

REGEN PROJECTS

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An interview with Wolfgang Tillmans

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Look, again



Venice 2007, C-Type print 181x252 cm

INTERVIEW

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 für 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?'

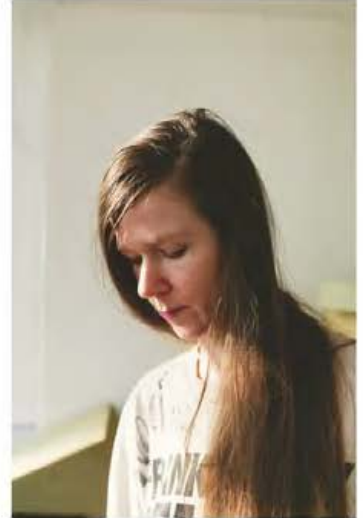
DE So making images is partly about some kind of impossibility?

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.

Susan, No Bra



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.

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 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]

WT There 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?

WT Yes, 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 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.

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.



DE Is 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.

Dominic Eichler is a musician, writer, artist and contributing editor of *frieze*.