

# THE COMMON GUILD

Visual arts: Projects / Events / Exhibitions



Photo by Ruth Clark

# 14

COMMENTARIES

## Wolfgang Tillmans

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(For WT)

If seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees, language necessarily fails us in our attempts to perfectly describe those things that are encountered; things, in this case, made by WT. This, then, is a second-hand report, one that falls back into the containment of words, a series of footnotes on approach and affect.

1. To start, a subjective description of the machinations of how the objects might come to be, or of our looking and seeing of them.

a) With our everyday eyes, first seen is the image (deceptive, being more than this). An image captured via photographic process and created with more or less structure or chaos, chemically manifested on the paper object. An image precisely constellated in a gallery / in a magazine / on a postcard, looked at and seen by us. The realisation of this process is a line of thinking that charts the world + the people + the things in it (including those image object things, our own selves and WT).

b) Looking, our eyes take in the image – we may not know what we are looking at, we find ourselves at sea. The usual, lazy methods of looking often prove unworkable: our coordinates are confounded by scale, angle, detail, viewpoint, macro and micro. Looking, then, beyond naming and language, we question the image, seeking possibilities, even answers. Seeing takes place, and with it a return to language and the names of things: a plane in flight, a windowsill with plants in glass jars, a body with leg and arm outstretched, a pair of faded jeans, a waterfall, a colour, a fold, a spray of light, a moon – and we have, if but momentarily, been freed from what we know. Unknowing, we read, and in those first moments of simple acceptance – the open state of innocence required for any reading - coordinates are changed. With slight shifts, recalibrations, tiny psychological and physiological tunings, evolutions occur.

c) Looking, unknowing, seeing, reading and shifting, our focus pulls back, acknowledging, however unconsciously,

the change that we have undergone – acknowledging also that WT has been with both the subject and with us through this process. We see form and format, the structure of the paper, clips and tape, the architecture of the space and a construction of relationships between things.

d) We have of course been denied the usual comfortable codes of looking that have been promoted to us so aggressively. WT's counterbalance to this unsettling discomfort – our reward – is abundant beauty, formal balance, nuanced and rich colour, detailed human narrative, and the awareness of our own present moment. We have been gifted a poetic yet analytical universe, an intuitively constructed constellation that sits outside language; it records ancient phenomena yet moves within these days of ours, it is meticulous and acute yet funny, silly, even heartfelt (and, in this, beyond brave).

2. Always closely observing, photographic processes and their outcomes have offered WT a distance on what it is that surrounds him. This of course translates as both strategy and response for the objects themselves.

3. The reference to the apparent casualness of WT's work might undergo revision; rather, it seems to me an effortlessness that belies a considered politics, a generosity of observation, a clear formal structure and a constant seeking of clarity. Abstraction underlies much; this is only too easy to overlook when it is as much a proposal for looking as it is a history and an aesthetic (and because, being only human, we think we are looking at reality when we look at a photograph).

4. As I write, images float across the mind's eye, but these are never divorced of context. They are always alive in a form – a book, a card, an installation, the place where I was standing, looking. These things of WT stay grounded in the world. In the world too, then, is photography – image, object, process and sphere; a chemical process, a series of physical objects, a theatre of display and concealment, a business, a concatenation of trickery, luck and experience. Rather than being seduced into reproducing his own previous styles, WT moves on with openness and acuity, disallowing himself the option of remaining fixed or

comfortable, instead choosing to remain, above all things, vulnerable. The subsuming energy of the image economy – a snake that eats its own tail – becomes material for his thinking, and a foil for those things he makes.

5. WT does not hide from the stuff of the world – newspapers, advertising, decayed fruit, his own installation images – nor does he hide from the beauty of intense colour, the sweetness of the tiny snipped hairs on the back of a man's pink ear after a haircut, the lyricism of the drawn line or a folded page, an old, dearly remembered painting housed in a museum. Language sits away from these perfect/imperfect haikus, these demonstrations of observation, these comical twinkles of the eye. Titles – rarely a guide – are more often a reference point or an opportunity for an intention to reverberate, a gentle embrace of history + politics + art + cultural imperatives.

6. The curiosity of WT is infectious.

7. Transparency and clarity enforces a truth to material, medium and mechanics. We, in turn, become higher and lighter, absorbing depth without language, re-animating our curious yet distracted minds and our more honest, earth-bound bodies. An invitation to be freed of the world by the world, a meditation on multiplicity and frailty, and numerous temporal visions of the complications and contingencies of the world... a place where a colour and a fold don't meet.

Sophie O'Brien, Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the Serpentine Gallery.



All photos by Ruth Clark