Herbert, Martin, Cover Feature: Wolfgang Tillmans, The World Through my Lens, 
Art Review, April 2013, p.62-71

When *ArtReview* visited Wolfgang Tillmans recently in his labyrinthine studio in Kreuzberg, Berlin, we found an artist toggling between looking forward and looking back. On the one hand, Tillmans - first photographic artist to win the Turner Prize, nonpareil exponent of his medium’s horizons and reach in recent years, etc – was fresh from the triumph of *New World*. This years-in-the-making project (showcased both in a 2012 exhibition at the Kunsthalle Zurich and a lavish Taschen book) serves as a surgical inquiry into how, in diverse ways, the world has changed, 20 years after Tillmans began photographing it: cue, for him, a global itinerary of lightning trips, toting a newly adopted digital camera, to everywhere from basement garages in Tasmania to bustling Indian streets, silvery Far Eastern malls to titanic rubbish dumps. On the other hand, he was preparing - alongside a museum exhibition in Lima - his current large show for K21 in Düsseldorf. In an office filled with a big model of that space, its size necessary for the artist to perfect the intricate scalar shifts of his installs, Tillmans talked about his recent past and a more distant one - starting with his plans to include, at K21, some illuminating work from his teenage years...

**MARTIN HERBERT**

*When did you first get a camera of your own?*

**WOLFGANG TILLMANS**

Not until I was twenty. I come from a family of avid amateur photographers – my father, my grandparents – and so that medium felt completely precluded for me. Maybe that’s why I didn’t initially put my photographs directly on the wall and only explored found photos, mechanical pictures. Look at these [points out *Edinburgh Builders a, b and c* (1987) on worktable]. With my mother’s little Rangefinder camera, I photographed a builder working on the opposite house – so the queer gaze is subtly already there [laughs] – and progressively enlarged it across several photocopies so it becomes just a distribution of surface pattern. It’s a kind of noise, but it comes across as super-specific. I still don’t know what this random or-not information means, but it’s always been of great interest to me. The lucky thing was that I discovered these photocopies as ‘originals’. They had the aura of finished work, yet I didn’t have to paint or draw it. Maybe that was in keeping with me liking electronic music, too – the idea that you can do something expressive without an expressive hand, I was fortunate to have that at an early age. A photocopy is just a sheet of paper, but something happens and it becomes of value, of aesthetic charge.

*This issue of transformation has never gone away in your work, has it?*

WT: I’m always interested in the question of when something becomes something, or not, and how do we know? I observe it all the time. One person becomes a dear friend, the other not; this pair of old jeans your mother thinks is rubbish and wants to throw away, and to you it’s your favourite piece of clothing. There’s different attributions of value at different times and stages in one’s life, different people have different vantage points - and this is what *Truth Study Center* [his ongoing installation project, first shown at Maureen Paley, London, in 2005, intermingling astral photography, newspaper clippings emphasising various types of intolerance, and much more] was concerned with. All of these people claiming to know ‘what it is’, and almost, one could say, an immodesty in assessing value – in not asking ‘where did my evaluation come from, and when did I start

**Wolfgang Tillmans**

thinking about that? And I would also like to know what things are, and I also want always to acknowledge that even though I want clear answers, they always evolve over time.

And so now you’ve just looked back over 20 years, comparing then and now, for Neue Welt. How did this start?

**WT:** Part of what determined the locations was an interest in borders. At the end of 2008 I went to the Sicilian island of Lampedusa and a month later to Israel and travelled all over the borders of Israel, and then on the same trip – though not directly, of course, to Tunisia, to go to the other side of Lampedusa. As so often happens, though, when you backtrack, the seeds of the work lie further back. There’s one photograph in Neue Welt called Growth and that’s from 2004. I had an interest in going against the aesthetic that I’ve become known for, and at first – for a show at Andrea Rosen in 2007 – I thought of making deliberately ugly pictures, but that isn’t an interesting pursuit in itself. Only two years after I started Neue Welt did it become clear that this was the biggest thing I’ve been working on since the Abstract Pictures.

When you gathered those together in a book, you also included works like Edinburgh Builders: again, the starting point was earlier – your work doesn’t divide neatly into sections. But from 1998 you did spend a decade focusing on abstraction – the galaxial scanned-and-enlarged darkroom luminograms Freischwimmer and Blushes; the lysergic lumino- and photogram Mental Pictures; bent and crumpled Lighter photo-objects; the series of photographs of curling photographic paper; Paper Drop, to name but a few.

**WT:** Dealing with materiality was a way of dealing with changed contexts in the photographic world. At the end of the 1990s what I felt was needed was this slowdown of picture consumption – which of course seems funny to think about back then, because now there’s an insane speed of picture consumption. But I already felt people were getting careless with it. I wanted to go against that and mess with expectations of what one would see and how one would read this piece of photographic paper.

Since 1998, this talking about the photograph as an object has been such a strong focus for me. I’m doing what I do for myself, but of course I’m always doing it in the context of the world it exists in, so if I feel there isn’t enough of something, then that, in a way, constitutes the reason for me to do something about it.
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and I never move pixels around. And I think that’s important because people nowadays just expect that something has been altered in pictures. I find that a bit disturbing.

*So this is about truth...*

**WT:** Yes. In my work various ways of transfer, meaning printing, are possible, because this is how an idea becomes form, in a way. But the world as it passes through the lens and is projected onto film or sensor - I find that shouldn’t be tampered with. Because the world already allows for so much absurdity, so many wild conjunctions of events and objects, it would be crazy to think that’s not enough. By not doing retouching additions in my work, I insist that what you see somehow was in front of the lens. I want people to trust this as a basic given. That makes it somehow more powerful than all the pixels I can move around.

*Then the attraction of digital is on the level of resolution?*

**WT:** Yes. I had found my photographic truth in the grain and information level of 100 ASA fine-grain film. Which I read somewhere carries as much information as a 14-megapixel sensor. So until there were digital portable light cameras that could have 14 megapixels, I thought the idea of going digital was stupid anyway. My approach to photography as a medium has always been that I wanted to approximate what it feels like to look through my eyes, and that seemed very much achieved with 35mm. What was attractive to me about digital cameras of this full-format generation is the extreme variety in speed: that you can set it from 100 ASA to, now, 25,000 ASA. And it really makes certain pictures possible that were impossible before.

*For example?*

**WT:** The stary skies. They seem not of a particular time, but if you are in the know, you know this picture is very improbable. Ten years ago you wouldn’t have been able to take this picture, without manipulation. Because after five, seven, eight seconds, stars show up as a line, because of the earth’s rotation. So you’d have to put the camera on a countermovement, but then the ground would be blurry. For me to take a picture of the northern sky, an astro-photograph, from a flying aircraft, with no movement, that’s such a crazy idea. So I’m glad I went to digital of my own free will, because then a year later Fuji discontinued the fine-grain film that I used.

It seems you’re also more interested in issues of scale now. In the sense that you have these really large enlargements that are pin-sharp as well...

**WT:** The scale-shift issue has been going on since my first show at Daniel Buchholz, 20 years ago, but what has changed, and really been a challenge for me, is that you can look as close at the large pictures as you want and there’s no dissolution. And that I find is of huge significance – in cultural history, possibly. I don’t want to sound immodest because it’s also something that was given to me by the camera maker, but some of these new pictures – or all of them, in a way – contain more information than the mind can possibly remember. So any super-fine paintings from 1500 with fur that looks super-real, they are still not as fine as these pictures, which are at the same time photographed from the vantage point of my eye, which is always interested in the nonhierarchical point of view. So whereas in the past a 10 x 8 photograph always somehow had to be taken from a privileged point of view, there is somehow a coming together of, on the one hand, this very human perspective and glance, with this precision. It’s something I find personally still perplexing, like: what is going on here? It’s a bit scary. And interestingly, now I’ve gone digital, there’s no digital medium that can show these pictures in their full quality.

*So it’s still analogue in the end: you still have to go to the one-off, the print...*

**WT:** There’s no screen that has the depth of information. And so it becomes very much about standing in front of this print, and having the spatial relation and movement around it. So I kind of have great faith in the picture: it hasn’t gone away. Fortunately.

*Work by Wolfgang Tillmans is on show at K21, Düsseldorf, until 7 July and at Museo de Arte de Lima (MALI) until 16 June. Neue Welt is available in a limited portfolio edition (signed and numbered) from Taschen*