

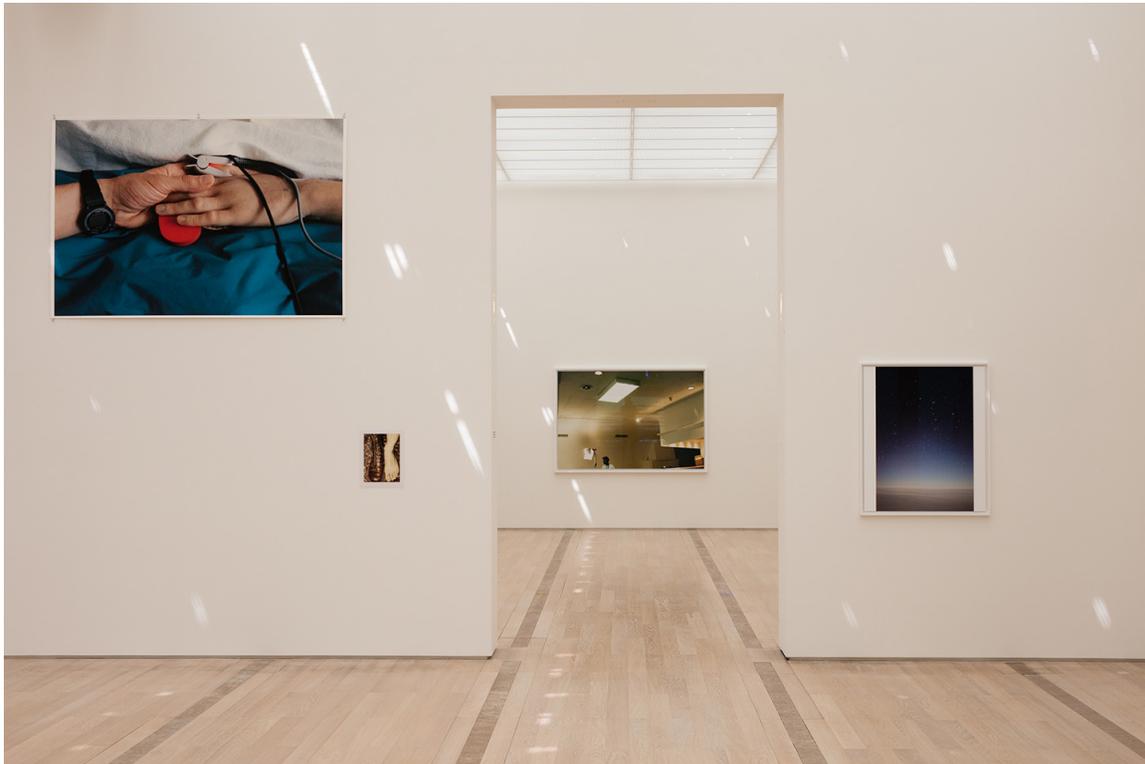
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MOUSSE

CONVERSATIONS

Wolfgang Tillmans at Fondation Beyeler, Basel



Wolfgang Tillmans at Fondation Beyeler, Basel, 2017

Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Cologne / Berlin / New York; Maureen Paley, London; David Zwirner, New York / London

Wolfgang Tillmans in conversation with Riccardo Conti

Wolfgang Tillmans has become one of the most important artists of his generation. He had a recent solo exhibition at Tate Modern in London until 11 June and now, as well, the Fondation Beyeler in Basel has dedicated its summer show to him, focusing for the first time on the medium of photography. This major solo exhibition, curated by Theodora Vischer, features around two hundred artworks. In these photos Tillmans reveals

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moments of beauty, nature, friendship, and desire, and documents scenes of activism and social and political life. This and the Tate installation perfectly embodies Tillmans's intense oeuvre, and his utopian idea of a non-hierarchical society.

Riccardo Conti: In the Tate and the Fondation Beyeler exhibition, some of your works are attached to the wall with small clips, while others are exhibited in frames. How do you decide how to present each photo?

Wolfgang Tillmans: It comes from my understanding that photographs are "objects." The sheet of paper is inseparable from the image it carries, not just a vessel of information. Thus, instead of hiding the body of the photograph I choose to show it as an object. This is why I place some pictures naked on the walls, letting the viewer perceive them for what they are.

RC: Can you explain further how you arrived at this open form of presentation?

WT: Yes, it was minimalistic—the purest approach, in a way. Yet after ten years of having exhibited only unframed photographs I felt that it had become expected. And so I thought it would be interesting to add frames because they remind the eye of these different statuses. I didn't just add *random* frames. They are the result of precise research for a model that can lend purity to the object one is working on over time.

RC: Did your relationship with reality change between your early analog works and the advent of the digital era?

WT: I think photography just offers realistic depictions of reality. I see myself using photography in the way any artist looks at the world with the means of his or her own time.

RC: What are your thoughts about the reproducibility of the medium, and its implications in the market?

WT: The market and its demands have never been compelled me to do more. I have always believed that the intention behind of the making of an artwork is encapsulated in the artwork. For example, the first airplane wings were a one-to-one direct negotiation of thousands and thousands of pictures I took years and years before the first time I exhibited that photo. But when I realize the perfect image of a subject, there is no need to have that experience again, because there is no remaining innocence in repeating it.

RC: So when you achieve a result, it's time to move on to something different?

WT: Sure. But if you put that way, it sounds like an active decision. It wasn't necessarily that "conscious" for me. You have to make yourself open to things. You have to be prepared for chances.

RC: It's hard to circumscribe the range of your subjects to a single theme, but if I had to name it, I should say "freedom." What does freedom mean to you?

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WT: Actually freedom has a precise meaning to me. First, it comes from the awareness that the freedom we enjoy is something that others fought for. If we can live freely, it's because other people in history did serious, radical, challenging things. And I'm not just talking here about the LGBT community; I'm thinking about even more basic rights that today we take for granted. The big question of our time and for the younger people is to protect those achievements.

RC: Would it be safe to say that one of your art books, *Soldiers: The Nineties* (1999), conveys a certain desire toward bodies in uniform?

WT: Perhaps, but it's a contradictory attraction, a double feeling, that could be affirmative or subversive. Uniforms are designed to look a certain way, to display masculinity, in ways that are never actively discussed. If you look at those bodies wrapped inside the uniforms with a sexualized glance, you immediately remove the power and the authority they represent.

RC: At the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the exhibition *Eternal Youth* includes some of your photographs. Do you think that part of your work is misleadingly connected to or entrapped in some cult of "eternal youth"?

WT: In the first place, I do not speak about youth. When I was twenty-four, my main thing was to speak to being alive, being human, and to do that I spoke through the people who were close and accessible to me, and they happened to be young. When my first book came out in 1995 it got a lot of attention and people started to describe it as "a portrait of a generation," but that was never my aim, because when you are young you are not really aware of this condition. It's a matter of perspective. I realized I wasn't young anymore when I was thirty-one years old. And I certainly don't consider "being young" a particular value, because it is a moment of great vulnerability, crisis, and confusion.

RC: Do you think you contributed to some change in the ideals of beauty with your work for magazines such *i-D*?

WT: Maybe. But what goes on in 99 percent of fashion publications is not influenced by that. A real alternative of bodies and beauty is not fulfilled because there is always a sense of perfection there. I'm not so optimistic in that sense. I think that we are just carrying forward a small detail of what people did in far more radical ways in the 1960s and 1970s. And our tolerance for different bodies is definitely lower than it was twenty-five years ago.

RC: An ethical question persists in photography: How to operate in a world of heavily consumed visual imagery? Why should a photographer want to take another picture in a photo-saturated world?

WT: Exactly. It's the reason I slowed down my photography in the late 1990s, when I turned more to abstract pictures made without the camera in the darkroom. If you think about a balance, a justice regarding what lives are worth representing, I wonder why we should have 10 percent of the world be portrayed every minute and other people from the same Earth not at all.

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RC: Is that why you usually take photos of people you personally know, and not just bodies without any story or context...

WT: I was always critical about it, and aware of the complications that come with depicting people. I had problems with how young people were depicted in the late 1980s; they were always presented as not serious, making funny faces or funny gestures, like they had to excuse themselves for being young, and I never felt that that generation should be taken anything other than seriously. The people I knew were quite deep, not superficial. I personally felt very serious at eighteen, or twenty-one, with sincere interests in fine arts and music as well as pop culture, magazines, and fashion.

RC: Now that your artworks belong to some of the world's most important art institutions, what kind of relationship do you have with the Old Masters?

WT: I have never regarded the Old Masters as completely out of my reach or my real experience. When you talk about Gustave Courbet, first of all I think of him as a human being. That's because of my fundamental belief is that all people are born equal. There are variations in how we use a tool to represent a wave—for instance with painting or photography—but we are still looking at the same subject in different moments in history.

at Fondation Beyeler, Basel
until 1 October 2017



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Courtesy: Galerie Buchholz, Cologne / Berlin / New York; Maureen Paley, London; David Zwirner, New York / London

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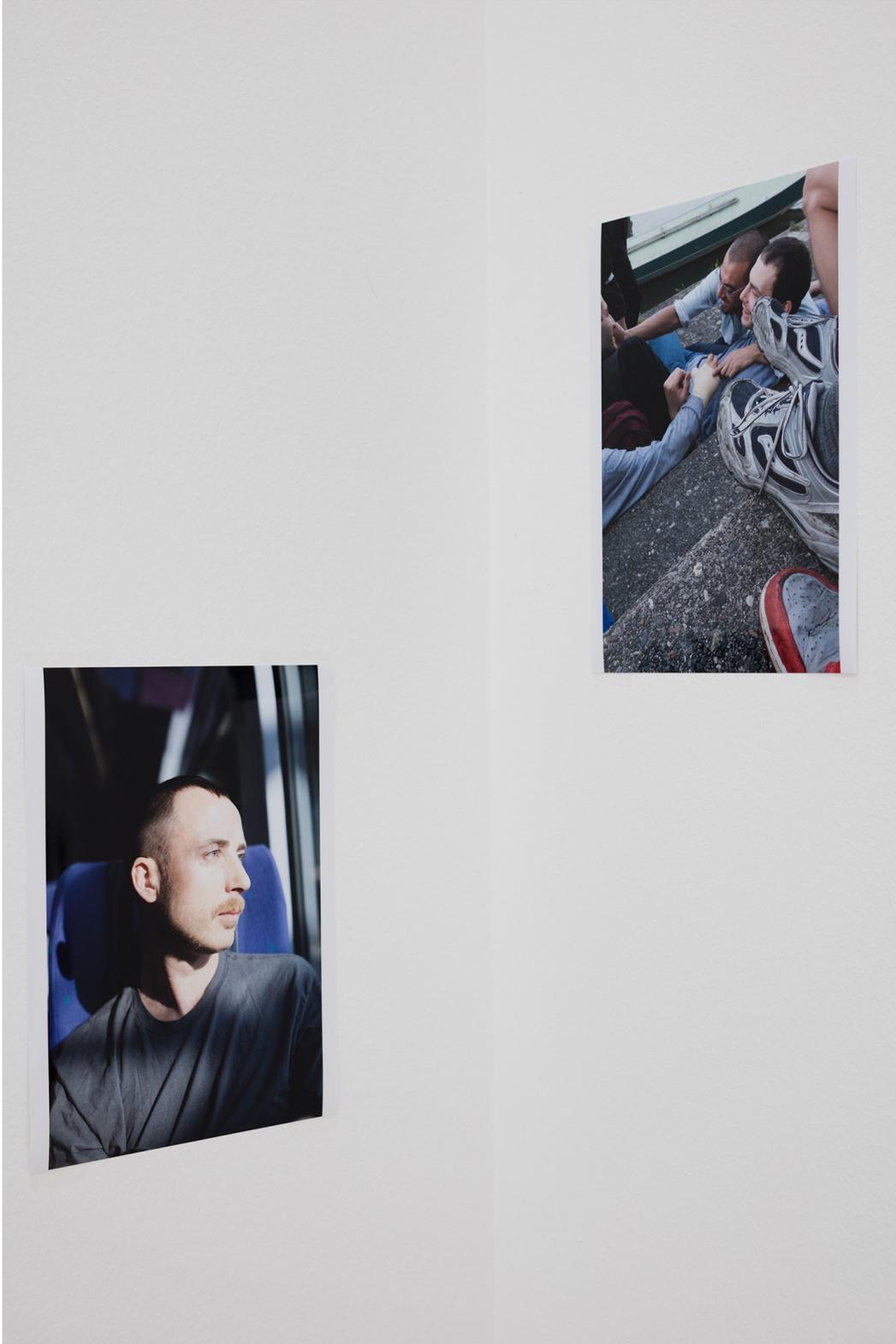
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