Wolfgang Tillmans
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2010 marks the 75th anniversary of the Jaguar name; 75 years of looking forward, designing and building cars that represent the very best of technical innovation and design leadership.

Since our earliest days, we have been inspired to design and develop beautiful fast cars: cars that stand out and stand apart. At no point in our history has this vision been more complete than today with the all new XJ, the internationally renowned XF and the super sleek XK.

As part of our ongoing 75 year celebrations, we are delighted to support the 40th Anniversary of the Serpentine Gallery and proudly sponsor the 2010 Summer Programme and the influential work of Wolfgang Tillmans.

The Serpentine Gallery is widely recognised as one of Britain’s most dynamic and creative arts organisations and one which Jaguar is honoured to work with. At Jaguar we endeavour to bring our own sense of passion, glamour and unrivalled style to all that we do: I’m sure that all visitors to this year’s Summer Programme will experience this and be captivated by the exhibition throughout.

On behalf of everyone at Jaguar, I wish the 2010 Serpentine Gallery Summer Programme and Wolfgang Tillmans every success.

Mike O’Driscoll
Managing Director
Jaguar Cars
Directors' Foreword

The Serpentine Gallery is delighted to present Wolfgang Tillmans, the first major exhibition of the artist’s work in London since 2003. He previously exhibited at the Serpentine fifteen years ago – in the group show Take Me I’m Yours – and his return to the Gallery is marked by an impressive display of recent work.

Since he made the United Kingdom his home twenty years ago, Tillmans has redefined photography and the ways in which it is presented. In this exhibition, which he conceived specifically for the Serpentine Gallery, he explores the complexities of photographic image-making and exhibition installation. The overall constellation of pictures, as well as each individual work, reflect his engagement with what he describes as ‘an abstraction grounded in the real world’.

Tillmans rose to fame in the late 1980s and early 90s for his seemingly casual yet eloquent photographs of the world he inhabited. Astutely reconfiguring ideas about documentary photography and reflecting the discussions surrounding identity politics at that time, the work from this period also captured the fragility of human life and the profound beauty and subversion that Tillmans has long embraced. Experiment and the unknown have always played a crucial role in Tillmans’ practice. An experimental approach to making work, played a crucial role in Tillmans’ practice.

Tillmans uses a range of installation methods, often pinning or taping his work to gallery walls, displaying found material in study tables that recall museological vitrines, or creating wall-based Perspex cases for selected process-based works. Each exhibition is a renegotiation and rearrangement of material, ideas and subjects, and an investigation into the politics of exhibition and image-making – all under-taken with an eye on the smallest detail, but expansive in scope. In every new presentation of his work (which may just as readily take place in a magazine, newspaper or art publication) the artist reconfigures this vast network of accumulated images, mirroring our complex world with a distinctively energetic yet capturing the essence of a moment. His exquisite yet challenging works capture the delicate balance between beauty and subversion that Tillmans has long embraced.

We are delighted that Wolfgang Tillmans accepted our invitation to present this new exhibition of work, created especially for the spaces of the Serpentine Gallery. It has been an immense pleasure to collaborate with him on this show, which reflects his acute sensitivity to contemporary society (in all its manifestations, including the political), his ongoing fascination with colour, and his conceptual engagement with the technical processes of photography. It has been an extraordinary experience to work with him on this exhibition and catalogue, both of which he devoted much time to conceiving and designing.

Our many thanks go to Wolfgang Tillmans for generously producing a Limited Edition Print on the occasion of the exhibition, to be sold to benefit the exhibition and the Serpentine Gallery.

We would like to warmly thank Jaguar Cars, in particular Mike O’Driscoll and Amanda Chick, for their exceptional support. Ross Wheeler and the team at Imagination made important contributions to this presentation of the work of this significant artist, and we are also indebted to the Luma Foundation, and in particular to Maja Hoffmann, for supporting the exhibition. Maureen Paley and the team at Maureen Paley, London, must be gratefully acknowledged for their invaluable and considerable assistance in the realisation of both the exhibition and related events. Additionally, we are most appreciative of the generosity of the lenders, without whom the exhibition would not have been possible.

We are delighted to include essays by Michael Bracewell and Josef Strau, and we thank them both for their wonderful contributions to the catalogue. Koenig Books London continues to collaborate with us on the distribution of this book, the latest in the Serpentine Gallery series. Federico Martelli, Karl Kobitz, Anna von Stackelberg and Tess Hurrell, working at the Tillmans studio, must also be warmly acknowledged for their committed work on the show and publication. We would like to thank Oliver Knoght and Rory McGrath of OK-RM for their expertise and advice on the design and production of the publication.

We would like to offer our extensive thanks for the generous contributions made by supporters of the Serpentine Gallery, which includes the Council of the Serpentine Gallery, an extraordinary group of individuals whose ongoing commitment is exceptional.

Last but not least we would like to acknowledge the team at the Serpentine Gallery for their work on the exhibition, particularly Sophie O’Brien, Exhibition Curator; Sally Tallant, Head of Programmes; Mike Gaughan, Gallery Manager; Leila Hasham and Christine Takeny, Assistant Curators; Hattie Spires, Assistant Gallery Manager; Nicola Lees, Public Programme Curator and Exhibitions Interns, Daria Kirsanova and Charles Moffett.

Julia Peyton-Jones
Director, Serpentine Gallery and Co-director, Exhibitions and Programmes

Hans Ulrich Obrist
Co-director of Exhibitions and Programmes and Director of International Projects
Christopher Isherwood, *Goodbye to Berlin*, 1939

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


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 (Brol 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.
was derived in great part from the 1980s and 1990s. In its turn, this position and European clubbing scene of the late 20th century was importantly, by the sub-cultural creativity and traditional art education and, perhaps more simultaneously informed by traditional meditative and filled with restless self-awareness, to the messy but complicated empathetic understanding and philosophical potentiality of the photographic image is touched by the devotional.

Throughout the 1980s, and extending into the 1990s, the subcultural worlds of music, 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 lifelikes, underpinned by the viewer, clubs and fashion, were of more relevance, culturally and creatively, than the activities that made up the visible, clubs and fashion style culture magazines of the 1980s such as i-D (in which Tillmans would publish photographs and himself) and Blitz and The Face, their hand waving 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 post-punk electronics. 

The figurative and ‘representational’ photographs by Tillmans relate social narrative to still life, nature and landscape photography. However, this image, too, we can only see a fragment of the institutional form, its mass media sensibility, by the edge of the reflected image cutting towards the viewer. Its held hand by the smiling mother. In this image, the life, nature and landscape photography of 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. As we see the baby, 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 eyelids, forever closed, are closest to the viewer a good indication of her age and appearance. Pale but bright sunlight is coming into the car, highlighting the collection of dust and dried raindrops on the windscreen, and the drooped arc of smeared water left behind by the perspiring rubber of the windscreen wipers. The girl is lying on a backgound, the infant’s sleeping face is framed by the dark blue-black of her 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 infers a relationship that is more deeply personal. Further visible in the rear view-mirror and the intensely felt presence of the sleeping baby. In its undeniably 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 woollen, attempts to look into the rearview mirror. Its hand held by the smiling mother. In this image, too, we can only see a fragment of the institutional form, by the upper edge of the canvass. Her relationship with the child is defined by what we see of her jaw and smiling mouth, framed by her long blonde hair, closely 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. 

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 photographic paper, for the act is to resemble an altar dedicated to the icons of media, to transform it into a sensibility – at once vibrant and actively political – that Tillmans would later inherit.

The figurative and ‘representational’ photographs by Tillmans relate social narrative to still life, nature and landscape photography. 

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 line of thinking is further affirmed by the political and spiritual concerns within his work.

The medium is the massage 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, in their different states of activity, 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 athlete, the viewer is nonetheless fully aware of the emotional and physical challenges with which an athlete of this calibre 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, spangled 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 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 heighten the visual tactility of the subject and the satisfying image – the ‘stuff’ or raw material – to be completely liberated from meaning; rather, this 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 × 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 subject is handed over to the effects of pure colour; the image proposes its own vivacious, seemingly weightless subject of the image and transforms it into another.
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, unfettered 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, meditational, 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.’ 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.

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, definitions of fiction writing, where fiction is put forward in the context of a reconsideration and transformation 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 astronomical 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 to exist, 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 project, one repeatedly finds texts and information dealing critically with the most powerful institutions that administer ‘absolute truths’, particularly religious ones. 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 sensitivity 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, injustices and the struggle for 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 lately to reappear in the way he portrays objects in his everyday still lifes or landscapes, although he does not express the 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 Dovidovick 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 the existence of their communities, 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 Jewish New Year rites, castes the sins of the old year into the sea 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 sings the old songs, alone, with the whole of Manhattan behind him. This poignant scene recalls Tillmans’ process of combating sexuality, expressing his suffering on the long road to 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 sings the old songs, alone, with the whole of Manhattan behind him. This poignant scene recalls Tillmans’ process of combating sexuality, expressing his suffering on the long road to self-determination to live both a gay and a Hassidic life.
You chose to live in London twenty years ago, and you’ve always kept it as your base. What was London for you then and what is it now?

I moved to Britain twenty years ago this year, so this show’s like a small anniversary marker. The London that I got to know in the 1980s as a teenager and that I fell in love with forms the background to my London today. If I look at London now, I still see the potential that was there. In the 1990s a lot of that was totally intact and there were different layers of subculture in the city. I feel that with the rent explosion and with the property-price explosion and the commercialisation of absolutely everything, there isn’t that much freedom anymore. It seems that Britain has such a work culture now. It’s all about working but at the same time, the prosperity that Britain lived through was…well, that prosperity is, as it turns out now, a deficit prosperity. It’s like London has gone through a golden age in the last ten years. It’s become the dominant city in Europe and a lot of good things have happened. Yet at the same time, I observe with a bit of sadness how so much quality of life has somehow gone. Young artists have to live in shitty unheated studios outside of Hackney Wick and pay four times more than you used to pay much closer to the centre. It’s a contradictory situation. I don’t know how much London does for nurturing what comes next. The only advantage it has is that – like New York – it’s a continual magnet for people and so thrives off what outsiders bring to it. And actually I think that’s the biggest change that’s happened. The 1980s and 90s London definitely generated its output from inside Britain, and from the British provinces. But I think now its strength is that it’s such a powerful Hoover that constantly sucks people in from all over the world who want to come and make it in London. They cover the shortfall that has happened from the decline in British art education. I don’t think doubling and tripling the numbers of art and design students in the UK schools without enlarging the facilities can have a good effect. But as a nation you don’t notice that because it’s covered up by the constant influx of people. That’s just an observation. As a total, as a whole, it’s probably similarly exciting for different reasons.

That’s what’s allowed London to really flourish and it does make it the most astonishingly vibrant place in which to live.

Yes. But the whole question of city and the influence of the place on my work is something that I’ve completely gotten over in the last ten years, whereas in the 1990s that was a huge question for me. In my movements between Hamburg, Bournemouth, New York, Berlin and London there was always a lot of soul-searching for the ingredients that make up my work. Then at some point I realised that it’s really nothing to do with the city. Where the work happens is too unpredictable. Some pieces happen in the neighbourhood where I live and the conditions that I’m living in, and others happen in transit or in another city that I’m familiar with or that I’ve lived in. But there was this desire to find an answer to that and I’m really happy that for the last ten years or so I haven’t felt as if I need to answer that question. I get asked a lot about my second base in Berlin: ‘Berlin or London, which do you like better?’ Again, I feel absolutely no need to decide that because the answer isn’t really in the place. The work that I make ultimately comes out of me and that’s wherever I am. So the world that I view with my work comes from a European perspective and it’s not so much a particular city.

This show at the Serpentine Gallery reflects a specific period – it’s work predominantly from the last five years. Was there a turning point in your work five years ago?

One could say that the camera-based work has become, in the last...
few years, even less about covering one scene. It’s not about an ideal scene, but more a look at the world at large.

HUO Looking at your work over the last ten years, you see the evolution of a continuum of ideas: for example, your very strong body of abstract work. You said in our previous interview that you thought it had to do with the idea of slowing down, given the ever-increasing flow of images in our lives. Are there other reasons why abstraction became important?

WT The first group of sixty abstract and semi-abstract pictures I released was in 1998 and they were dated 1992 to 1998. So I had actively begun with that in the 1990s, but there was, let’s say, an intuitive decision that one could also call strategic – because artists do reflect on their situation and make decisions where they want to take their work. Around 1999/2000, I actively felt the need for a complete shift.

JPJ One of the things that I wanted to ask you about is the way in which you portray sexuality now compared to the way you portrayed it ten years ago. We can even take it back to the earlier series that you showed at the Serpentine Gallery, which was in Take Me I’m Yours, curated by Hans Ulrich in 1995. Sexuality always allows for the making of new things and every time and every historical situation – because artists do reflect on their situation and make decisions where they want to take their work. Around 1999/2000, I actively felt the need for a complete shift.

WT It is and was a motivation, but only in so far as I find it significant as a symbol or a timus test: you can read the state of society in its relation to sexuality. I was never particularly interested in depicting sexuality as something for its own sake. I was driven by the political meaning of sexuality and that, of course, comes from my personal experience of growing up as a gay man, which meant that I was always interested in how the political could be used in order to change things. Sexuality is part of that. It’s all about what it’s like to be in this world, what we notice and what sensations we notice – to be aware and finely tuned receiving beings, to listen to what we’re seeing and feeling, physically, but also to what we see and feel visually. I’m most interested in what I’m experiencing as receiving visual information that’s sensual. Colours are a pleasure. Colours are nature. I look at this world in terms of making sense in making those colours. It’s the observation of physics, of nature, of how those processes work, and how different colours function next to each other. Those are psychological, sensual, but also simply neurologically, possibly.

WT Sensuality is ultimately all about what we notice and what sensations we feel and want to be aware and finely tuned receiving beings, to listen to what we’re seeing and feeling, physically, but also to what we see and feel visually. I’m most interested in what I’m experiencing as receiving visual information that’s sensual. Colours are a pleasure. Colours are nature. I look at this world in terms of making sense in making those colours. It’s the observation of physics, of nature, of how those processes work, and how different colours function next to each other. Those are psychological, sensual, but also simply neurologically, possibly. It’s all about what it’s like to be in this world, the sensual exploration. I was looking at the model at the Serpentine show in 1995 and thought ‘Wow! That’s really like a lab, a laboratory for studying the world in many of its facets and visual manifestations.’ Sexuality is part of that. I experienced the world as an aesthetic object with sex and sexuality, with the taboos, but not in a provocative, sensual way. It’s much more to do with a kind of tenderness, with the subject that allows for that kind of exploration. This doesn’t appear on the face of it to be present in the abstract works, but in fact the works that are incredible fine to be shown on TV before the watershed but two men kissing each other has been completely taboo and even now is only slightly okay. I find two men killing each other just so much more shocking.

WT Sensuality is all about what we notice and what sensations we feel and want to be aware and finely tuned receiving beings, to listen to what we’re seeing and feeling, physically, but also to what we see and feel visually. I’m most interested in what I’m experiencing as receiving visual information that’s sensual. Colours are a pleasure. Colours are nature. I look at this world in terms of making sense in making those colours. It’s the observation of physics, of nature, of how those processes work, and how different colours function next to each other. Those are psychological, sensual, but also simply neurologically, possibly.

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work, revealing some of the overarching categories in your photography. This includes people, still lifes, landscapes, cityscapes and skies. Abstraction is there, already present, as well as people, including self-portraits of friends, sitting, dancing. You also have the commissioned portraits you do, which are for magazines. All of this is a diagram, it’s a body. It’s an organic, holistic overview of your work. You had an amazing exhibition in Berlin, which was a kind of a gesamtkunstwerk, where you combined old and new work into a total installation. It would be interesting to talk about the Serpentine exhibition, where again you were deeply involved in the selection and installation. Your exhibition follows Richard Hamilton’s show, and Hamilton has said that we only remember exhibitions that also invent a new display feature, a new way of hanging or showing the work. It would be great to hear you talk about the exhibition as a medium, and how you approached the Serpentine as a show. How do you bring this all together in bigger exhibitions?

WT I think what may have changed in the last few years is that I’ve become more at ease with separating out different rooms, different zones within the work, with the idea that something I could only start doing with a sufficient amount of work in general, but also a sufficient experience of dealing with large-scale, multi-room exhibitions.

The first of these large-scale museum exhibitions toured European cities, Hamburg, Turin, Paris, Humlebaek, Denmark 2001–2003 then the Tate exhibition in 2003, the Tokyo Opera City 2004, and the project at P.S.1, in New York, 2006. The next period was the museum tour of four American cities: Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington D.C. and Beccio City from 2006 to 2008. This kind of ‘world tour’ concluded with my biggest show to date at Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin 2008. So in that period from 2001 onward, all those cities met their first large Wolfgang Tillmans exhibition, a huge survey. There was the need to show everything and show it all as an integrated oneness.

2006 began with a project show at P.S.1, which focused on one cohesive, coherent body of work. From that point onwards, and over the course of the US tour, I realised the strength of making different rooms that didn’t jive with each other and allowed the viewer to settle and.T The exhibition in 2003, the Tokyo Opera City

WT: What one can say is that the freedom that previous installations had, due to the heightened light sensitivity they have. The most extreme example of this is in flight astro (ii), in the first room of the Serpentine exhibition, which wouldn’t have been technically possible five years ago. I’m both very curious and very traditional, in a way. I very much like absolute truth to the medium, and I think all my abstract work is true to the medium. It’s only doing what the process does: collecting light. Different coloured light is being transformed into different colours on paper. All my works define the same nature of the medium: it transforms light into coloured pictures on paper. There is also a very small family of pictures where I use digital manipulation. With these works, I feel absolutely sure that I don’t want to make the kinds of manipulations in every single one of the pictures where you can’t tell the work is true to the medium. It’s only doing what the process does: collecting light. Different coloured light is being transformed into different colours on paper. All my works define the same nature of the medium: it transforms light into coloured pictures on paper. There is also a very small family of pictures where I use digital manipulation. With these works, I feel absolutely sure that I don’t want to make the kinds of manipulations in every single one of the
whether it’s been cleaned up or not. I do want people to have faith in my work that everything they see is actually a direct result of this translation process. And it is a translation process. A photo is never really, there are always many things that change it from reality. But it has to be translated and transformed within the same parameters. So one can’t say, “This area of a picture has gone through that parameter, and that has gone through this filter.” It’s all as one and the viewer can trust that. On the other hand, I have found the potential of Photoshop fascinating.

I made a picture called Gedser in 2004, which is a photograph of a man with a mobile phone. For years I’d wanted to take a picture of a person with a mobile phone, because it’s so obvious and therefore so difficult because it’s so obvious – it’s such a strong symbol. I ended up getting one that seemed to have a really interesting shape, of a person completely engaged in an internal way, but standing in public on the deck of a ship. The problem was, there was this other figure walking through the left of the picture; it didn’t add any quality. I like chance to interject into the picture, but this was bad and ridiculously silly – a tourist with shorts and sandals. So I got the stamp tool out, and crudely stamped him away, making him this ghostly white patch. When you look at the picture and are told about it, it’s very clear that it’s been hugely manipulated. But the interesting thing is, you look at the picture and are told about it, it’s very clear that there’s something I’ve specialised in over the years, and I’ve further developed how to predict these certain areas of colour. All these colours are handmade in the dark room by mixing, for example, blue light, yellow light or green. I do that in the negative process. It’s a predictive process – for instance, there are three seconds of blue and a half second of red, and a particular angle hitting that paper that will give me a particular shade of green. This is something I’ve specialised in over the years, and I’ve further developed how to predict these certain areas of colour. So when the viewer sees this big corner installation of Silver Installation VII, there are lots of similar shades of the same colour, and then there are interjections of the opposite colours, or colours that don’t match. Often the slight shifts are not ‘nice’, so to speak. These are an observation and a study of colour. And I see them as a study of nature in that sense. They’re connected to the very specifics of light and colours, and how they manifest themselves in front of you. I see them as a bit of nature in themselves, as well as an abstraction of nature. They’re also a large-scale wall drawing, a mural, where the white areas are equally as active as the picture areas.

HUO Dan Graham has said that in every interview it is important to ask what music an artist is listening to. When we did previous interviews, you were listening to Antony and the Johnsons. What have you been listening to lately?

WT The two albums of John Maus, an American solo artist, who’s yet to become better known, but I’m sure he will be. He makes these short electronic songs sound totally relevant and current. Also I listen a lot to Lady Gaga. There’s something hidden in her music, a hunger that makes it different from what it first appears to be, something very touching.

Oriental Pearl, 2009

Nacken (a), 2007

Kelibia, 2009

Auffahrt (night), 2009
paper drop (Roma), 2007/Bio Bees, 2007
Lighter, green/black I, 2007

Lighter, white IV, 2010
wie praying (faded fax), 2005
Wald (Dreieck), 2008
Ursuppe, 2009

Empire (US/Mexico border), 2002

[Image ofEmpire (US/Mexico border), 2002]
Lampedusa, 2008
Tunisia bus, 2009
Selected Biography

1968 Born in Remscheid, Germany
1987–1990 Lives and works in Hamburg, Germany
1990–1992 Studies at Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design, Bournemouth
1995 Ars Viva Prize, Bundesverband der Deutschen Industrie e. V.; Kunstpreis der Böttcherstraße, Bremen, Germany

Since 1996 Lives and works in London
1998–1999 Visiting professorship at the Hochschule für bildende Künste, Hamburg
2000 Turner Prize, Tate Britain, London
2003–2010 Professorship of interdisciplinary art at Städelschule, Frankfurt a.M.
Since 2004 Also lives and works in Berlin
2006 Opens Between Bridges exhibition space in London
2009 Kulturpreis, The German Society of Photography
Since 2009 Artist Trustee on the Board of Tate, London

Selected Exhibitions

2010 Serpentine Gallery, London
2008 Lighter, Hamburger Bahnhof, Museum für Gegenwart, Berlin; Tegenwoordigheid van Geest, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; Museo Tamayo, Mexico City
2007 Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C.; Bali, Kesnther-Gesellschaft, Hanover; Beurdey, Kunstverein München, Munich
2006 Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Helsinki-Festival, Taidelaiti, Helsinki: Freedom from the Known, P.S.1 / MoMA, New York
2004 Freischwimmer, Tokyo Opera City Gallery, Tokyo

Selected Publications

1995 Wolfgang Tillmans, Taschen, Cologne, reissued 2002; Wolfgang Tillmans, exh. cat., Portikus, Frankfurt am Main; Wolfgang Tillmans, Kunsthalle Zürich, Zurich, reissued 2008

1996 For When I'm Weak I'm Strong/ Wer Liebe wagt lebt morgen, exh. cat., Kunstverein Wolfsburg and Halte Cantz Verlag, Ostfildern-Ruit

1997 Concorde, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne

1998 Burg, Taschen, Cologne, reissued as Wolfgang Tillmans, 2002

1999 Soldiers: The Nineties, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne; Total Solar Eclipse/Totale Sonnenfinsternis, Galerie Daniel Buchholz, Cologne; Wako Book 1999, Wako Works of Art, Tokyo

1994 Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York


2001 Aufsicht, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg; Science Fiction/hier und jetzt zufrieden sein (with Isa Genzken), Museum Ludwig, Cologne; Wer Liebe wagt lebt morgen, Kunstmuseum Wolfsburg

1995 Kunsthalle Zurich; Portikus, Frankfurt a.M.

1994 Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York

1993 Daniel Buchholz – Buchholz & Buchholz, Cologne; Maureen Paley, London

1988 Approaches, Café Gnosa, Hamburg

2000 if one thing matters, everything matters, Tate Britain, London; Frans Hals Museum, Haarlem, Netherlands; View from Above, Louisiana Museum for Moderne Kunst, Denmark


2003 if one thing matters, everything matters, exh. cat., Tate Publishing, London

2004 Freischwimmer, exh. cat., Opera City Gallery, Tokyo; Wako Book 3, Wako Works of Art, Tokyo

2005 truth study center, Taschen, Cologne

2006 Freedom From The Known, exh. cat., P.S1 and Steidl Verlag, New York and Göttingen; Wolfgang Tillmans, exh. cat., Museum of Contemporary Art, Chicago; Hammer Museum, Los Angeles, Yale University Press, New Haven and London; Why we must provide HIV treatment information, HIV i-base, London

2007 Manual, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne; Wolfgang Tillmans and Hans Ulrich Oberst, The Conversation Series 6, Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, Cologne

2008 Lighter, exh. cat., Hamburger Bahnhof, Halte Cantz, Ostfildern; Wako Book 4, Wako Works of Art, Tokyo
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>List of Plates</th>
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<td>* Denotes works not included in the exhibition</td>
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**Eierstapel, 2009**
- C-type print
  - 61 × 50.8 cm

**Wald (Reinschagen), 2008**
- Framed C-type print
  - 237 × 181 cm

**Wald (Tierra del Fuego) II, 2010**
- Laser print
  - 42 × 29.7 cm

**Duomo, 2009**
- Inkjet print
  - 207 × 138 cm

**Roy, 2009**
- C-type print
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Nanbei Hui, 2009**
- Inkjet print
  - 207 × 138 cm

**Heptathlon, 2009**
- Inkjet print
  - 208.5 × 138 cm

**glass factory, 2008**
- C-type print
  - 30.5 × 40.6 cm

**Nacken (a), 2007 * **

**Keitba, 2009**
- Inkjet print
  - 208 × 138 cm

**Autsicht (night), 2009 * **

**Oriental Pearl, 2009**
- Inkjet print
  - 205 × 136 cm

**Edinburgh builders, a, 1987**
- Framed C-type print
  - 61 × 50.8 cm

**Silver Installation VI, 2009**
- Unique C-type prints
  - 231 × 563 cm

**Details of Silver Installation VI, 2009**
- Unique C-type prints
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Table A**
- Space, Food, Religion (TSC), 2010
  - Wood, glass and mixed media
    - 78 × 198 × 76 cm
  - C-type print
    - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Table B**
- Space, Food, Religion (TSC), 2010
  - Wood, glass and mixed media
    - 93 × 198 × 46 cm
  - C-type print
    - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Table C**
- Space, Food, Religion (TSC), 2010
  - Wood, glass and mixed media
    - 83 × 198 × 61 cm
  - C-type print
    - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Detail of Table A**
- Space, Food, Religion (TSC), 2010
  - Wood, glass and mixed media
    - 78 × 198 × 76 cm
  - C-type print
    - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Detail of Table C**
- Space, Food, Religion (TSC), 2010
  - Wood, glass and mixed media
    - 83 × 198 × 61 cm
  - C-type print
    - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Venus transit, second contact, 2004**
- C-type print
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Venus transit, edge, 2004**
- C-type print
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Venus transit, passage, 2004**
- C-type print
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Venus transit, second contact, 2004**
- C-type print
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Venus transit, edge, 2004**
- C-type print
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Venus transit, passage, 2004**
- C-type print
  - 40.6 × 30.5 cm

**Beerenstilteben, 2007**
- C-type print
  - 30.5 × 40.6 cm

**Silver Installation VII, 2009**
- Unique C-type prints
  - 306 × 843 cm

**Details of Silver Installation VII, 2009**
- Unique C-type prints
  - 306 × 843 cm

**Auh, 2008**
- Framed C-type print
  - 29.7 × 21 cm

**Zimmerlinde (Michel, 2006**
- Framed C-type print
  - 211 × 145 cm
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Next page: see summer, left 2004
we summer, right 2004
This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition Wolfgang Tillmans at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 26 June – 19 September 2010.

Exhibition curated by

Julia Peyton-Jones
Director, Serpentine Gallery and Co-Director, Exhibitions & Programmes

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