



Alongside the abstract plane,
dots and bangs of latent
evidences and true relativity
exposed

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In the early 2000s, I was invited to co-curate an exhibition at Kunst-Werke, Berlin, called *Now and Ten Years Ago*, which referred to an exhibition of the same name held in New York a decade earlier. The exhibition was based on a by now well-established theory that assumes that if a cultural product reappears ten years later it will have lost its attraction, or at least might look pale in comparison to its first successful entrance onto the scene, but that after ten more years it might reappear as an interesting revival. This assumption was fashionable in some alternative art circles at the time, used as a tool to unmask the fickleness of the culture industry and its influence on even the most independently produced art objects. But being somewhat tired of theories whose sole aim was the denouncement of the quite obvious (but in some ways exciting, albeit rather destructive) mechanisms of cultural fashions, I wanted to find works that would exemplify the opposite qualities – works that might have even more meaning than they did ten years before. The strongest disproof I could find for the theory was the work of Wolfgang Tillmans. Looking back on his photographs of the early 1990s, and considering the political and art situation of that time, I realised that these images would have an even more radical effect on viewers of the early 2000s than on those of the decade before.

In *Now and Ten Years Ago*, Tillmans presented a large version of *Silvio (U-Bahn)*, 1992, a photograph of flowers in a Berlin subway station – the unofficial monument to a man who had been killed there by neo-Nazis. It became, for myself and others, the central piece in the show. The work had this strong effect because of Tillmans' ability to capture something that people are not yet willing to recognise as a phenomenon: *Silvio (U-Bahn)* was made at a time when many were reluctant to accept that there was a resurgence of right-wing violence in Germany, believing that the country had overcome these ghosts. It was a truth that had been left unnamed for too long. When shown for

the second time in this large version, the photo was exposed to a now transformed public, whose awareness of this frightening phenomenon had shifted from latency to consciousness. Tillmans' particular choice of display, with the work extending down to the gallery floor, bringing the image of the candles, the flowers, the handwritten letters and words of mourning from another place and another time into the space, made the tragic monument more present than ever before, and gave the exhibition a glimmer of gloomy subversive radicality.

And now, some years later, many of Tillmans' works have become more explicit in their emphasis on the photographic potential of latency. They display the fundamental photographic procedure of carrying a certain moment of the past into the future, but more than that, they freeze and transform latency into obvious visual evidence. These works are usually labelled as abstract, but they are quite often ambivalent to general definition and this practice of ambivalence is perhaps the most impressive achievement of his works. It is not the ambivalence of an in-between or of a double negation; it is the expression of a very contemporary political philosophy, exemplified in his almost literary or cinematic combination of radically diverse meanings and narratives in photographic images, or a combined pattern of diverse statements, as in the table-top works, *truth study center*, begun in 2006. This concept of ambivalent involvement doubled by subversive engagement is most obvious in works dealing with astronomy and religion. His interest in these fields is not of the pretentious sort, stemming from a fear of missing out on some fashion; quite to the contrary, they are interests, at least for the moment, avoided by the majority of artists.

Having started to work with texts and writing some years ago, I have often wished that I could create the same kind of perfectly contemporary novels that Tillmans makes with his camera. This literary quality comes from diving into various social and personal narratives, but also

from suddenly coming down, as in *Silver 1*, 1998 or *paper drop*, 2001, to revelations of the abstract, the concealed and the pure matter of photography, or even of light itself. It could also be called a fictional quality. As an observer standing in one of his exhibitions, I often feel that there is a moment when, almost automatically, my brain will start perceiving a narrative pattern in his work. Perhaps the best way to describe this pattern is as a new, completely reinvented science fiction – the result of Tillmans' idea of dealing with the contemporary situation through a permanent attack of extremely diverse imagery. This definition of his work as a reconsideration and transformation of science fiction is put forward in the context of the development of contemporary definitions of fiction writing, where fiction is not a completely invented structure, but more a transformation of real or daily events, recombined or sometimes appearing in a transgressive perspective.

Tillmans' combination of different formulas of image production might appear at first as a strategy to avoid the pitfalls of stagnancy and dead-ends often inherent in successful art productions. But with his strong theoretical awareness of social and productive systems, he seeks to influence his own creation of a system with these diverse patterns and waves of information. For example, if one looks at the display tables contained in the *truth study center* project, one repeatedly finds texts and information dealing critically with the most powerful institutions that administrate 'absolute truths', particularly religious institutions. Alongside this one can find a newspaper text about the recent findings of astronomical research. This is not an attempt to play the old game of religion versus science. During further exploration of his work, one finds a differentiated world exposed from different angles, sometimes even incorporated as modes of perception in his own personal methods of observation. Often, the objects observed by him are in some way representations of the photographer himself, although they are

not simply self portraits. This indirect involvement of the artist in the image as a model for the exploration of reality pushes the concept of ambivalence further towards contemporary ideas of science.

Photos of the night sky full of stars always make demands on the visual perception of the observer: they are just a bunch of dots on paper. They are abstract-looking images of the real in the most extreme form. Tillmans sometimes plays with achieving almost impossible photographic feats, like photographing the stars from the window of a plane with a non-specialist camera and still making them recognisable to the viewer, or capturing images of the planet Venus passing through the field of the sun. When he makes reference in his work to the discovery of exoplanets (the planets orbiting far-away suns) he touches on a very exciting step in contemporary astronomical developments – for many, one of the most exciting in astronomic history, although in fact it is just the conclusion gleaned from other observed data, like the diminishing light of stars when orbiting exoplanets cross their field. It is a similar operation to that in Tillmans' *Venus transit* photographs, but without the direct use of photography. The information proving the existence of these planets functions like a mirror of science itself, reflecting the long journey that it has had to undertake through the ages – the self-imposed limits that scientific knowledge and even the idea of enlightenment had to break through, even in the last few decades, to finally arrive at the proof of planets far away from our own solar system.

Tillmans seems obsessed with astronomy and physics, and with the changing nature and relativity of science and enlightenment itself. Not only has evidence of astronomical data progressed dramatically during the last years, but the relation between theory and evidence has made unpredictable changes in consequence. Whoever follows the now very accessible scientific texts and images in astronomy-related websites will experience a

dramatic shift in the language of science, and even in the culture of its communication. Many of the ideas and language of what some decades ago was only science fiction has recently become 'official' institutional expression, like the recent debate on parallel universes. For me, the verification of the existence of exoplanets made during the last years is so exciting because during my school years in the 1960s and 1970s, any suggestion of their existence was refuted with a whole list of impossibilities. Planet Earth was perceived to be the result of a singular incidence. Since then, almost every year, one of these 'impossible truths' has been proved possible, and former heresies have now become authoritative realities. The image of the universe presented by the defenders of scientific institutions during the 1960s or 1970s now looks like a weird human-projected abyss, a dark hole that now suddenly shines with infinite possibilities and endless varieties of other life forms and forms of intelligence. As Tillmans perhaps proposes, even in enlightenment there is relativity and it has to change its imaginative capabilities just as an artist has to change his comparably small mechanisms in order constantly to rethink, sometimes even dramatically, the theories for which his work is a tool.

As stated above, the appearance of scientific material and logic in the works of Tillmans is often a result of his reflections on the ambivalences inherent in them. One might speculate even further and propose that the same sensibility seems to be at work in his reflections on the religious authority of absolute truth. The subversive power of religious heresies in earlier centuries was in their refusal to obey the authority of dogma and institution, but even more, in their embrace of the personal qualities of religious practice – for instance, life as a power-free zone, religion as social awareness, religious celebrations as redemptive means for the transformation and relief of pain and suffering, placing a messianic emphasis on the poetic beauty of original texts and the hope for an era

without repression and injustice. It might sound incongruous to enumerate such old-time qualities in a contemporary art context, but seeing the texts and images that Tillmans has used in different parts of *truth study center* about the repression, injustice and the strangling of life caused by the authorities of religion, I feel the urgency of raising these arguments again. The radicality (at least in the context of contemporary art) of Tillmans' subversive practice of ambivalence does not diminish his critical statement; the opposite is even the case. The religious or quasi-religious qualities above seem latently to reappear in the way he portrays objects in his everyday still lifes or landscapes, although he does not represent faith in any traditional way. Their pictorial intensity appears to be touched by some transcendent latent light.

The famous Israeli documentary film *Trembling before G-d* by Sandi Simcha DuBowski about gay and lesbian people living in the Jewish orthodox communities documents their struggle for acceptance in societies where homosexuality is strongly rejected. Their vivid statements and stories of excommunication become all the more intense when they insist on continuing to celebrate religious holidays, to dress traditionally, to carry on singing their old and beloved prayers and songs. This reaches its high point at the end of the film when one of the men, who has expressed his suffering on the long road of self-determination to live both a gay and a Hassidic life, stands alone on the East River. In a lonely performance of one of the Jewish New Year rites, he casts the sins of the old year into the water, garbed in beautiful traditional dress, singing the old songs, alone, with the whole of Manhattan behind him. This poignant scene recalls Tillmans' process of combining seemingly opposite signs, and in that way giving a stronger subversive power to his critique of the institutions of absolute truth.