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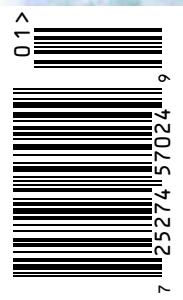
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influence

\$10. ISSUE 02, 2004 (15) GOPNIK, Adam (15) ALS, Hilton (19) GEDNEY, William (19) SARTOR, Margaret (24) PHILLIPS, Sandra (44) MILLER, Ken (50) CURTIN, Devon (64) RUFF, Thomas (70) CLOSE, Chuck (80) VERSLUIS, Ari & UYTENBROEK, Ellie (88) DIJKSTRA, Rineke (92) NICKAS, Bob (114) TILLMANS, Wolfgang (124) BREUKEL, Koos (128) OPIE, Julian (134) WAWRZY尼亚K, Martynka (145) RUIZ, Stefan (152) GIUÉ, Steve (154) FOWLER, Eve (158) FREGER, Charles (164) LIKSOM, Rosa (172) WEBER, Bruce





HOW ELSE CAN WE SEE PAST THE FICTION OF CERTAINTY?

(p. 110) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Jochen taking a bath, 1997. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 111 left) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Mauricio, profile, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

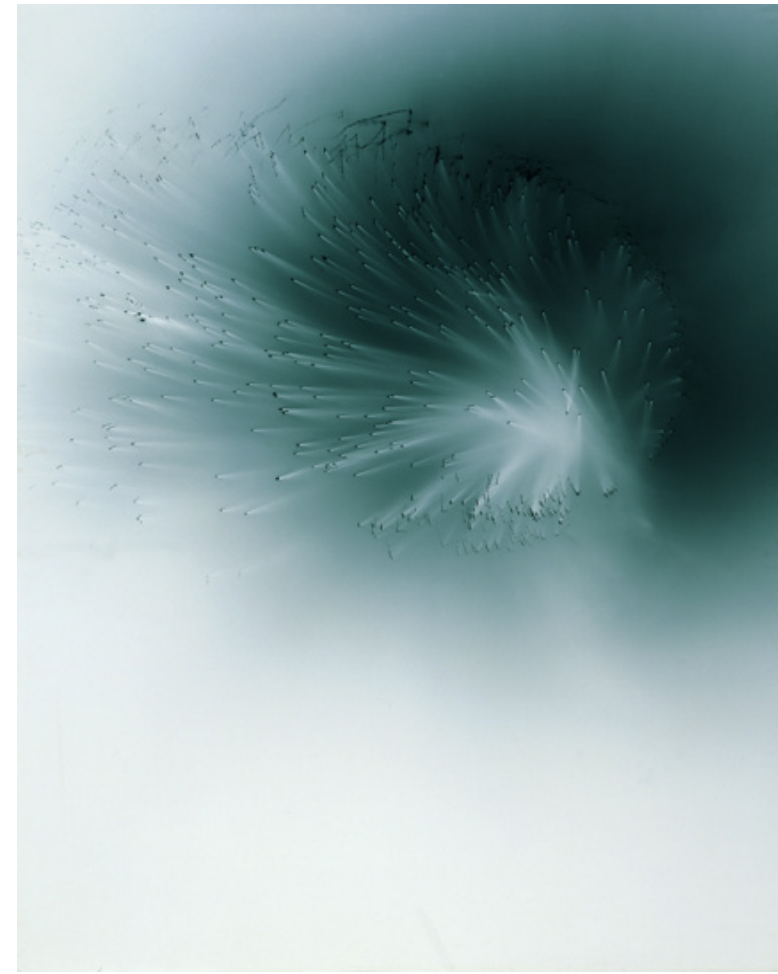
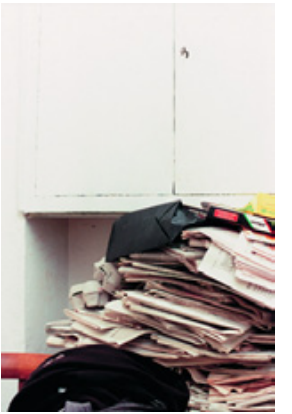
(p. 111 top-right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Zietungsstapel, 1999. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 111 bottom-right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Blushes #59, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

FOR MUCH OF ITS HISTORY, PHOTOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE HAS SOMEWHAT PATHETICALLY ECHOED ITS PRECEDENTS in painting, continuing to reflect the compromising relationship between patron and artist. Portraitists often go to confectionary extremes to pad a sitter's chosen mythology, most awkwardly demonstrated by the work of Julia Margaret Cameron, Edward Steichen, and Annie Liebovitz. Likewise, photographic dissent rarely extends beyond hijacking the presumed objectivity of the process to artificially (and negatively) hyperstimulate our perception of the subject, as demonstrated by Diane Arbus, Richard Avedon, and most photojournalists. Both methods depend on and promote the fallacy of the clarifying gesture, the singular image that captures essences and reveals mystic truths. In fact, what photography has more consistently shown, despite its practitioners, is the opposite: the infinite ambiguity of the human experience, a flood of implication that by its elusive nature denies explicit understanding. Genuine portraiture reflects that continuum, rather than attempts to act as an isolated document superior to it.

The artist Gerhard Richter, who creates work of supreme rigor, has said that the amateur's family snapshot, as an unself-conscious and direct recording of information, is a more reliable method of depiction than the cleverly composed art photograph. In his formulation, both of those attempts at understanding human experience are doomed to frustration anyway, but the snapshot at least is uncontaminated by ridiculous delusions of grandeur. It is, in his words, "pure picture." Maybe it's a bit cynical to contend that any single snapshot, as an embodiment of careless resort, is more profound than a purposeful but vain attempt at establishing meaning. But there is great originality in the thought that a lifetime of such images, a compendium of them, the result of an ongoing, fractured, subconscious but active routine of searching, comprises a more viable kind of compound "portrait" than any single image that teeters dangerously on the verge of propaganda. It's not merely a matter of volume: Nan Goldin has an ample cache of solipsisms, but their sum never reaches a critical mass that can lift them above the weight of individual anecdotes. They become a foreseeable routine. What might instead render the quotidian as sublime is an approach from oblique angles, from the indirect and always limited information we more realistically know life to afford, so that the attempt at depiction itself reflects our finite capabilities and knowledge of experience. A new and viable portraiture then might serve not so much as a terminus or distillation, a "decisive moment," but as a catalyst for reconsideration, a point of departure rather than one of absurd, convenient, and obviously false finality.

Wolfgang Tillmans' work is an open-ended example of this kind of new portraiture. If the most common criticism is that it lacks focus and





resolve, that same sense of loss and existential capitulation grants his portraiture an anticlimactic fragility that's unexpectedly strong, convincingly intimate, and never once surrenders to patronizing homilies. No single Tillmans portrait fully coalesces or completes itself. No single portrait is ever a portrait. Rather, each gels by the same process as memory, through the unending accretion of multiple and imperfectly formed instances, a synthesis of glances, always incomplete and peripheral, constantly realigning our knowledge, as snow accumulating over a landscape dynamically and randomly defines the thing observed. There's no question that Tillmans' anarchic, threadbare style can be troubling to eyes more conditioned to photography in a mode of perfected majesty. It's no help sinking to the contemporary indulgence of calling it "real", but the work is honest, and gratifyingly upfront in its copious shortcomings. It makes no assumptions and, in a way that is exceedingly rare, never attempts to inform. The totality of Tillmans' oeuvre, consisting of thousands of pictures of maddening variety, serves as a single, plainspoken document that paradoxically diffuses our knowledge and expectations. It contradicts all of the demands of historic portraiture, and so is uniquely photographic.

GIL BLANK What's the basic motivation for your photographic portraiture? Is it at all distinct from the remarkably wide variety of other subjects you seek out? **WOLFGANG TILLMANS** When I began to define my portraiture, in 1990 to 1991, I wanted to communicate both the feelings I had for my contemporaries as well as the sense I often had of a single person. I wanted to communicate the complexity of that person in its entirety, that lack of a singular reading. I wanted to channel the multilayered character of a personality and its contradictions, the way it's revealed in clothes, in styles, in attitudes, and the way a person lives. It's the fractured reality of identity that fascinates me. I didn't feel myself well represented in the late-eighties media as I was growing up. Perhaps I did in some magazines like *i-D*, but everything else depicted people making odd gestures, or acting crazily, or smiling. They were always apologizing for being the way they were, always giving a single reading of their mood, of what they were about. It took me a while to get my own photography of people in line with the way I saw people. That happened around 1991, when I realized that I needed to strip all the pictorial devices away, so that the subjects wouldn't have to apologize for who they were, and the picture wouldn't have to justify its observation. It wouldn't hint at being more of an artifice than necessary. I got rid of everything that's artistic in portraiture: interesting lighting, recognizably "special" techniques, and all the different styles that divide us from the subject and are usually considered to be enhancements of the subject or the picture. I found a way of indirect lighting that looks like the absence of artificial light. That's often been misunderstood as a lack of formality, and dismissed as the dreaded "snapshot aesthetic." I know what people are referring to when they say that—the immediacy they feel from my pictures—but what's mistaken about the term is the lack of composition and consideration that it implies. **GB** But why should that be considered a pejorative term, except in the shallowest reading? Obviously, the "snapshot" label is for some a lazy way of critiquing the aesthetic or formal value of the work, but I'm not so sure that the lack of consideration that it also implies is necessarily a bad thing. It goes directly to Richter's idea of "pure picture," of a direct, unmediated pictorial experience that doesn't suffer from all kinds of overbearing artistic effect. **WT** It does release me from having to meditate on the picture. I take a picture to perceive the world, not to overthink what's in front of me. Pictures are an incredibly efficient and



CAMERON, Julia Margaret
After she was given a camera at the age of 48, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–79) became an ardent and accomplished amateur photographer, creating portraits of friends, family members, and Victorian celebrities, as well as allegorical images with costumed models. Her work was rediscovered and embraced by Alfred Stieglitz in the twentieth century, and there were similarities between her photographs and the atmospheric, soft-focus work of the Pictorialists.

STEICHEN, Edward
Born in Luxembourg, the photographer, painter, and curator Edward Steichen (1879–1973) spent much of his life promoting photography and modernist art in New York. In his photography he moved from soft-focus Pictorialism to New Realism; as a curator at The Museum of Modern Art for fifteen years, he is best remembered for organizing the tremendously popular exhibition "The Family of Man." In 1905, with Alfred Stieglitz, he founded the Little Galleries of the Photo-Secession, at 291 Fifth Avenue, and in 1923 he became the chief photographer for Condé Nast Publications. In addition to fashion and advertising photography, Steichen also shot portraits, landscapes, cityscapes, still lifes, and images of sculpture.

LIEBOVITZ, Annie
The commercial photographer Annie Liebovitz (born in 1948) is best known for her splashy, flatteringly elegant celebrity portraits. She got her start in the early seventies, when she became a photographer for *Rolling Stone*, after acquiring her first camera while studying painting at the San Francisco Art Institute. In 1983 she became a contributing photographer to *Vanity Fair*. Liebovitz has also shot advertising campaigns for the Gap and American Express.

(p. 112 top-left) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Central Line, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 112 top right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Still Life, Talbot Road, 1991. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 112 bottom-left) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Conor Sun Burst, 2002. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.



(p. 113 top-left) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Alex packing, 2003. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 113 top right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Andy on Baker Street, 1993. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 113 middle) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Deer Hirsch, 1995. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 113 bottom) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
o.M., 1997. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.





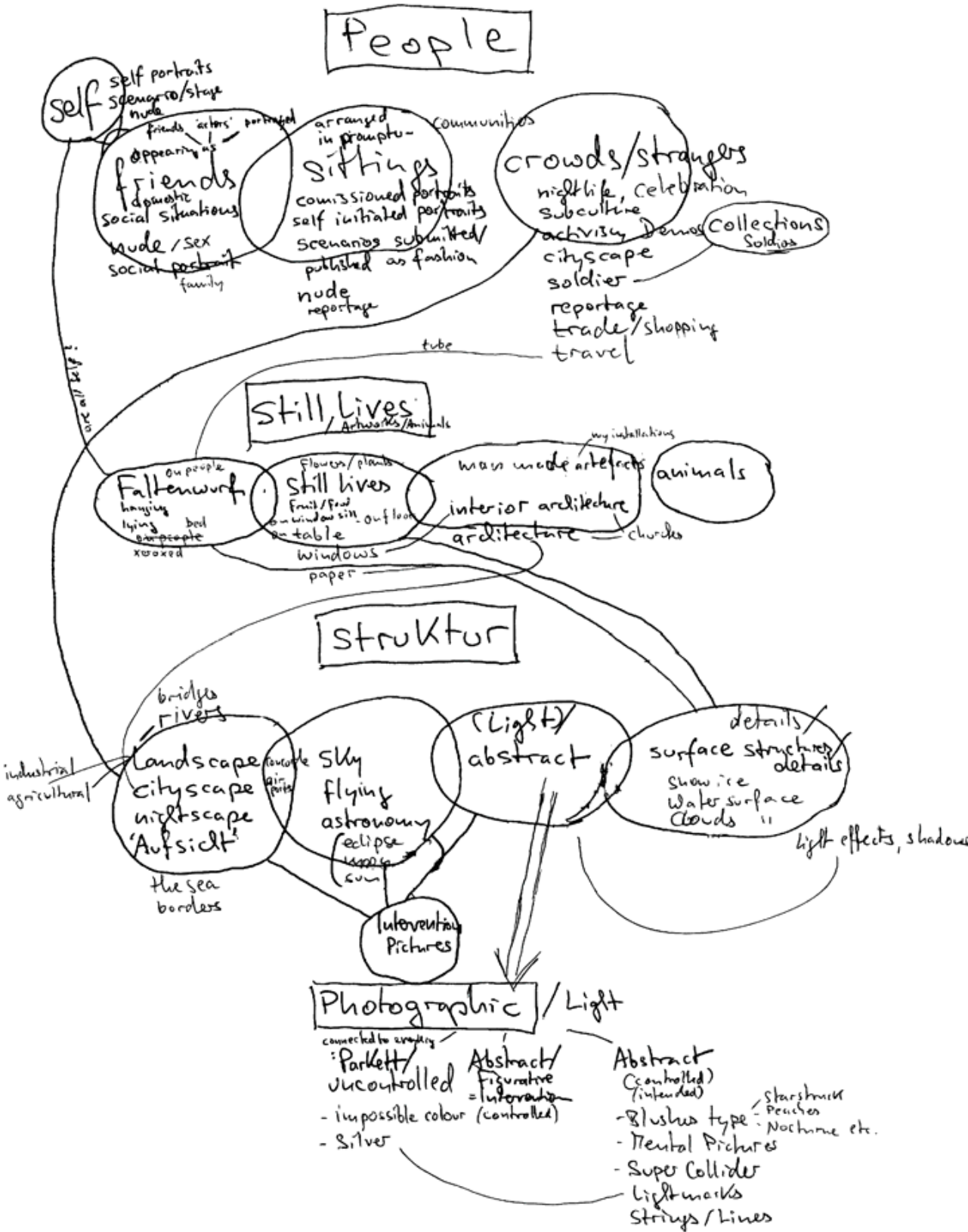
GOLDIN, Nan
The photographer Nan Goldin was born in 1953 in Washington, D.C., but her formative artistic encounters took place in the Boston area, and she is counted among the "Boston School" of photography, which also includes Jack Pierson and Mark Morrisroe. There she attended the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, began exploring color photography, and documented the nightlife and drag scene. She developed a signature style that is notable for its saturated color and grippingly intimate subject matter. Goldin moved to New York in the late seventies; in the early eighties she began presenting a slide show named *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, in which images of love, violence, and drug addiction were accompanied by music by Kurt Weill, the Velvet Underground, and others. A mid-career retrospective, titled "I'll Be Your Mirror," was presented at the Whitney Museum in 1994.

(p. 114) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Alex in her room, 1993. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 115 top) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
A drawing made to accompany Tillmans' recent exhibition at Tate Britain. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 115 bottom-left) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
summer still life, 1995. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 115 bottom-right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Turnhose (Sandalen), 1992. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.





economical way of visually absorbing the world. If I have an immediate feeling, then it's actually a very good language for me to translate that into a picture. I agree with almost everything that is said about the positive side of the snapshot, but not with the conclusion that one could draw from that, that every snapshot is the same. **GB** Despite its apparent ease and immediacy in the short term, your working method requires a certain degree of counterintuitive thinking to be effectively turned into a meaningful life pursuit. It's a complete abandonment of the patterns of identification that are most familiar to a photographer. For many photographers it's easier to settle for the clichés of portraiture—the exquisite technique, the overly constituted moment, the conventional signs of an archetypal personality—then it is to forego that, to vacate one's familiarity and create something that shows few overt signs of consideration. At this point, so much in your work revolves around the seemingly tangential moments, the synthesis of unexpected or apparently unimportant elements, that I wonder if it's become a conscious part of your process to specifically avoid photographing subjects that are too ideally photographic. There are a few aspirationally iconic pieces—like *Deer Hirsch* and *Untitled (La Gomera)*—but is this kind of endowed single image something that you resist? **WT** A lot of them are just given to you when you make yourself open and vulnerable to the human exchange that takes place in the photographic situation. That's how I try to negotiate a portrait. The desire to control the result, to come away with an interesting image, is simultaneous with the admission that I'm not in fact completely in control of it. Ultimately I have to be as weak as the subject, or as strong. If I go into the situation with a preconceived idea, then I'll limit the human experience that I might be able to have. The outcome of such a situation is unknowable, and that's something very hard to bear; people prefer to know that what they do will have a good result. I've possibly developed the faith or strength of letting myself fall each time. I risk not knowing what might come out and I also risk making an important work. That's what I like about the magazine portraiture that I've been doing now for fifteen years. It always sends me back to the zero-point of human interaction, the point of not knowing. I know that I'm likely to make a printable picture, but I'm not forced to make an artwork. And I quite like that, that I have no responsibility to the sitter or anything beyond the act itself. That's also why I never take commissions from private parties or collectors. **GB** That would make no sense at all, diverting the centrality of the interpersonal experience. **WT** The essential fragility

(p. 116 top) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Circle Line, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 116 bottom-left) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
grey jeans over stair post, 1991. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 116 bottom-right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Sternenhimmel, 1995. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 117 top) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Untitled (La Gomera), 1997. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 117 center) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Arkadia I, 1996. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 117 bottom) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Richard James, 2001. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

of the outcome would be compromised; only a truly powerful outcome would be possible. There would be only that useless certainty. **GB** One of the fundamental impulses for any portraitist, especially apparent in your work, is to approach experience, to make sense of what we experience and the people in our lives. Photography, because it's so accurate in its registration, always contains the implicit hope that we can somehow obtain a vestige of proof, of knowledge: this is how things are, this is what exists, what I know. We live in hope, but it's an absurd hope, because as soon as you move toward that or try to build on it in pictures, you automatically begin to assert a control over the situation that prevents it from ever being anything beyond your own preconceived ideas. And so for you, it's vital to maintain that position of vulnerability. **WT** Yes. And of course with friends, I'm like that much more naturally. In the end the pictures that matter to me most are of people that are close to me. **GB** And when you consider the sketch you made for your retrospective at the Tate, which functions like a diagram or flow chart of your working method, you put the "People" category at the very top. It's quite disorienting, and I imagine purposely so, because you do break things down into large categories, but obscure that with the insertion of smaller and smaller notes, and cross-referencing paths and connections, so that there is no real separation. Everything is cross-contaminated. **WT** But you can separate, for instance, "Crowds/ Strangers" from "Friends Sitting." Then again, that can be extended into "Nightlife," which gives you a big family of extended friends you don't immediately know. The whole chart was made in the full knowledge of its own absurdity. Likewise, the catalog for the exhibition, *If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters*, which is an encyclopedic catalog of over two thousand images from the present back to when I began making pictures, is all about the audacity implicit in the attempt to make a map of my world, something that can never be drawn or defined. The thing that makes working this way both harder and much more interesting is that it's also how I experience my life: there never are sharply circumscribed experiences or fields. I admire other artists that work in very strict patterns, but it's interesting to note how that strictness or seriality is often associated with seriousness in our culture, with more thought and more depth. I find it more challenging to try to reconcile all those different fields that constitute experience as I live it day to day. **GB** And that's what can be so difficult to accept about your work. For years, it was a constant source of aggravation for me. It requires a renunciation of the assumptions we have about photographic forms. A beloved motivation for photographers is the isolation of perfect meanings, singular visions. You're adamantly seeking the same kind of reconciliation with experience that photographers have always attempted, but you're doing so by abandoning the status of photographs as exceptional objects, and that naturally disturbs people who are conditioned to placing a high degree of value and faith in them. **WT** Or let's say the language of them. Because truthfully I'm also after refinement and precision; I'm only abandoning the preferred language of that, the signifiers that give immediate value to something, such as the picture frame. First of all, I see an unframed photograph as an object of great beauty, in its purity as a thin sheet of paper, but I'm also resisting the statement that one image or object is more important than others. I want it to battle it out for itself. That doesn't mean that I don't believe in singular, great pictures, though. Some images function in different ways, some more or less loudly, but in terms of quality, I would never throw something in that I don't believe has the potential, on its own, to be really good. The totality will always reflect more of what I think than any single picture can, but the single picture functions as the definitive version of the subject for me here and now. **GB** What? You really mean that? **WT** Yes! That feeling might change in a year's time, when I have a different angle on the same subject matter. But take the Ecstasy and nightlife experience of early-nineties techno as an example.



After '92, I made very few pictures in nightclubs. Those shots are that feeling for me, that Ecstasy feeling. I wanted to have that and I got it; I'm satisfied that they're a true reflection of what I felt and thought. I never have the desire to do more of them. Similarly, with the still life images, even though the genre is repeated over the course of thirteen years, I somehow always try to divine what the situation is for me now, in the best possible way, and not necessarily allow twenty variations of that. **GB** How, then, do you determine the overall arc of your picture-taking? If we are to take the pictures as a compendium, an articulated personal history, how, then, do you prioritize the meaningful events in your life? **WT** I quite like the term "quantification." By observing the number of times I use a certain picture, by seeing how much it shows up in the installations, which ones become a postcard, which ones become featured in books. I know what's significant in my actual life. Thinking backward I know what felt significant, and though perhaps in the here and now you can never fully face that, I don't think there's any need for it either. **GB** At first sight, your work can seem scattershot, and randomized. With more time and attention, connections and coincidences can emerge, with one photograph "activating" others, as you've put it. How much of that is planned and controlled, and how much is left open-ended, for the pictures themselves to spontaneously create a unique system of meaning? **WT** I do leave it pretty open to the pictures. I know every one of them; I do have thoughts about them and that was another reason why I did *If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters*. But the reassessing of pictures isn't a process that goes on indefinitely. I wanted to wrap up all the pictures that meant something to me. Ultimately, though, they all stay free, and in an installation I never say how they should be read. There's no narrative that



(p. 118 bottom-left) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Adam, 1991. © Wolfgang Tillmans,
courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 118 bottom-right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Concorde, 1996. © Wolfgang Tillmans,
courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 118 top-right) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Schlüssel, 2002. © Wolfgang Tillmans,
courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 119 top) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Kieler Straße (self), 1988. © Wolfgang
Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York.

(p. 119 middle) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Isa with pool of water, 1995. © Wolfgang
Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York.

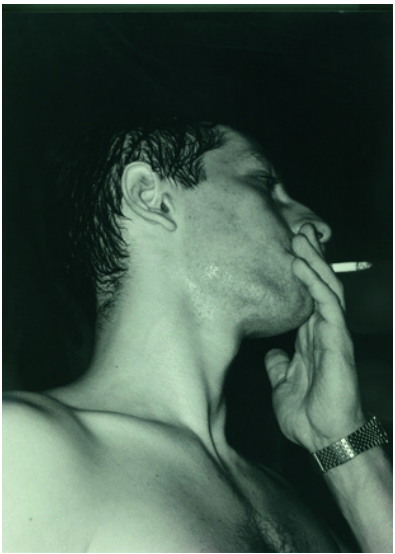
(p. 119 bottom) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Smoker (Chemistry), 1992. © Wolfgang
Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery,
New York.



realization of freedom. **GB** Let me then come right out and ask the fundamental questions: What kind of faith do you place in photographs, and portraits in particular, as a way of helping us understand or access personal experience? Is there any hope, or help, or any need for either? **WT** I like the idea of the photograph as something that joins me to the world, that connects me to others, that I can share. I can get in touch with somebody when they recognize a feeling: "Oh, I felt like that before. I remember jeans hanging on the banister, even though I've never seen that exact pair. I've seen my oranges on a windowsill." It's the sense that "I'm not alone." That's the driving force behind sharing these things—that I want to find connections in people. I believe that every thought and idea has to be somehow rendered through personal experience, and then generalized. **GB** Can that kind of approach ever be completed? Or might it not actually doom itself, a restless desire to move and to know and to see that—because of the foregone conclusion of our own deaths—implies its own impossibility? **WT** Yes, but it is all impossible! Like the Eva Hesse quote I love: "Life doesn't last, art doesn't last, it doesn't matter"! **GB** [laughter] **WT** [laughter] **WT** I mean that of course you have to give as much love as possible into your life and your art, not only despite the fact that none of it matters but precisely because of it. I don't feel a restless desire at the core of my work. I feel it's about stillness, about calmly looking at the here and now. **¶** These are real issues, the biggest ones, and particularly in regard to portraiture: Why take pictures of others? It's not the same as taking pictures of non-portrait subject matter. When you show a person to another person, why do you do that? Do you show a role model, do you show an ideal of beauty, or power? Why should somebody else regard someone they don't know? Why is it necessary for me to circulate pictures of people in books and magazines and exhibitions? Isn't that part of the omnipresent terror that we're faced with merely by being alive and part of this non-stop normative process? **GB** Then is that the central affirmation of the work? It won't rely on the pathetically heroic devices of traditional portraiture, so you force your subjects into a proxy war in which their portrait images "battle it out." as you say, to somehow identify themselves within a tide of beauty and banality. **WT** I certainly feel a responsibility when using my power to utilize media of

binds them sequentially in the books, even though I know why I placed them as they are. **GB** In your installations, everything is incorporated into a heterogeneous mix: genres, sizes, wall placements, even print formats. But in that book, for the first time, every image was treated the same way: you made them all identical, placed them one after the other in a relentless stream. **WT** There's a rigorous system of only a few sizes underlying the intended sense of heterogeneity. I'm certainly not embracing everything. Even though there are so many subjects in the work, there are also so many things that aren't. I tried to show that in the flow chart. It is something specific that I'm looking at, and not everything. It's not about trying to control the whole world through pictures, or to get the process of seeing and experiencing out of my system. It's more that I'm trying to bear life, to bear the multiplicity of things, and that's what people find very hard. They find it hard to bear the lack of answers, so they strive for simple solutions and concepts, for simple ideas. Letting things stand on their own is about giving up control over them, it's the attempt to bear them. It's finding the pleasure in that experience, but also giving witness to the fact that there are no simple answers. I do think the work is optimistic, but perhaps in the harder way that an existentialist might come around to that

any sort, such as an exhibition. I've always felt very strongly that whatever I do involves using a position of privilege and power, because I'm the one that's talking. But I've also thought that my point of view deserved to be heard, because I always felt that neither I nor the way that I look at the world was adequately represented. That of course changes, and we're now living in a completely different image world than we were ten years ago. **GB** One in which there's tremendous—and perhaps dubious—value placed on perceptions of authenticity and the authentically lived life, particularly in the representations that we fashion of each other. How do you react in your work to that dangerously hypocritical impulse? **WT** First of all, I never denounce it publicly, because we're all part of the argument. You can't possibly have an uncompromised relationship to authenticity. As soon as you represent something, it's always a mediated, invented situation. What is genuine, though, is the desire for authenticity. So, absurdly enough, that's something that actually is authentic about this moment. Personally speaking, I feel somewhat post-authentic. What's authentic to me is whatever looks authentic. **GB** Perverse. **WT** Well, that's the gift of late birth! Certain ideas are just worn to death. All the sorts have been played out. Images had been so outspokenly formulated by the time I started to speak with them that I didn't feel a need to add to that. I don't have to be part of any one school. The authenticity label is tricky, because I immediately want to denounce it, to say it's not true, that everything in the work is consciously constructed, but that's also untrue. I do respond quite immediately to situations, and I think the pictures should come across on an intuitive level. You shouldn't have to get caught up in the artifice; you should try to be hit by an authentic experience. **¶** At the most basic level, all I do every day is work with pieces of paper. I shape colors and dyes on paper, and those objects aren't the reality they represent. I understood that early on, and it was the beginning of all my work. How does meaning take hold of a piece of paper? Why does this paper carry a charge? It's the brain, it's our humanity that brings life to it. What matters is how we shape the things on the paper, somehow forcing it to become a representation of life, or experience. People always think that a photograph is bodiless, that it's not an object unto itself but merely a conduit, a carrier of some other value. **GB** And that's the reasoning behind your darkroom abstraction pieces, to short-circuit photography's representational value by foregoing lens-based images and simply exposing photographic paper to light by hand. **WT** Yes. I'm trying to challenge people's assumptions that every photograph is reality by presenting abstract forms that somehow look figurative. People inevitably use all sorts of words and allusions to describe them, saying they look



like skin, hairs or wires or sunbursts, but they only bring those associations along because the images are on photographic paper. If they were on canvas, they wouldn't say the same thing. **GB** But I think that kind of challenge to photography's formalist character is a well-established concept. More relevant to the work at hand is whether the abstractions are a conscious subversion of the rest of the oeuvre's totality. Because the uniqueness and aesthetic value of the other images as a totality is so inherently photographic. The abstractions feel like a deliriously utopian attempt to bring things





(p. 120 top) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Selbstportrait, 1988. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 120 middle) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Alex in Rom, 1987. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 120 bottom) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
Paul, New York, 1994. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

(p. 121) **TILLMANS, Wolfgang**
I don't want to get over you, 2000. © Wolfgang Tillmans, courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York.

back to that hypothetical zero-point, the state of surrendering photographic knowledge. **WT** But I always have a good excuse for them because they are purely photographic. They're as true as my other photographs, because they do exactly what photographs are designed to do. **GB** Which is what? I'm challenging you to spell that out. **WT** They collect light and translate it into dyes. I expose and manipulate light on paper and I let it do exactly what it's supposed to do. I'm not doctoring the process. **GB** But that's ridiculous. It's like saying the only point of language is to produce sounds. Both language and photography only have value in so far as they're human systems, and that they produce human meanings. Kangaroos have no use for photographs, only we do. And just because I open my mouth and make noise doesn't mean I've said anything. So here's the trap we're in: photographs are permanently bound to experience, to the recounting of events with a precision that's exceptional but incapable of ever completely explaining those events to us. If your abstractions provide none of that explicit signification, however ambiguous, if in fact they are made as negations of meaning, are they really photographs? Perhaps simply by virtue of their process, but I don't think at all by what you state as their human value as objects. **WT** But they are photographic in pleasure. **GB** What?! **WT** They're great pleasures for me. They're a fascinating phenomenon that I take great pleasure in. **GB** That can't be all there is. **WT** But it is! **GB** All of this can't be that insubstantial. **WT** But it's part of that research into how meaning gets onto paper. Part of that's hard work, but it's also being open to the pleasure of being and playing. Without sounding too corny, I think play is very important, very serious. I'm exploring what happens when thinking and being become matter, because photographs don't just come into existence on their own. **GB** I think *I Don't Want To Get Over You* is the key example of that, because it shows within a single image the kind of cross-contamination we see in your work at large, with the abstracting light trails that break open the underlying straight representational image. It has a duality, the connection to experience mated to the desire and the attempt to break free of that condition. Then there's also the transposition of the image formed automatically by a lens, by a machine, and the trails left by your own hand as the author. **WT** It has that inherent quality of being manmade. **GB** Not just manmade, but Wolfgang-made. It yearns for universality but is tied to your own everyday, like all the other images that are distinctly of their time, of their author. **WT** Because they can't be achieved any other way. I've never been afraid of being of my time, and I often find it problematic when people try to avoid that in order to achieve timelessness. They cut themselves short in the process. All great art is strongly linked to its time. The paradox is how to achieve that universality while acknowledging specificity. It's quite hard to handle, this open-endedness. The lack of clear answers, handling the contradictions, not thinking, and yet not giving up either. Not going the easier route of pretending that there are simple answers.■

