

W O L F G A N G
T I L L M A N S

ROOM GUIDE
FONDATION **BEYELER**

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WOLFGANG TILLMANS May 28 – October 1, 2017

WOLFGANG TILLMANS

The large summer exhibition at Fondation Beyeler is devoted to the artist Wolfgang Tillmans. It is the first comprehensive engagement with the medium of photography at the Fondation Beyeler, which some time ago added a wonderful group of works by Tillmans to its collection. Approximately 200 photographic works from 1986 to 2017, as well as an installation with new music videos, are on view.

Tillmans gained notoriety in the 1990s with pictures reflecting the lifestyle of a generation, many of which have since become iconic. Over the following years, he expanded the focus of his activity and launched into photographic experiments that led to a new visual language. Works were produced both with and without a camera, and by using a photocopier.

Photography is generally expected to capture something that exists, and to reflect reality as faithfully as possible. Accordingly, we tend to see things in photographs as they are depicted from reality. Tillmans considers this to be a misleading and restricting idea, as a photo image is actually capable of showing much more. He is interested in photographs as “made” or “fabricated” pictures, and tirelessly explores the diverse potential and reception of the medium. Alongside traditional genres such as portrait, still life, and landscape, the exhibition includes abstract images that push the boundaries of the visible. This exhibition does not focus so much on photography in the classical sense as the center of Tillmans’s oeuvre, but rather highlights the creation of imagery.

The exhibition was curated by Theodora Vischer, Senior Curator at Fondation Beyeler, in close cooperation with the artist.

CAUTION: Please do not touch the works of art!



Whenever this symbol appears on the exhibit labels, it means you will find the work of art discussed in detail under the corresponding number in this guide.

1 • *unscharfer Rückenakt*, 1994; *Night Jam*, 2013; *ceremony*, 2007

Based on a few exemplary works, the exhibition begins by highlighting the range of Tillmans's artistic activity. Regardless of the great differences between them, it becomes clear that the focal point is not always the motif, but often the way in which the thing represented is transformed into an image.

unscharfer Rückenakt would seem straightforward, simply because the motif of the figure turned away from the viewer has a long history in art. However, this picture was taken quite spontaneously in a situation that the artist wished to preserve for the future.

Night Jam is strongly colored and on first sight appears abstract, despite the fact that it captures reality. It shows remnants of sheets of photo paper that became wrapped around the cylinder of a developing machine and had to be cut away piece by piece.

The large-format *ceremony* was made by transferring the motif from one medium to another. The point of departure for this image was a color negative that was enlarged on a photocopier and eventually printed on photo paper.

2 • Portrait

The portrait is a constant that runs through Tillmans's oeuvre. Accordingly, the exhibition includes many portraits made in various contexts. Tillmans's portraits are characterized by the sitters' great presence, immediacy, and spontaneity. He makes a point of avoiding dramatic staging, such as manipulated lighting, aiming to capture the tension-charged first encounter with the model. Tillmans is interested in the unfamiliar, less obvious aspects of his sitters, rather than the preconceived image or impression they wish to convey. This notion frequently amounts to vulnerability combined with charm and strength tempered by weakness, which is revealed when a person is confronted by the camera.

Tillmans has accompanied and regularly photographed his friends for many years. Yet he also captures spontaneous portraits of chance and casual acquaintances. Tillmans has, furthermore, been commissioned to shoot magazine cover spreads and album artwork for a number of celebrities and musicians.

3 • Still Life

Another genre found in Tillmans's work is the still life: a symbol of time, transitoriness, and abundance that has been featured in art for centuries. In his still lifes, the artist lets subject, place and time enter a dialogue. For instance, he might begin by arranging flowers, fruit, or mundane objects into an ensemble. Then he leaves this "living still life" to itself for a while—sometimes returning to it after months, or even years, when he feels the moment has come to capture the motif in an image. Thanks to the resulting picture's dimensions, the lighting conditions, form and color, and flatness or volume of the objects can be precisely inspected. This exploratory gaze and conscious observation can help us to overcome habitual vision and perception.

4 • *window shaped tree*, 2002

In works like *window shaped tree* and *tree filling window*, Tillmans addresses artificiality or the “made” quality of pictures. The green trees have just the appearance we would expect: green. When we look more closely, however, we discover that the interior walls and the windowpanes are actually green too. During the enlargement of a black and white negative, the artist used a red filter to suffuse the entire composition with greenish light.

The complex relationship between real object and photographic reproduction is determined by technology, material, and the artist’s careful decision making. Regardless of whether the photograph is black and white or color, it is simply not possible to depict the motif in a neutral or objective way. As is true for paintings, the “made-ness” of photography is always evident. Artistic interpretation of reality works as a strong filter, like the green hue Tillmans has laid over the entire image of the window.

5 • *Chemistry Squares*, 1992

Tillmans has emphasized that he doesn’t work in series but that his thematic groups, picture types, and subjects develop organically, over the course of many years. A rare exception is *Chemistry Squares*, a self-contained series of 15 photographs made over the course of a single night in 1992. All of the photos exhibit the same formal parameters: square format, lack of color, and a dynamic composition in which those depicted are shown not head-on, but rather cut-off or in motion. These are partial enlargements of pictures taken of visitors at the London *Chemistry* club night. The sense of community, peaceful atmosphere, and ease reflected by the warmth in the people’s faces are characteristic of the techno scene to which Tillmans and his friends belonged in the early 1990s.

Based on the motif of *Faltenwürfe* (Draperies), Tillmans explores the fundamental incompatibility of two- and three-dimensionality in art. How can the soft folds in a piece of cloth be represented on a flat sheet of photo paper? How can the volume, let alone beauty, of a single fold be shown? We might say that the craft of the artist consists in translating the three-dimensional world into the two dimensions of imagery.

6 • *Faltenwurf, shiny*, 2001

In *Faltenwurf, shiny*, Tillmans confronts us with a composition of two elaborately folded and gathered articles of clothing in different shades of green. The out-of-focus image does not reveal what holds these draped pieces together. For Tillmans, “clothing is per se what we see of people”—the membrane between them and us. The metaphor of a “second skin” presents itself here. After all, we usually encounter each other while clothed. Our body is ever-present, although concealed. Divorced from its wearer, a piece of clothing can be a sculptural object that occupies space, and presents itself to the viewer as a thing of beauty in and of itself.

It will serve the observer well to look closely and compare the works displayed here, as the artist again and again sets up intriguing cross-references between his compositions. This is especially true of his series of *paper drops*, which borrows the theme from *Faltenwürfe* in a fresh and surprising way.

7 • *paper drop (green) II*, 2011

Tillmans's *paper drops* are both sensuous and graceful. One half of a sheet of photo paper curves back over the other and seemingly dissolves into the brilliant white of the background. The shimmering green surface of the paper shines out of the drop-like shape. The light reflections on the glossy paper, the barely visible shadows, and strong contrasts reduce the depicted object to forms and lines. For the artist, photo paper possesses “its own elegance, when it bends, when you let it hang from your hand, or hold it in both hands.” Folded into a drop shape, the sheet exposes the perfection of things beyond any signs of wear. Thus, Tillmans challenges our eye to perceive a three-dimensional object by subtly transforming it into an abstract, two-dimensional shape.

This room illustrates the way in which Tillmans typically arranges his works to form a compositional whole. Rather than being subject to sound logic, the selection and arrangement is based solely on effect, with each image having to assert itself against the next. And still, they all engage in a fascinating intercommunication with each other.

8 • *Gedser*, 2004

In *Gedser*, a man immersed in a telephone conversation turns his back on us. The idiosyncrasy of the picture becomes evident only on second look. There is a ghostly white figure passing through the scene, seemingly dissolving into the sky. This image represents a great exception in Tillmans's oeuvre, in that it was modified on the computer to literally erase a real figure in the background.

As the title indicates, the picture was taken on a ferry near the Baltic Sea port of Gedser, Denmark's most important ferry harbor. "In 2004, I was still aware of how strange it really is to be standing on a ship and phoning without a wire," the artist recalls. How much attention do we pay to our environment, everyday happenings, and our own actions? Tillmans reminds us of events and places in his own life, focusing on mundane behavior and sharpening our eye for things that have become a matter of course.

9 • *Leaf for Architects*, 2013

Leaf for Architects provides the viewer with a brief glimpse into the vivid world of Amazonian Peru. At the lower edge, Victoria water lilies float on the water. Meanwhile, the area above them is obscured by a reddish-orange umbrella with a palm-tree pattern. As a result, our eye is both drawn to the scene and prevented from entering it.

The juxtaposition of incompatible elements, like the graceful water lilies and banal umbrella, seems illogical at first. Yet it is precisely at this point that the artist's love of playing with forms, colors and textures becomes apparent. Linking contrasting motifs is the source of tension that fills the image.

With the title *Leaf for Architects*, Tillmans draws attention to the amazing stability of water lily leaves. Thanks to a system of branching ribs on the leaf's underside, they are able to support remarkable weight on the water's surface—a considerable architectural achievement on the part of nature.

10 • *Black Lives Matter protest, Union Square, b*, 2014

Political engagement has played a key role in Tillmans's work from the start. Its means of expression are manifold. With some of his photographs, he points to obvious injustices, while in others he documents sites of resistance, portrays activists, or launches own initiatives such as the anti-Brexit campaign in 2016.

As its title indicates, this photograph was taken during a *Black Lives Matter* protest march on Union Square in New York. The slogan “Hands up, don’t shoot,” and the corresponding gesture pictured here, refer to the death of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014. Before the African-American student was fatally shot by a policeman in Ferguson, Missouri, he unmistakably raised his hands to show he was unarmed.

11 • *Display of Works*

Since the beginning of his extensive exhibition activity in the early 1990s, Tillmans has developed a specific form of presentation that comprises large and small formats, figurative and abstract images, and framed and unframed works. Hung next to and above one another at different heights, these enter a non-hierarchic and non-chronological, yet precisely arranged composition. Each separate image plays just as important a role in this arrangement as the visual interrelationships among them. The result is an order that is diverse, multivalent and open—traits that also apply to Tillmans's oeuvre in general.

ROOM 5

In this room, material qualities, though presented merely on photo paper, are conveyed to all of our senses: hard stones, soft skin, a bunch of keys, clothing, flowing water, etc. Simply by looking at these photographs, tangible qualities are not only apparent, but can be virtually and physically experienced.

12 • *Anders (Brighton Arcimboldo)*, 2005

“Playfully put warm stones from Brighton beach on my friend’s face. Suddenly they seemed threatening, like growths, or monstrous.”

On first sight, this portrait of Tillmans’s friend Anders looks definitely eerie. The face appears in profile with eyes closed while the projecting shoulder rests under the chin. The face is partly covered with roundish stones, which blend into the visage thanks to the picture’s strong black and white contrasts. There are no clues as to where or when the event took place.

In addition to Anders’s name and the English resort town of Brighton, the title mentions Arcimboldo—a Mannerist painter who created unusual portraits and figures composed of fruits, vegetables, animals, or books, evoking associative imagery that shifted the border between reality and illusion, and deception and recognition.

Tillmans’s photograph entered the Beyeler Collection in 2013, joining the line of compelling portraits by Paul Cézanne, Pablo Picasso, Alberto Giacometti, Andy Warhol, and Thomas Schütte, all of whom categorically shaped this genre in the 20th century.

ROOM 6

Tillmans repeatedly focuses on parts of the body that seem familiar, encouraging us to rediscover them through his photographs. It is as if the artist is inviting us to explore the human body in all its forms—its familiarity and unfamiliarity, its strength and weakness, and its beauty and ugliness. His images address the vulnerability, mystery, and uniqueness of human existence.

13 • *nackt*, 2003

Sexuality and eros are presented in Tillmans’s work as a natural way of life. In this room, nudes are viewed as pictures of the body that do not reflect so much a state of nakedness, but rather a way of approaching it. This image shows a usually concealed and vulnerable part of the body: the female genitals, the vulva, and pubic area. *nackt* distantly recalls Gustave Courbet’s *L’origine du monde* (The Origin of the World) of 1866. For the 19th century, Courbet’s depiction of female genitalia represented an unheard-of provocation—something that cannot be said of Tillmans. His picture, in contrast, has a revealing, enlightening quality about it. He frequently reminds us that the human body is free, that it is nothing to be ashamed of, and that it should not be subject to norms, laws or ideologies. “The body is completely free,” Tillmans asserts, “and we can perceive it in any way we wish. This is something photography can underscore.”

ROOM 7

An exploration of light, and the way spaces can be defined by illumination, has always concerned Tillmans. Many of his works address the subject of light, be it natural or artificial, accidental or intentional, in illuminated interiors, or light-flooded outdoor scenes.

This room confronts us with the entire range of light's modes of appearance: from garish beams (*Kopierer*), through strangely orchestrated interior lights (*meeting lights*), to the wonderful colors of light in the sky and a technically induced disturbance (*Conquistador*). The black bands over the motif in the latter resulted from the incidence of light while fixing a paper jam in the developing machine.

14 • *meeting lights*, 2006

meeting lights is a picture worth discussing in connection with the subject of illumination. Several artificial light sources of different size and intensity come together here. There is hardly any evidence concerning the function of the depicted room. The only person present is relegated to the very lower edge of the composition. In this place without characteristic traits, at most recalling some conference room or office, it is only the light fixtures themselves that produce an elusive, somewhat ridiculous play of light.

ROOM 8

15 • *Xerox*

The *Xerox* works mark a key period of Tillmans's activity. In 1986, even before he began to take photographs, he frequented a copy shop to use a Canon black and white laser photocopy machine, which was the first of its kind to allow 400 percent enlargement. The artist was as excited by this possibility as he was by the chance to reduce his motifs to grayscale. Tillmans used the copier to transform his own pictures, as well as some taken from magazines or family albums, thus partially relinquishing control of the process to the machine itself. As intended, the copier left chance traces that determined the structure and texture of the imagery. Thus, a new reality of the depicted images emerged—an exciting discovery for the young artist.

“I actually use photography only as a medium, to make new pictures—rectangles.”

The works in this room possess an undeniable picturesque quality, which owes to a combination of control and chance. In the case of the *Intervention Pictures*, experiments with alterations made during the enlargement process produced strange imagery. In the case of the *Freischwimmer* series, made mostly by manually manipulating light without a camera, the painterly aspect comes from the artist's gestures. In the *Weak Signals*, a failure of technology underlies the monumental image of disturbance.

16 • *Icestorm*, 2001

In the late 1990s, Tillmans discovered the potential of handmade prints—and the mistakes bound to occur during the developing process—as a new way of image-making. The path from negative to print can encounter many obstacles: distorted excerpts, wrong colors, poor illumination, exhausted chemicals, etc. Tillmans began to purposely invite such “mistakes” and experiment with them. *Intervention Pictures*, a limited number of works devoted to these phenomena, emerged between 1993 and 2003. Watching for and making use of errors became an equally crucial step on the path towards non-objective imagery.

The *Intervention Pictures*—one of which is *Icestorm*—are based on photos of various natural landscapes into which veils of color have been inserted to produce a surreal effect. Though the original motifs are still identifiable, this lends the pictures an atmospheric quality—a suggestion of eerie transfiguration. In this way, Tillmans demonstrates the ambiguity of visual imagery and sharpens our sense of the uncertainty of the world.

17 • *Ostgut Freischwimmer, left*, 2004

The *Freischwimmer* works were produced in the darkroom without a camera. They form a unique group in Tillmans's oeuvre. Renouncing the photo negative in favor of gestural operations, and using light as the sole “material” and “subject”, created poetic luminograms during the developing process. The viewer is tempted to associate these images with something real—streaks of paint, windblown sand dunes, hair in the water, sperm, etc.—or at least detect some allusion to reality. Yet rather than a depiction of an object, Tillmans is concerned with illusion. The borderline between real and “made” blurs, thus enriching photography with a painterly dimension.

18 • *Silver*, 1998–2015

The *Silver* images, like those of the *Freischwimmer* series, were made without a camera, yet still in the darkroom. Traces, scratches and imperfections point to a mechanical process and the artist's instrumentalization of the workings of chance. Tillmans put exposed and unexposed photo paper through a developing machine that had purposely not been cleaned. Particles of dirt altered the paper surface, creating graphic effects and runs of color. Each sheet accordingly became a one-off piece.

“Among other things, I see... the *Silver* works as an allegory for the breaks and imperfections in our lives and for the way we deal with them,” Tillmans says. Therefore, the individual *Silvers* can be seen not only as the result of a mechanical artistic process, but also as a reflection of our life's experiences leaving a mark on us.

19 • *Concorde*, 1997

“Watching the Concorde in the air, landing or taking off, is a strange and free-of-charge spectacle—a supermodern anachronism and an image of the desire to overcome time and distance by means of technology,” says Tillmans.

The *Concorde* prints show a series of similar compositions wherein the aircraft of the same name is shown taking off from or returning to London Heathrow Airport. The plane is captured appearing and disappearing among trees, buildings, and traffic arteries. What started as a tiny speck on a runway, shoots as a dark shape over the horizon, only to elude our perception again a short time later as another tiny speck. Before the Concorde was decommissioned twenty years ago, Tillmans observed them with an astonished gaze and craned neck, looking towards the image from which the ear-splitting noise of these supersonic aircraft was completely absent.

The pictures on view here are the last seven of 64 featured in the artist’s book dedicated to the Concorde. Due to the depletion of the developing fluid during darkroom work, the images record how the colors gradually shifted towards a purplish fantasy world.

20 • *Lacanau (self)*, 1986

The artist’s long-standing involvement with bodily and figure imagery largely concerns himself. The range of possible self-staging extends from the classical, representative portrait to the abstracted image, as in *Lacanau (self)*. This early self-portrait from 1986—which Tillmans calls his first work—reflects the way in which an observation was transformed into a picture. He pointed the camera down his body to produce a barely identifiable image of his clothing and leg above a stretch of sand. Yet the picture is also a record of a personal experience, which amounts to a confirmation of Tillmans’s own individuality.

21 • Music videos

Tillmans has been interested in music since his youth. He describes it as a fundamentally important means of expression for him. From early on, he experienced music as a medium with its own language and strong political statement that brings people together. The early 1990s techno scene had a lasting influence on him. Over the past three years, Tillmans has collaborated with various musicians. For this room, Tillmans has compiled a series of recent music videos into an installation.

The “Artist Talk: Wolfgang Tillmans” will take place on September 7, as part of the series organized by the Fondation Beyeler and UBS.

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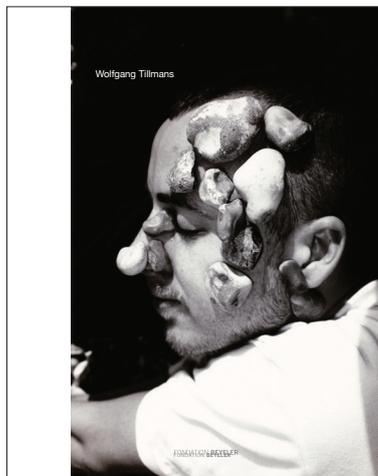
Texts: Julianna Filep, Ioana Jimborean, Daniel Kramer,
Jana Leiker, Janine Schmutz, Rahel Schrohe
Editing: Ioana Jimborean, Daniel Kramer
Translation: John William Gabriel
Copy editing: Leah LeFort

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Further publications on Wolfgang Tillmans are available in our Art Shop: <http://shop.fondationbeyeler.ch>

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