

REGEN PROJECTS

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FEATURE

The Venice Architecture Biennale: artist interview



A still from Wolfgang Tillmans' *Book for Architects*, 2014, which is in the central pavilion at the Biennale

JOURNEYS INTO SPACE

Wolfgang Tillmans's Venice work explores architectural details, grand and humble, from 37 countries. By Louisa Buck

It is a busy summer for Wolfgang Tillmans. The German artist may be best known for his wide-ranging but also utterly distinctive photographic work – he was the first non-British and photographic artist to win the Turner Prize, in 2000 – but he is currently confounding expectations with a two-channel video installation in "Elements of Architecture", the central pavilion at the 14th International Architecture Biennale in Venice (until 23 November), as well as presenting a room containing objects and photographs at the 8th Berlin Biennial (until 3 August). Tillmans, who now divides his time between Berlin and London, is also taking part in the veteran curator Kasper König's Manifesta 10 (until 31 October). This edition of Manifesta is, controversially for many, being hosted by the State Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg. Rather less contentiously, Tillmans has work in the Royal Academy of Arts' annual Summer Exhibition, which runs until 17 August (he was elected a Royal Academician last year). He also has work in the Beyster Foundation in Basel – his photographs were the first to enter the museum's collection.

The Art Newspaper: You are taking part for the first time in the Architecture Biennale. How do you feel about this new departure?
Wolfgang Tillmans: I was afforded this great opportunity by Rem [Koolhaas] to realise a project that I had been thinking about for at least seven years, ever since this title *Book for Architects* sprang into my head. It came from a desire to be in dialogue with architects, to offer my point of view, but not in a lecturing, teaching kind of way. It might be initially surprising that I have a room in the central pavilion exhibition "Elements of Architecture", but architecture and how we use space is actually something that has been part of my work actively from the start. I've noticed that I am very aware of architecture from two points of view: one is from the way that it influences everybody's lives and the central role that, especially, the details of architecture play in everyday life and how little this is discussed. My other point of entry and interaction with architecture is that for the last 20-plus years I have been making site-specific installations in galleries and museums that start with a direct response to the interior spaces that I will occupy.

Contrary to its title, *Book for Architects* is a two-screen, 40-minute video projection, showing a sequence of 450 still images. Why did you choose this format?

Initially, Rem offered me a generous L-shaped corner in the central room of the central pavilion but I realised that it would probably hold only 20 pictures and I thought it would have felt like just an illustration of a concept which needed to be shown in depth and with a greater number of pictures. For years, I have thought about the idea of a film made of stills. Obviously, this is something that has been before, but what made it possible is that I found these new Sony projectors that have this incredible eight-megapixel density. It's called 4K and is four times as sharp as high definition – so for the first time, there is a video quality that I feel comfortable showing my still pictures on.

It features a wide range of architectural images taken from a multiplicity of viewpoints, from corners and ceilings, to plazas, skyscrapers and aerial shots of cities.

It is playing with these terms of dissemination of ideas and it is reflecting upon what was built by architects and also without them. In architecture, there is an incredible proliferation of books and of categorisation and sub-categorisation but *Book for Architects* is not very user-friendly. It features 37 countries in no typological or any other keyword-able order – even though throughout there is an order and it's not a random selection. It is very specific and it has a point of view and opinions about architecture, its not just showing that all of this exists. This was an important criteria when I was editing over the last three months. I was always reminding myself: "Hey, is this picture in there just because it covers what exists? If it only does that, then it has to go out." A picture can only be in if it is a specific observation which translates into something general and universal.

How has this affected the final lineup?
It brings together things that I like in architecture: personal spaces like my studio or my parents' home are featured often because I understand them very well in a specific way. Then there are other generic situations which I have encountered all over the world which are really striking when you recognise that the same thing is happening everywhere simultaneously.



Biography

WOLFGANG TILLMANS

Born: Remscheid, Germany, 1968
Education: Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design

Represented by: Maureen Paley London, Daniel Buchholz Berlin, Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York
Lives and works: Berlin and London

Selected solo exhibitions: 2013 Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany; Les Rencontres d'Arles, France; Museo de Arte de Lima, Peru 2012 Kunsthaus Zürich, Switzerland; Museo de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, Brazil; Moderna Museet, Stockholm, Sweden 2011 Zachęta National Gallery of Art, Warsaw, Poland 2010 Serpentine Gallery, London; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, UK

Selected group exhibitions: 2014 Manifesta 10, The State Hermitage Museum, St Petersburg; 14th International Architecture Biennale, Venice; Berlin Biennial 2010 The British Art Show 7, various UK venues; 2009 3rd Moscow Biennial of Contemporary Art; 53rd Venice Biennale 2008 Turin Triennial, Italy; 55th Carnegie International, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, USA 2005 51st Venice Biennale; 2000 Turner Prize (winner); Tate Britain, London; The British Art Show 5, various UK venues; 1998 Berlin Biennale

So much of today's architecture is just cladding. It pretends to be a surface that it actually isn't – many buildings now are really just like Ikea shelves with a thin skin facade dropped down. Then there are favourites of mine like the Southbank Centre [in London] and places that are built in a very real way, where what the eye meets is actually what the structure is. So there is meandering thinking about the public face of our cities and then there are more individualist gazes on how, say, somebody in Seoul has joined a drainpipe with another drainpipe coming out of a corner of a building, and has poured a bucket of concrete over it to make the surface smooth again.

I have always had a fascination with these individual human responses to a given problem and how different people find different solutions to the same problems. This is meant as a celebration of the manner and the creativity of the human mind.

You are also taking part in Manifesta 10 in St Petersburg. How are you approaching this more problematic context?

In 2009, when I was invited to the Moscow Biennale, I made a very outspoken statement in a way that I could not do now, with images that included a large photograph of two guys kissing and a picture of a demonstration for freedom of expression with a lesbian kiss, as well as gay flyers and anti-gay vitriol from Bethnal Green in London. This time, I have chosen to show photographs that I took in St Petersburg and Moscow over three visits. In 2009, 2005 and 2014, which I think are quite a clear critique and depiction of the state but which don't have political meanings spelled out all over them. One is a picture of an Orthodox church being built in Moscow – a pre-cast concrete structure that looks like a bunker which is then half-clad in pseudo-historic surface tiles. Another picture is the gigantic four-metre *End of Broadcast*, which I photographed on a TV in St Petersburg, where there is no signal – you just have static snow.

Another room features the body, with a great number of the drapery pictures hung like a classic picture gallery; you get a sense of a lot of undressing happening. I wanted to create a sense of the body in a different way and confront the viewers with themselves through the pictures: the Hermitage is a huge conglomeration of drapery and body surfaces.

You came to digital imagery quite late – in 2009 – and you have said that it marked a seismic shift in how you take and look at photographs.

It really threw a spanner into the fine mechanics of the psychology behind my photography: the triangle of subject and photographer and hope and expectations which you cannot verify until you see the processed film. Suddenly, you see this immediate little representation of what you have photographed and it was quite an unlearning curve not to use it as a compositional device but just to look at it purely as proof that the picture was taken.