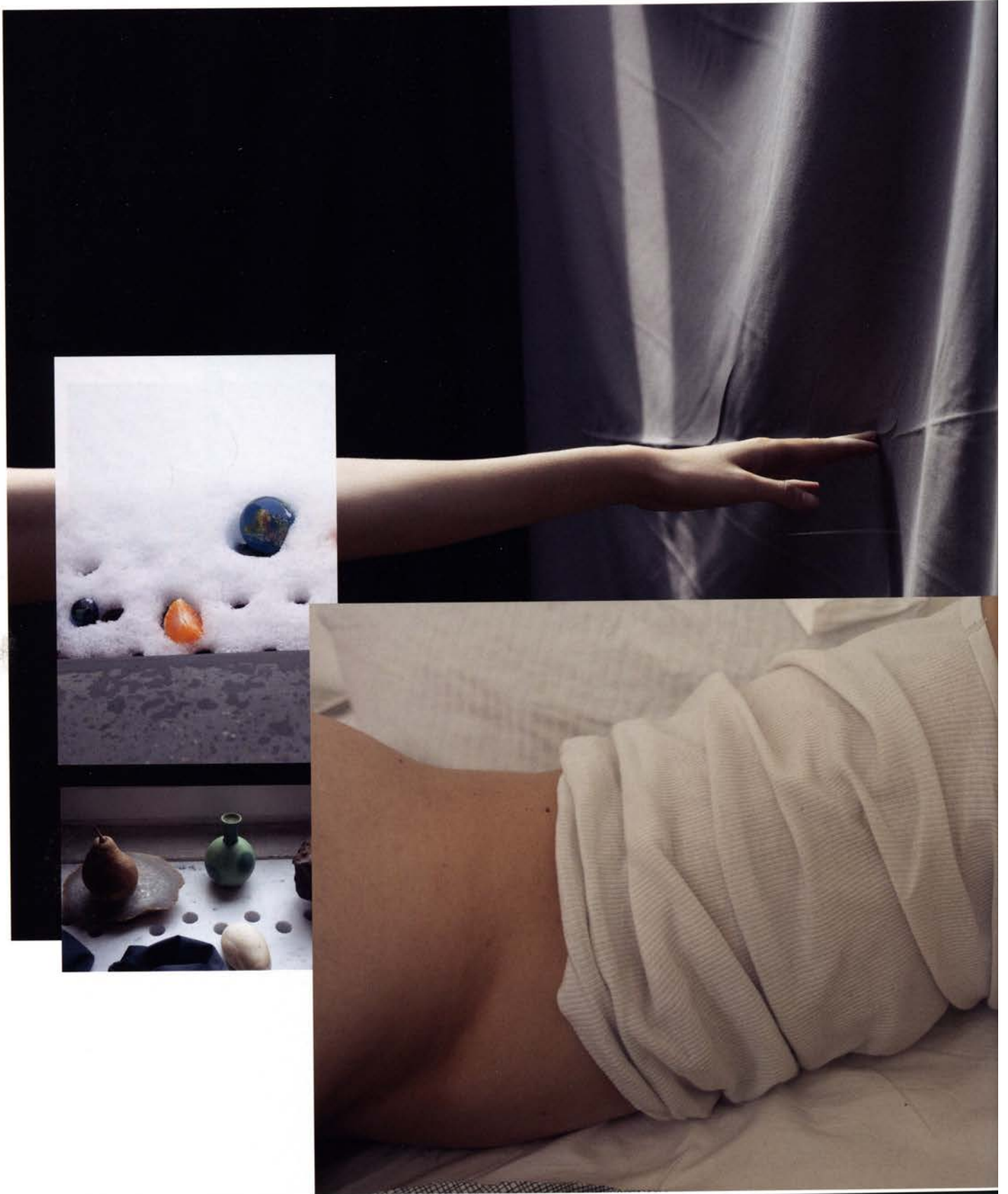
Wolfgang Tillmans in Autre



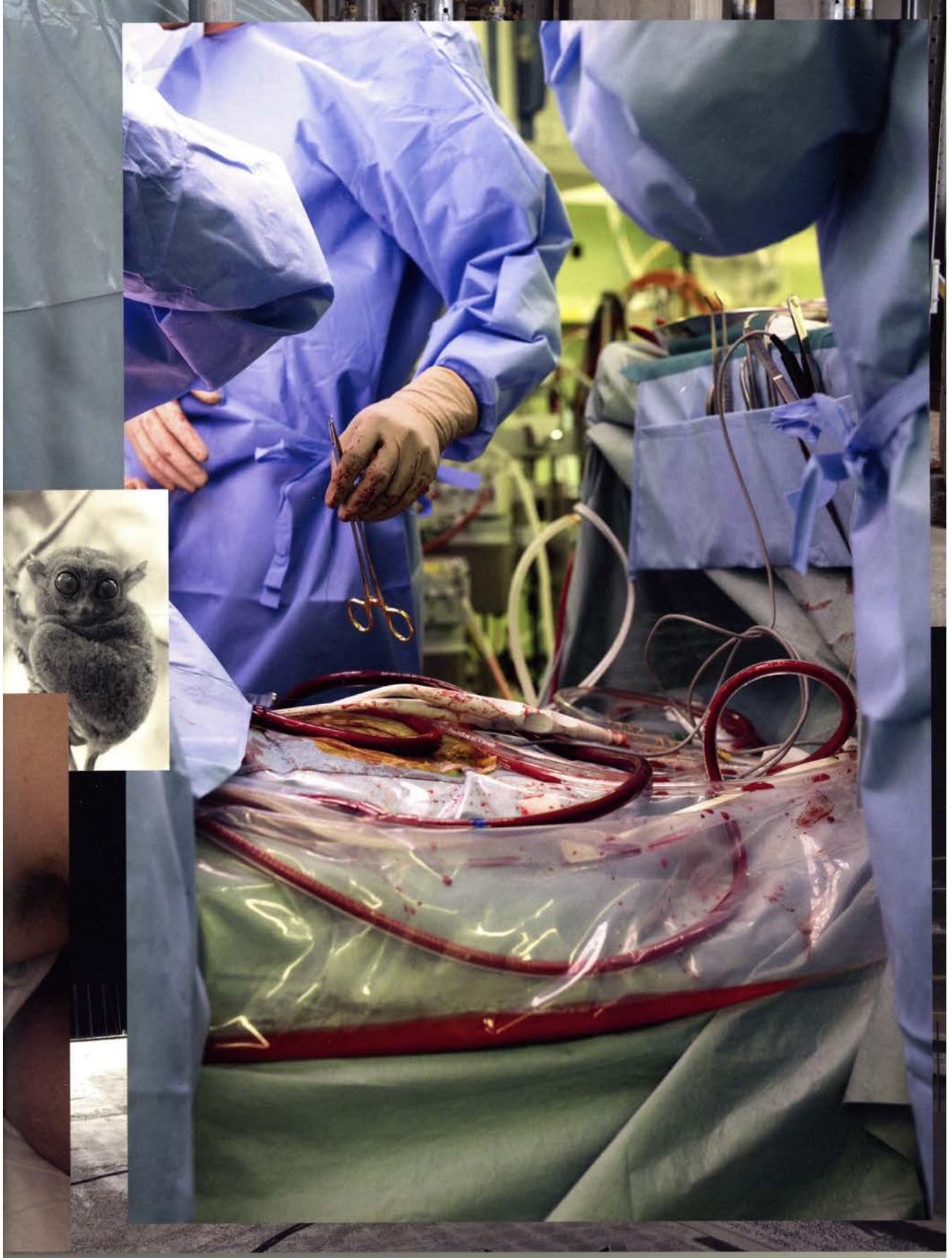
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