



**Everywhere, all the time
and at once: the art
of Wolfgang Tillmans**

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I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking. Recording the man shaving at the window opposite and the woman in the kimono washing her hair. Some day, all this will have to be developed, carefully printed, fixed.

Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, 1939

There is absolutely no inevitability as long as there is a willingness to contemplate what is happening.

Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage: An inventory of effects*, 1967

The tall trees before us are dense and mysterious. Their foliage hangs majestically, in languor, as though sombre and dazed by clinging tropical heat, yet somehow alert and sinister. But we are faced, in fact, across a modest width of lawn, with the dark entrance to a temperate northern forest. Exuberant shrubberies give a garden-like air to the beginnings of this seemingly wild space. As the smooth trunks of the tallest trees soar straight and vertical, the gathering mass of leaves and branches creates a dark portal, like the entrance to an enchanted path. Higher up, patches of light can be glimpsed, glinting through the deeper canopy. The scene appears quite still. And yet, as you look at these trees, you might start to question the nature of this apparent stillness. Is the atmosphere on this lawn peaceful with birdsong and distant cheerful voices? Or is it silent, expectant and laden with portent? Perhaps it is simply neutral.

This black and white photograph by Wolfgang Tillmans (*Wald (Reinshagen)*, 2008) enfolds the viewer in such a succession of distinct yet overlapping emotional and psychological sensations. But throughout these responses, the image brings one back to its own unique location, its confluence of calm and mysteriousness, and the unwavering tension between its pictorial and atmospheric qualities.

With its visceral sense of place, this photograph transports the viewer to an immediate experience of landscape and nature; at the same time, our precise identification with this simple scene – a towering screen of placid trees, rising from Edenic shrubberies – is meticulously destabilised upon the axis of its empathetic capacities. For all its apparent serenity and calm, there is a semiotic undercurrent running deep within the image, as profound as a sub-sonic pulse: an animating tautness that derives from the precise balance – within the emotional weighting of the image, of the known and the unknown – of that which we can see and that which we intuit, reading, as it were, through the surface of the image and beyond its materiality.

A further image by Tillmans of the interior of a forest, *Wald (Briol I)*, 2008, depicts the play of bright light through the crowded trees. Scattering ingots of white brilliance create the illusion of a stroboscopic or Op-art effect, playing games with the scale and perspective of the image, and creating a dream-like or submarine other-worldliness that makes the viewer think of moonlit woodland. This image appears as filled with motion and clamour as *Wald (Reinshagen)* seems heavy with stillness and silence.

But photography is in many ways only the beginning of Tillmans' art. Indeed, over the last decade, he has made an important body of abstract works that are 'not made with camera' (the artist's phrase), yet are still directly related in process to photography. In both a practical and a philosophical sense, therefore, Tillmans engages and works with the photographic image on every conceivable level: as a consumer and reader of images, a producer of images, an editor of images, as their printer, replicator, publisher, arranger, curator, installer, and also as their mechanic, anatomist, politician, sculptor, technician, connoisseur and philosopher-scientist. He is thus the creator and director of an encyclopaedic lexicon of images, examining and exploring every aspect of their form, in terms both of medium and object. (Small

wonder a major publication on Tillmans' work is titled *Manual*, proposing an instructional handbook of the mechanics of the image). For Tillmans, photography has as many sculptural possibilities as it has representational, aesthetic or political capacities. It is the bearer of information as much as of 'beauty' (this latter quality being a charged and conditional term when applied to his work), a form that interrogates the viewer, individually and sociologically, as much as it is itself an object of scrutiny, appraisal or reflection.

The art of Tillmans is multi-allusive, in both the extent of his subject matter and his treatment of photography as a medium. From astronomy to portraiture, to luxuriant yet minutely poised studies of light on photographic paper, he creates a cosmology of images, tirelessly refining – as artist, editor, installer and curator – the semiotic chemistry of their interrelationship to one another. In this, Tillmans locates the visual equivalent of Proust's 'mot juste', identifying not simply the most eloquent images, in terms of colour, composition, mood, texture, light and emotional pulse, but those that appear to possess their own sentient meaning. For Tillmans, one feels, the potentiality of the photographic image is intimately related, at a profound level of empathetic understanding and philosophical awareness, to the messy but complicated business of being alive. In his art, spirituality and semiotics are held in balance, revealing moments of quotidian transubstantiation in which the subject is suddenly seen in a newly coherent and heightened form – as both its 'natural' self and as an image. Collectively, the images made by Tillmans seem to comprise a seamless keychain code of visual DNA, becoming – as 'pictures' and as objects – both meditative and filled with restless self-enquiry. Generationally, Tillmans was simultaneously informed by traditional art education and, perhaps more importantly, by the sub-cultural creativity and European clubbing scene of the late 1980s and 1990s. In its turn, this position was derived in great part from the

explosion in the earlier 1980s (and post-punk years of the late 1970s) of a creativity and artistic network that was derived from sub-cultural lifestyles as much as from arts institutions. Youth sub-cultures transform the personal space of adolescents and young adults (the teenager's bedroom in the family home, for example) into intensely private spaces, which are at once shrines to lifestyle choice and laboratories of image-making; they become both dressing room and theatre, their poster- and image-hung walls acting like altars dedicated to the icons of pop and fashion. (We might think of John Ashton's portrait of the British Pop artist Pauline Boty, for example, in which the artist poses triumphantly before a bed-sit wall collaged with found images.) There is an echo of such *dedication* to images in Tillmans' approach to hanging his individual work (with pins, tape or clips) and to its overall installation: the effect is chapel-like, at once secular and sacred in feel, balancing informality with reverence or meditative stillness: the personal becomes the political; the domestic, in its own quiet way, becomes touched by the devotional.

Throughout the 1980s, and extending into the 1990s, the subcultural worlds of music, clubs, fashion, new magazines and pop and fashion video provided both a subject and a venue for many young artists, writers, designers and image-makers. Indeed, in London, in the years prior to Young British Art, there was a sense for some artists that the 'underground' network of sub-cultural lifestyles, underpinned by pop music, clubs and fashion, were of more relevance, culturally and creatively, than the activities taking place within the institutional world of contemporary art. 'Style culture' magazines of the 1980s such as *i-D* (in which Tillmans would publish photographs) and *Blitz* and *The Face*, proposed a culture that was at once stylistically exuberant, elitist, aggressively trend-conscious yet politically aware and left-wing in attitude – a stance echoed by the development of dance music out of post-punk electronica.

(Bronski Beat's 'Small Town Boy', for example, no less than Heaven 17's 'We Don't Need That Fascist Groove Thang', were founding examples of politicised British pop music in the 1980s, proposing a sensibility – at once vibrant and actively political – that Tillmans would later inherit.)

The art of Tillmans – in all its variety as an edited and installed form – might thus be said to have engaged directly with the subcultural zeitgeist. (Marshall McLuhan's phrase from his classic analysis of mass media, *The Medium is the Massage*, 'When information brushes against information' seems an apt description of this engagement.) Tillmans' early use of photocopiers, for example, or even of faxes, encodes his work with the urban and Warholian imprint of mass mediation, which also had its place in the sci-fi futurism of the post-punk aesthetic. And yet Tillmans is always most concerned with the constitution of the image itself, to free it from anything but its own form, and allow it to declare itself in what might be termed a state of 'not knowingness'. Every image and configuration of images created by Tillmans has at its heart a tension of opposites: the precise balance of enigma and certainty. As such, Tillmans' art can also be seen to descend from classic Romanticism (the simultaneous activation of 'reason' and 'the senses' proposed by Friedrich Schiller, for example); this lineage is further affirmed by the political and spiritual concerns within his work.

The figurative and 'representational' photographs by Tillmans relate social narrative to still life, nature and landscape photography; and yet there is a holistic unity to their vision and temper. The common denominator of this unity appears to be their visceral description of emotional and psychological texture: they reveal their subjects at peace – in humanistic repose – yet alert with life. They both assert the democracy of universal human experience, and describe the indifference of nature to the passage of human events – a philosophical position that transposes to the

contemporary urban world the Pantheistic belief in the higher power of nature, as it frames individual and social destiny.

In *Roy*, 2009, we see an infant sleeping in a carrying chair, secured backwards in the front passenger seat of a car to face out towards the viewer. In the rear-view mirror, we see the upper half of a woman's face, the edge of the reflected image cutting horizontally across her features, so that her dark eyes – concentrating on the road ahead – are only half visible. Her eyebrows, forehead and centrally parted hair give the viewer a good indication of her age and appearance. Pale but bright sunlight is coming into the car, highlighting the collected dust and dried raindrops on the windscreen, and the dragged arc of smeared water left behind by the perishing rubber of the windscreen wipers. In the bottom-right foreground, the infant's sleeping face is framed by the dark blue-black of his woollen pullover and knitted hat.

In one sense, this picture appears to take its place within the historical imagery of mother and child. One cannot be sure that the woman driving the car is the child's mother – it could be aunt, nanny, or a friend of family. And yet one intuits a relationship between the fragment of the female figure visible in the rear-view mirror and the intensely felt presence of the sleeping baby. In its undeniable modernity and sense of daily event, the image brings to mind Richard Hamilton's painting *Mother and Child*, 1984–85, in which a smiling infant, dressed in white woollens, attempts awkward early steps towards the viewer, its hand held by the smiling mother. In this image, too, we can only see a fragment of the mother's face, since it is cut across by the upper edge of the canvas. Her relationship with the child is defined by what we see of her jaw and smiling mouth, framed by her long brown hair hanging loosely to one side as she bends down to guide the stumbling child. The light within the scene – as in *Roy* – appears to be that of pale, bright early spring sunshine, suggesting new life.

Another image by Tillmans, *Heptathlon*, 2009, shows a female athlete at a track event. Behind her, two other female athletes can be seen, unheeding of the attention being paid to the principal figure, who is being filmed by a cameraman just visible at the left-hand side of the photograph. Again, the figure appears both tensed and in repose; the half-clenching of her hands might suggest nervousness or impatience, while her expression towards the camera is at once impassive and slightly confrontational. Knowing nothing more about the circumstantial context of the image, the viewer is nonetheless made fully aware of the emotional and physical challenges with which an athlete is faced. There is a quality of ruthlessness in her gaze towards the barely seen cameraman's raised lens: the expression of competition.

Heptathlon is an image filled with declamatory colour and complex geometry. The picture is divided horizontally, roughly, across its centre by the upper rim of the trackside advertising. In the upper half, beyond the insular world of the track event – fenced off – we can see the tops of trees and a suburban-looking rooftop. The lower half of the image is dominated by the bright orange surface of the track itself, and the busy criss-crossing of white markings, the bare legs of the athletes, speaker cables and numbered cones. In this lower half, we see how figuration begins to collapse and transform into abstraction, how that which is naturalistic begins to shed its narratives, and how the stuff of everyday life on Earth – its raw materials, technology and residues – can begin to acquire a form and appearance that rejects linear meaning.

This point of transformation within an image, when a subject in one state dismantles the container or borderline of its meanings and enters a new visual identity, is vital to Tillmans' art and has become increasingly so. This is doubly significant in the case of an artist

for whom the precision of reading – his minute scrutiny of print media, journalism and found imagery, for example, in his *truth study centre* tables – is equally important. To reveal yet preserve the 'tipping point' of an image, at which its representational qualities become first abstract and then sculptural, might be seen as a further example of the founding system of maintained tensions in his work. At this point, where the borders between our perceptions of an image become first broken and then dissolved, the photographic image achieves a form of closed aesthetic circuitry, in which subject and object cease to be determining values. Such, perhaps, is the artistic journey taken by Tillmans to date.

We can see the development of this process by first considering examples of Tillmans' camera-made images, the subjects of which are hard to ascertain, but whose colour, composition and textural power are richly beguiling. In *Economy*, 2006, *CLC1100*, 2007 and *glass factory*, 2008, for example, we see images of industrial and technological materials and equipment. All three are figurative, representational images, yet all examine their subject in a way that seems to highlight the visual tactility of the image itself: the satisfying, lozenge-like oblong of vivid purple glass resting against the vertical black bars of its industrial holding frame in *glass factory*; the bite of an elastic band into dense, carbon-coloured sponge in *Economy*; or the magnesium-like flare of white light off the opened photocopier in *CLC1100*. In all of these images, representational coherence is brought to the edge of collapse, to the point at which texture becomes marginally more dominant, in our reading of the image, than narrative or legibility.

The progress of Tillmans' exploration of the image (which might be likened to a study of sound), from representational camera-made works to non-camera-made pure sculptural abstraction, might also be seen to embrace his earliest photocopier works: the images from 1987, for example,

depicting incoming surf (*Wellen Lacanau*, 1998), or three seemingly random, UFO-like clusters of white dots against a graphite black background (*Genova*, 1998). The play of light and dark in photocopied images, and the interruption of their image surface by ghostly bars, shimmers and mottling of shadow, creates the impersonal, mass-media effect of classic American Pop art (specifically Warhol and Rauschenberg); and yet for Tillmans the medium appears once again to hold qualities in tension: intimacy and enigma, figuration and abstraction, knowing and not knowing.

A glacier seen from the air, an opened window, the shattered hulk of a bright blue wooden boat: as subjects of Tillmans' photographs these each explore texture and legibility, and the transformation of a tangible subject into abstraction. In one sense, such works run parallel to Tillmans' major non-camera-made and sculptural works. In the latter, however, he allows the image – its 'stuff' or raw material – to be completely liberated from 'meaning'; rather, process becomes image, in that the manipulation of light and photographic paper (by which the abstract works are made) both creates the subject of the image and transforms it into a sculptural object.

Tillmans' *Ostgut Freischwimmer, right*, 2004 is a vast, near billboard sized work (231.1 x 607.8 cm) in which particles of blackness appear to have been combed into diffusion across the horizontal breadth of the image. The seeming 'whiteness' of the image's background turns out to be as complex and subtle as the submarine-like play of diffused blackness that it contains. It is as though, from the top left-hand corner of the image, the white of cloud or dense fog has become gradually 'stained' by the evaporation or dilution of the particles of blackness, which appear to be losing their solidity – like a substance in chemical suspension that has gradually broken down. Thus the viewer might have the experience of being 'allowed' to witness some dramatic ritual from micro-biology, chemistry or the natural sciences; the image proposes its own

unnameable narrative, recounting the transformation of light from one form into another.

Ostgut Freischwimmer, right is an epic example of Tillmans' enabling process to become image; and there is a quality to the amorphous and diaphanous fluidity and merger, within the image, of light and dark, solid and dissolve, that is utterly disconnected to work in any other medium. The picture becomes a floatation tank of light, at once scientific and fantastical in its aura, as though it were some kind of sentient scientific 'performance' or spectacle. (It hung for five years in the Panorama bar in Berlin.) Another such work, *not knowing*, 2009 is as densely vibrant with vivid colour as *Ostgut Freischwimmer, right* appears subtly monochrome. One might think of the 'cosmic' imagery often associated with progressive and psychedelic rock music: the oil-and-water light projections shown during long improvised sets by Soft Machine or Pink Floyd, for example. The use of colour, form, light and scale is visually overwhelming, allowing the image to work foremost as a masterclass in spectacle.

It is as though Tillmans, in his epic exploration of the capacities of the image – one might say the 'physics' of the image – is charting the deepest primal recesses of his subject. What happens when the image is handed over to the effects of pure colour? As contemporary readers of the image, how might we respond to sheer aesthetic spectacle, to which no signage of 'meaning' is attached? Where might this image stand on the registers of taste and kitsch? Or do these concerns of cultural status have no relevance to such a work? Tillmans answers with the discursive void of the work, which proposes only its own abstraction, and its own vivacious, seemingly weightless suffusions of colour – somehow ominously pitted with black cavities.

In its study of diffusion, *Ostgut Freischwimmer, right* might be seen as the descendant image of *Urgency XIV*, 2006, in which the uniform, somewhat industrial

magnolia of the image's surface is speckled and stained with dissolving and sedimentary ribbons of bright blood red – a substance that is in fact nothing more (nor less) than light itself. In the bottom-right corner of the image, a pinkish scarlet hue appears to be diffusing – as though droplets of a scarlet substance were breaking up within the processes of dilution. Both works (like those configured in the multi-panelled *Silver Installation VI* and *Silver Installation VII*, 2009) dismantle the artistic borders between different media: they are painterly, photographic, sculptural installations – unfettered image-making that takes its place on the far end of a scale of continuum between figuration and abstraction.

In his *paper drop* and *Lighter* works, too, Tillmans creates a fusion between the coolly industrial or mechanistic and a luxuriance of form and texture. The *Lighter* works, framed in Perspex boxes, resemble metallic panels – some folded, others dented – that have been industrially spray-painted in high-gloss colours. Made from photographic paper, these works appear to collapse the medium of photography itself, while taking the form of beguilingly coloured abstract sculptures: sky blue, swimming-pool blue, a green-to-yellow fade crossed horizontally by a blue bar, ripe-corn yellow divided at a low angle by black fading to spruce green and glinting jet black. There is a coolness to these works that brings to mind the US colour-field paintings of Morris Louis, Kenneth Noland and Barnett Newman. At the same time, the metallic look of their dented or folded surfaces distracts the painterly references and re-connects the works to a somewhat science-fictional industrial strangeness, untethered to the formal arguments of fine art.

Bikers, the Moon, a snowy suburb seen from the air, a homeless person, a television in a coach, a national border, metal machine parts, a block of flats, a garden, the sky, newspaper articles, advertisements, plastic boxes on a window sill, a portrait of William of Orange, male necks, exhausted party-goers, colours: in Tillmans' art, image

is infinite – everywhere, all the time and at once. The metal frame of a seatless and backless office chair, the fold of sunlight, the tessellating blocks of text and image in magazines and newspapers: all are agents and bearers of meaning – as though 'meaning' might take a malleable and elastic form, reflexive to our perceptions and understanding.

The Medium is the Massage is subtitled *an inventory of effects*. This would serve well to describe Tillmans' work, since it takes the form of a ceaselessly cross-referencing visual encyclopaedia of the image. In his meticulous selection of images, his treatment and installation of them, Tillmans creates an epic directory and handbook of visual effects that is at once novelistic, journalistic, ethnographic, meditative, political and poetic.

For McLuhan, writing in 1967: 'Environments are not passive wrappings, but are, rather, active processes that are invisible. The ground rules, pervasive structure, and overall patterns of environments elude easy perception. Anti-environments or counter-situations made by artists provide means of direct attention and enable us to see and understand more clearly.'¹ Tillmans is precisely such an artist, born precisely into the image-saturated culture that McLuhan surveyed. In his art, Tillmans renders visible those patterns, rules and structures – aesthetic, sociological, cultural, political – under which an age of accelerated and saturation media strives to maintain lucidity. At its core, of course, there is a necessary fallibility to this endeavour: as W.H. Auden once remarked of the attainment of religious faith, there is a quality of *not knowing* that underwrites its sincerity. Tillmans is likewise aware of the necessity of doubt, and, arguably, it is from this sense of doubt that his art achieves its monumental humanism.

1 Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: an inventory of effects*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1967, p.68.

