



Tillmans, Wolfgang (b. 1968)

by J. Marcus Weekley

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Wolfgang Tillmans, an important contemporary photographer, synthesizes classic photographic genres (still life, portrait, fashion, landscape, abstract) in many of his best images, but he has also pioneered by equalizing methods of presentation through his photographic installations.

For example, most of Tillmans' exhibits feature various-sized photographs printed from an everyday ink-jet printer, images from the pages of glossy magazines, and photographs that are framed like typical gallery art, all placed alongside each other to illustrate that each mode of presentation is integral to Tillmans' process of communication. This method of staging has gained him as much attention as his individual images.

Tillmans' representations of gay men are an important aspect of his art. While his representations of gay men are more abstracted than the sexually flagrant images of Robert Mapplethorpe, Tillmans presents each of his subjects, including gay men, directly, avoiding the subtle homoeroticism of such fashion photographers as Bruce Weber or Herb Ritts, for example. Take an early image which depicts two men having a sexual encounter in a nightclub Tillmans frequented: one man forces his penis through the open zipper of the other man. Tillmans treats the image with a mixture of abstraction and directness in a way that is undeniably homoerotic, yet more ambiguous and artful than pornography.

One of the continuing goals of Tillmans' work is the attempt to explode and expand the received definition of who is acceptable, and not just acceptable, but intriguing. In an image taken of his former lover, the painter Jochen Klein (who died of AIDS in 1997), Tillmans confronts the eroticism and banality of Jochen, who is sitting in a bathtub looking away from the viewer at a three-quarter turn. The image is neither showy nor subtle, but forces the viewer to confront directly the beauty and sensuality of the man. In doing so, Tillmans also forces the viewer to confront his or her own perceptions of beauty and intimacy.

Born in Remscheid, Germany on August 16, 1968, Tillmans started exploring photography and printed images as a teenager. As Simon Watney notes in the introduction to *Wolfgang Tillmans*, the photographer "began to experiment . . . with photocopies, learning about layout and the ways in which the meanings of images are affected--often dramatically--by their immediate relations with other images." As he has matured as an artist and gained mainstream success, Tillmans has continued to explore an image's meaning in relation to its context--in this case, in relation to the images near it on a museum wall or in a magazine's, or a book's, pages.

For a time, Tillmans worked in Hamburg in the late 1980s, then he attended Bournemouth and Poole College of Art and Design in England from 1990 to 1992. He then relocated to London (1992-1994), then to New York (1994-1995), then Berlin (1995-1996), and back to London where he currently lives.

Tillmans had his first exhibition at the age of nineteen in a gay café in Hamburg. It is not known when he came out, but Tillmans' desire to exhibit in a gay café leads one to believe that he was already comfortable



Wolfgang Tillmans.
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with his sexuality as a young man in his late teens. Tillmans also had several other solo European exhibitions during the early 1990s, however, he did not attract major critical attention until he began publishing in lifestyle and fashion magazines.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Tillmans' photographs began appearing in magazines such as *i-D*, *Spex*, *Interview*, and *The Face*. At this point, critics began to take notice.

Tillmans' early images focused on counterculture groups--gay youth, political demonstrations, and his own friends--and mixed documentary and snapshot aesthetics. These images, as all of his work does, focus on people defining themselves through mostly everyday means--banal actions such as eating, partying, having sex. Tillmans then turns these everyday actions into genre-bending images that hint at personality.

Tillmans' work has included a series on the death of his former partner from AIDS, a series on the Concorde, and, more recently, a series of manipulations of light-sensitive paper in the darkroom during processing. He exhibits this work alongside his earlier images, changing each image's meaning by placing it next to something new.

Tillmans has exhibited in some of the world's most prestigious museums, including major venues in London, Tokyo, Paris, Munich, and the U.S.

In 2000, Tillmans was awarded the esteemed Turner Prize. Given to a British artist under 50, the Turner Prize is among the most prestigious awards in the visual arts, and Tillmans was the first photographer to receive it. The award to Tillmans generated controversy over whether the Turner Prize should be awarded to an artist not born in Britain. However, the director of the Tate, Sir Nicholas Serota, strongly defended the decision to award Tillmans the prize.

Tillmans' second major mid-career retrospective (the first was at the Tate Britain in 2003) toured the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, the Hammer Museum of Los Angeles, and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden of Washington, D. C. in 2006.

Although many of Tillmans' images are rooted in his own experience, the photographer cautions that they are not to be read as a diary of his life or even of the lives of those close to him.

In an interview with Peter Halley, Tillmans explains how a viewer should experience his work: "The viewer should be encouraged to feel close to their own experiences of situations similar to those that I've presented to them in my work. They should enter my work through their own eyes, and their own lives--not through trying to piece together mine." Tillmans thus emphasizes the role of art in helping each viewer create and affirm his or her own identity, even as he denies his own presence in his images.

Tillmans has published twenty-one collections of his photographs. He has overseen the image order and design of nineteen of these collections. He is currently represented by the Andrea Rosen Gallery in New York.

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About the Author

J. Marcus Weekley received his B.A. and M.A. from the University of Southern Mississippi and holds a Ph. D. in English from Texas Tech University. He has published criticism in the *Tennessee Williams Encyclopedia*. A photographer and a creative writer, his photographs accompany the essays of Gail Folkins in *Dance Hall Revival*. Some of Weekley's images may be seen at www.flickr.com/photos/whynottryitagain2.