

# Wolfgang Tillmans: To look without fear

## Introduction

For more than three decades, Wolfgang Tillmans (born 1968) has pushed the boundaries of what it means to engage the world through photography. In works ranging from windowsill still-lives to documents of social movements, from ecstatic images of nightlife to camera-less abstractions, from sensitive portraits to pictures of architecture, and from astronomical observations to intimate nudes, he has explored seemingly every genre imaginable. Tillmans's approach to making pictures is grounded in the possibility of forging human connections and in the idea of togetherness. His work reflects not only his irrepressible curiosity but also a deep care for his subjects. He considers his role to be, among other things, that of an "amplifier" of ideas and of social awareness.

"I see my installations as a reflection of the way I see—the way I perceive or want to perceive my environment," Tillmans has said. In his convention-defying arrangements, prints are taped to the walls or hung with clips, and framed photographs appear alongside photocopies and pages cut from magazines. These images, often grouped like constellations on walls and on tabletops, share the exhibition space with video projections and sound pieces. This approach is expressive of Tillmans's concept of visual democracy: "If one thing matters, everything matters." Presenting the full breadth of his career, from the 1980s to now, *Wolfgang Tillmans: To look without fear* invites us to experience the artist's vision of what it feels like to live today.

## **All quotes credited to Wolfgang Tillmans.**

The photographic prints in this exhibition belong to the artist's studio collection. Many are also held in private and public collections around the world. Tillmans has developed a system of paper sizes and printing techniques that he has used consistently over the past thirty years. He presents many of his photographs in more than one size and medium, depending on the installation; this reflects his understanding that each version has its own unique qualities. Most of his works made without a camera are unique objects and exist in only one medium.

## **Why aren't there labels in this exhibition?**

Tillmans aims to create a unique site-specific presentation for each exhibition, making full use of the architectural elements of each gallery. The artist invites visitors to experience his singular installation and constellations of photographs, uninterrupted. This guide offers details on individual works as well as information on Tillmans's practice more broadly.

## **Room 1**

### **Photocopies and early works**

*"The reason I started to work with images from the very beginning was that I wanted to be involved with what was going on in the world."*

In 1986, while making a collage of song lyrics and photographs, Tillmans encountered a Canon NP-9030 laser photocopier at a copy shop in Remscheid, Germany. Unlike earlier models, this machine converted source pictures into a digital signal, which in turn could be translated into enlarged images in shades of gray. Tillmans was fascinated by the machine's ability to produce, with the touch of a button, what he has called "charged objects, full of texture, variance, and ethereal presence." In his photocopy works, Tillmans aspired to expand the materials and techniques of artmaking, an ambition that aligned with his experiments in electronic music around the same time.

## **Portraiture and subculture**

*"We were getting up into a new age... The new '90s, a new Europe, breaking down borders, we're in this together: that's where my language came from."*

Tillmans's outlook in the 1990s reflected the ongoing integration of Europe after the fall of the Berlin Wall as well as the internationalism of the era's subcultures. His attention to youth culture emerged alongside his interest in portraiture. *Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees* (wall C, 8) appeared in the British alternative magazine *i-D*'s "Sexuality Issue" as part of an eight-page photo-essay titled "like brother like sister." The models, friends of Tillmans, are neither siblings nor lovers. Yet their androgynous features and partial nudity suggest a form of kinship—what Tillmans has described as an "equally empowered gender relationship." Ignoring the conventional distinction between fine-

art photographs and mass-printed images, Tillmans uses multiple platforms to amplify the ideas in his work.

## **Room 2**

### **Concorde Grid**

Between 1976 and 2003, the Concorde jet made the trip from London to New York in about three and a half hours, a technological advance for aviation and a personal luxury for travellers who could afford the \$8,000 round-trip ticket. *Concorde Grid* (wall D, 16) is made up of fifty-six photographs of the airplane's takeoffs and landings. Captured at Heathrow Airport's perimeter fence and throughout South London over the course of several weeks in 199, the images document the daily passage of the Space Age relic over the city's suburbs. Fascinated by the plane's "futuristic shape, speed, and ear-numbing thunder," Tillmans created a meditation on the multicoloured shades of the sky, environmental crisis, and the utopian promise of technology.

### **Astronomy**

*"When I was ten, in 1978, I fell in love with the stars."*

As a child, Tillmans began observing sun-spots through a telescope, sketching their shapes and sizes and occasionally placing a camera against the instrument's eyepiece to snap a photograph. In 2004 and 2012, he used the same telescope to observe the transit of Venus (wall E), photographing the disk-like

silhouette of the planet passing in front of the sun over several hours. Together with photography, astronomy has played a key role in the artist's search for the "boundaries of the visible," an investigation that has been a lifelong obsession.

## **Intervention pictures and *Silvers***

In the late 1990s, Tillmans became interested in making photographs without a camera. He at first combined traditional photography with darkroom experimentation, creating what he calls his "intervention" pictures, like *I don't want to get over you* (wall E, 12), where he exposed photographic paper to a camera-made negative and simultaneously used a flashlight to "draw" on its light-sensitive surface. Tillmans makes his *Silver* works (wall E) by feeding photographic paper through a developer that he has purposely not cleaned. This creates unpredictable chemical reactions that produce surfaces bearing dirt, blemishes, and traces of silver salts. The unique original prints capture the rich textures and metallic reflections of these darkroom processes. Tillmans then enlarges these prints to offer viewers an experience at human scale.

## ***Freischwimmer***

Tillmans makes his *Freischwimmer* pictures (wall G and Room 4, Wall C) without a camera, exposing light-sensitive paper to a range of light sources. Each work traces the artist's actions and evokes a liquid, unfixed state. Tillmans chose the title for its suggestion of freedom and of movement.

## Room 3

### ***Soldiers: The Nineties, Installation V***

*“In the ’90s there was a perceived lack of threat in the west, even though there was a war going on almost every day of the decade. Maybe the lack of real threat had to be replaced by an ongoing presence of uniformed men on our front pages.”*

As Cold War tensions eased in the 1990s, thousands of North American and Western European military personnel were deployed to war-torn nations such as Kuwait, Bosnia, Serbia, and East Timor to participate in peacekeeping missions sponsored by the United Nations. Tillmans observed that the front pages of newspapers like *The New York Times* regularly featured images of young men in military uniforms engaged in acts of leisure: smoking, playing chess, or just hanging out. The artist began collecting dozens of these images as clippings, and in 1999 he incorporated them into the installation *Soldiers: The Nineties*, of which five versions exist.

## Room 4

### ***Lighters and paper drops***

*“Everything I do happens on paper.”*

Tillmans is fascinated with paper, not only as a material but also as a subject. In 2001, he initiated his paper drop works (walls A, B): still-life studies of the curving, reflective surfaces of

photographic paper. As he let the paper bend and curl freely under its own weight, he became attuned to a range of optical effects. For his Lighter works, he folded light-sensitive paper in the darkroom or exposed it to light in such a way that the results mimic the effects of folding. Their title may be read as evoking weightlessness, light, or the cigarette lighters the artist sometimes uses in their making.

## **Room 5**

### ***Neue Welt (New World)***

“With the Neue Welt [project] the camera is like a tool for me to see and record much more than I can possibly understand in that moment.”

Between 2008 and 2012, Tillmans undertook a major new project, setting out “to observe how the world’s surface is changing.” Comprising portraiture, still life, landscape, street photography, and architectural studies shot around the world, the group of works known as Neue Welt (walls A, B, C) observe contemporary global conditions as organized through the flows of finance, commodities, and people. Its beginning coincided with Tillmans’s adoption of a digital camera—a tool whose sensor could capture low-light subjects at an unprecedented level of detail, allowing him to make pictures that were previously impossible.

### ***The Cock (kiss)***

*“Questions of taste or of beauty have always been politically charged for me. Do you find two men kissing disgusting or beautiful? That is a question of aesthetics but also of politics.”*

Captured at London’s gay venue The Cock in 2002, *The Cock (kiss)* (wall D, 11) was widely shared on social media in the aftermath of the 2016 mass shooting at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida—a defiant response to a statement by the killer’s father that his son had been angered by the sight of two men kissing.

## **Room 6**

### ***Instrument***

In 2014, while Tillmans was in a hotel room in Los Angeles, he noticed a sliver of light from the window projecting a shadow of his body. As he played with the shadow, he noticed the sound his feet made as he moved, and he began to dance. In this intuitive and playful moment, he decided to record himself. Four months later Tillmans was in Tehran giving a workshop, when he noticed a similar sliver of light emerging from a window. He recorded himself again. Back in his Berlin studio, he combined the two videos. The sound is entirely produced by Tillmans running on the spot, featuring the noise of the busy Tehran streets in the background. He put the sound of his steps through filters, revealing, “I manipulated the stepping noises into electronic sound, sort of me being my own instrument.”

### ***Peas***



At first glance, *Peas* looks like a banal study of a pot of boiling vegetables, but as the peas establish a rhythm in the simmering water and their boundaries become indistinct, forms of solidarity emerge. Shot in the kitchen of Tillmans's former East London studio, across the street from a Pentecostal church, the video also bears witness to the shrill cries of a preacher. Bringing together what might seem like minor details of the artist's everyday life, the work is an exploration of the formation of community.

## **Room 7**

### ***Truth Study Center***

*"I realized that all the problems that the world faces right now arise from men claiming to possess absolute truths."*

In 2005 Tillmans introduced a new display architecture for his work. In his *Truth Study Center* installations, specially constructed wooden tables made of hollow-core doors hold arrangements of photocopied print and online media, ephemera, and photographs. Each table presents a different approach to knowledge, sometimes using humour. Scientific studies, editorial pieces, and forgeries mingle with Tillmans's pictures in a collage-like arrangement that is designed to function as an interrogation of our perception of truth. The artist's development of this new format was driven by this idea.

### ***The State We're In***

*The State We're In, A* (wall A, 3) features the roiling surface of the sea. Tillmans later felt the clashing waves that could “erupt at any spot, at any place, and any time” were a potent metaphor for the moment—one that has only become more tumultuous. Many of the works in this room suggest states of transition and transformation, or an uneasy in-between, like *Tag/Nacht III* (Day/Night III), 2015 (wall A, 5), where day and night both appear from the window of an airplane. *Lüneberg (self)* (wall A, 7) encompasses the twin aspects of connection and distance that we experience on video calls.

## ***Sendeschluss / End of Broadcast I***

In 2014, Tillmans made this expansive photograph of video static in Russia, capturing the flickering, snow-like pattern on the old television set in his Saint Petersburg hotel room. It reminded him of the nightly routine on pre-digital television stations; when they went off-air late in the evening, the image feed would be replaced by static. The photographs also convey what a censored screen might look like; the Russo-Ukrainian war had just broken out, and it was a moment of heightened awareness about the potential for state oppression. View the work up close to discover that the seemingly black-and-white image is full of colours.

## **Nightlife and Politics**

“Just because I am engaged in the poetry of looking, and touched by music, and nightlife, and musicians, and youth culture, it isn’t a contradiction to be interested in how things actually function.”

For Tillmans, there is no disconnect between political activism and his work. By the late 1980s, he expanded his practice beyond his self-described “introverted examination of media.” In his role as an amplifier of ideas he could both “fold a sheet of paper in the darkroom and shoot a reportage about LGBTQ activists in Saint Petersburg.” On documenting nightlife, particularly queer spaces, Tillmans reveals that for him “nightlife photography has always come from a sense of responsibility.” He adds, “I would like to document for the future that it existed, that it cannot be taken for granted, and that there are only very few places in the world where such an intense way of being together so fluidly and freely is possible.”

## **New Directions**

“Everything is matter continually renewing itself and transforming from one aggregate state into another.”

At the core of Tillmans’s work is an awareness of the foundation of photographic processes in minerals and matter. Photographs of materials and subjects in various states of suspension—from planetary crossings to photochemical reactions to sweat stains on a T-shirt—signal his endless curiosity and engagement with the everyday, the transient, and the cosmic. Concrete Column III (wall D, 5), for example, seems at first glance to depict a reinforced concrete pillar, but a closer look reveals that the mass is made of liquid stilled by the camera. Through portraiture, Tillmans draws attention to humans’ place within a larger planetary ecology. Establishing connections with his subjects (some of whom are strangers), Tillmans focuses on the nuances of pose, expression,

and context. He continues to turn the camera on himself, producing self-portraits in different modes.

## **Room 9**

### ***Book for Architect***

*“I’m aware that architecture is an expression of desires, ambitions, and hopes, as well as of myriad practical needs and limitations and that only together do they shape a structure’s design.”*

For this two-channel installation, the screens are presented at a ninety-degree angle to each other, reminiscent of two pages of an open book. The juxtaposed images reveal fragments of architecture, from iconic city skylines to anonymous alleys and corridors. The 450 panels—displaying images shot by Tillmans over a ten-year period in thirty-seven countries across five continents—offer a vision of the multilayered cultural and social fabric of our global-built reality. Tillmans includes aerial views, sites of transit like airports and shopping malls, and intimate, interior spaces—including a close-up view of red bathroom tiles in the house where he grew up in the 1960.

## **Jackman Hall**

### ***Moon in Earthlight***

Here the artist presents his first full-length album, *Moon in Earthlight*, which he sees as a single fifty-three-minute piece. Produced primarily during the COVID-19 pandemic, the album is centred on the performative nature of music and its role in bringing people together. The album is composed of recordings made over the last four years, and incorporates spoken word, ambient sound, and pulsating electronic beats, among other sonic elements. The film accompanying the music reveals a set of lights, arranged on a table, that project coloured shapes across the wall of a darkened room. This is followed by a range of subjects— from hermit crabs on a beach to a disco ball casting reflections—mostly shot with an unmoving camera. You are invited to meditate on how music influences our understanding of photography. For Tillmans, music is another form of communication and resistance—just like image-making.

The album *Moon in Earthlight* is available on streaming services, CD, and vinyl.

## **Screening regularly in Jackman Hall**

Please visit [ago.ca/tillmans](https://ago.ca/tillmans) for up-to-date screening times.