



# MESSY TEXT AND THE ACCESSIONING OF WOLFGANG TILLMANS' *LIFE IS ASTRONOMICAL* *INSTALLATION (2001–2012)*

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**ABSTRACT** This paper employs the ethnographic approach of ‘messy text’ to investigate just what kind of obligation the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen was about to take on when it acquired Wolfgang Tillmans’ large-scale work *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)*, and to raise awareness that while artists are key in the ongoing process of negotiating intent for the sake of transmission and the legibility of artworks, de facto it is a pluralist approach that is required. Following this approach, in the conversations between the artist, his assistant, the curator and the conservator, uncertainties and ambiguities are allowed to become visible. This case study illuminates that it is in the nature of co-stewarding complex installation artworks that ongoing exchange is necessary, but that some questions may remain unresolved at present because resolving certain issues may take another decade, the evolving life experience of artworks, artists, and caretakers, in which practical action is tested against the information available.

## Introduction

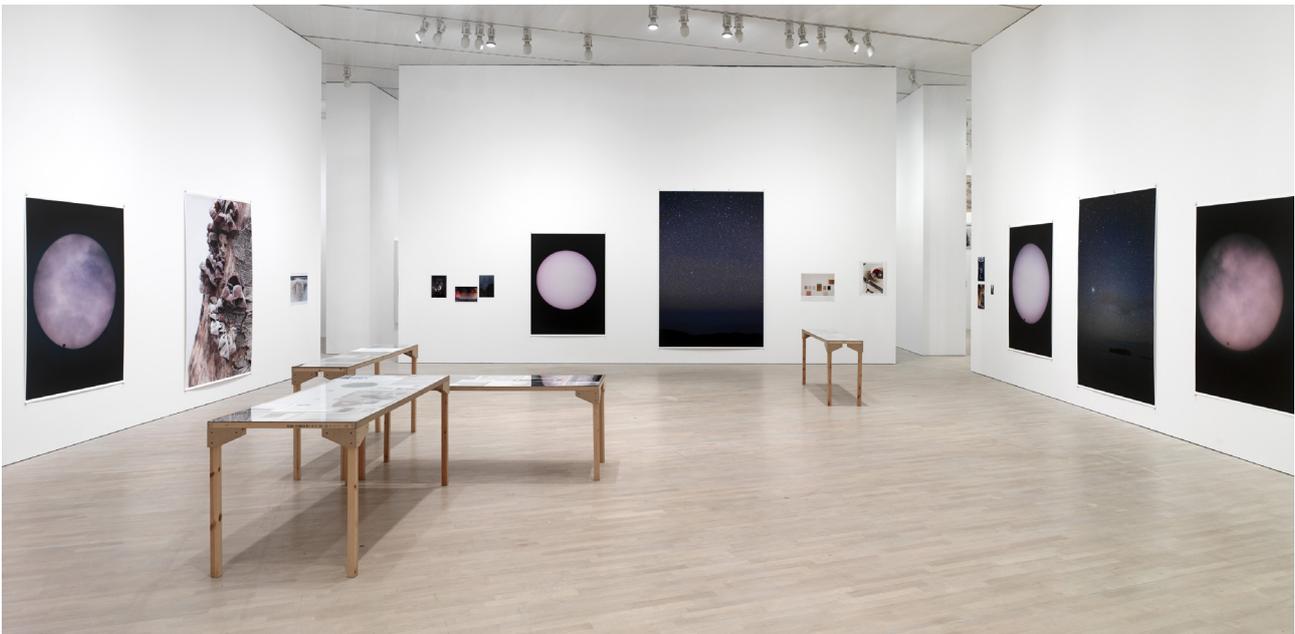
Wolfgang Tillmans (b.1968, Remscheid, Germany) creates artworks which uproot traditional museum roles and strategies: although his works are likely to be compartmentalised in a museum database as ‘works on paper’, they are frequently acquired as immersive installations in which viewers have unmediated access to the works.<sup>1</sup> In line with his preferred open display, his conceptual approach demands viewing them as artworks which exist in an evolving material form rather than as fixed objects.

This case study revolves around transferring Tillmans’ *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* into the collection of the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.<sup>2</sup> The installation consists of a group of 13 unframed chromogenic prints clustered around 11 large-format inkjet prints, and four wooden tables, topped with photographs and other material, covered with glass. All prints

are displayed uncovered on the walls. The chromogenic prints are affixed to the walls with tape in such a way that no adhesive touches the front of the photograph, and the inkjet prints are suspended from slim, shiny nails and white binder clips

The wish to acquire a work by Tillmans for the collection had emerged during the years before his 2013 exhibition at K21 and was decided upon during the course of the show. Once the transaction of sale was completed, curator Isabelle Malz championed the idea to present the newly acquired work at K21. In 2013, the installation had occupied the central area of K21’s temporary exhibition space (Figure 1) in which the entire group could be shown in a single space.

Eventually, a space to present the installation was identified – K21’s Bel Etage, the north-facing wing on the museum’s first floor comprising three galleries. This space was of course very different from the one in which the body of work had been presented in 2013 but,



**Figure 1** *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* as installed in 2013. (Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.)



**Figure 2** Wolfgang Tillmans, Isabelle Malz and the author in discussion, K21, 2016. Also present was Tillmans' senior assistant Maria Bierwirth. (Photo: Maria Bierwirth.)

eventually, Tillmans concurred and planned the adaptation of *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* to this very different setting. He asked for two additional prints, *Klassenraum, Leibniz Gymnasium I* (1991) and the large-format print *Ursuppe b* (2010), which measures a monumental 298 × 448 cm, to be included to complement the installation.

The work was installed in October 2016.<sup>3</sup> Isabelle Malz and I had signalled our wish to schedule a concentrated discussion while the artist was in Düsseldorf for the Bel Etage install to the studio, and as it was equally important to the artist that his work's essential features were recorded to provide guidance for future installs, Tillmans agreed to make time for our questions the afternoon he arrived. Our first conversation took place while the installation was in progress in the Bel Etage (Figure 2).<sup>4</sup>

A work's accession is viewed as a crucial time in its biography because it offers unique opportunities for gleaning information relating to its identity and often paints an extraordinarily clear picture of the negotiations around its future.<sup>5</sup> As art historian Tina Fiske convincingly argues:

When any work of art is accepted into a collection, it assumes a pre-existing status extra to itself – that of the museum object. In that respect, all works of art, on being acquired into a permanent collection, undertake a transition and will be formally recorded [or re-coded] according to the conventions of that new status.<sup>6</sup>

In order to adopt this new status of the museum object, the artwork's features are identified and recorded, and museum professionals will typically ask artists at this point to clarify issues such as their wishes for their work's presentation and their thoughts on the continuation of the piece. It is a moment which throws into sharp relief the issue of control of artworks, as Tillmans himself realised early on in his career. He illustrates this problem with the following examples:

I was a little surprised that when a major museum bought their installation – they requested two copies, like they do for all photography acquisitions ... but they just do that as a long-term guarantee, one is placed in cold storage and the other gets shown – but I was astonished that they did not want the old print from the edition of three of *Lutz & Alex sitting in the trees* from 1993, which I had set aside, thinking: this will someday go to this museum. I offered it to the museum's curator in 1996 and he refused

it. The remarkable thing is, this print is still with me, because their acquisition policy demands two identical prints. ... They couldn't accept one copy from 1993 and one from 2012. Now they have two prints made in 2012 – the vintage print is with me, with the signature crossed out, and I use it as an exhibition copy.<sup>7</sup>

Here, Tillmans' recapitulation paints a vivid picture of museums struggling to balance their protocol for transferring a work into the collection with the intricacies of his practice. Thus, accessioning Tillmans' work into collections tends to bring into focus the chasm between artistic practice and institutional policies. However, despite the fact that several major institutions have embraced Tillmans' practice and acquired bodies of work of a similar scope, little scholarship is available that analyses how the artist and custodians navigate his wishes for the continuation of his installations in practice.<sup>8</sup> This case study aims to fill this gap by scrutinising the negotiations around intent (both artistic and institutional) through the dialogues between artist and custodians that emerged in the context of the transfer of this artwork into the collection.<sup>9</sup> While these conversations clearly illustrate that over the course of an acquisition process, rules for the artwork's future are established jointly through discussions and questions, they also do away with the illusion that all questions can be answered. This appears to be an apt vantage point for the 'messy text' approach in which we did not interview the artist from a positivist perspective, but looked at questions and issues with him, thus co-constructing meaning together.

### The ethnographic theory of 'messy text'

In this paper, these conversations are re-conceptualised as 'messy text', a concept borrowed from ethnography. The term was introduced by George E. Marcus for an emerging genre of experimental writing in ethnography.<sup>10</sup> Described as 'many sited, intertextual, always open-ended, and resistant to theoretical holism',<sup>11</sup> the messy text framework facilitates polyvocality, because the internal decision-making of the participants is considered valid and noteworthy. In Marcus' own words:

In messy texts, there is a sense of a whole, without evoking totality, that emerges from the research process itself. The territory that defines the object of study is mapped by the ethnographer who is within its landscape, moving and acting within it, rather than drawn from a transcendent, detached point. ... Messy texts are messy because they insist on an open-endedness, an incompleteness, and an uncertainty about how to draw a text/analysis to a close. Such open-endedness often marks a concern with an ethics of dialogue and partial knowledge that a work is incomplete without critical, and differently

positioned, responses to by its (one hopes) varied readers.<sup>12</sup>

The grey areas in which qualms and reservations reside are where messy texts offer a lot of potential, as the concept allows for room for acknowledging the work that underpins the process of discerning and co-creating intent. As Vivian van Saaze asserted, 'the collaborative character of knowledge production and documentation in contemporary art conservation is largely underestimated',<sup>13</sup> even though it is widely accepted in the conservation field that documentation plays a pivotal role in the processes of collaboration between artists and caretakers of their work. Taking up the cue, Sanneke Stigter suggested that the conservation field had much to gain from autoethnography, including 'a personal account of the influence of interactions between stakeholders and contextual input, and the way the artwork is perceived during conversations, participatory practices, conservation treatments, and reinstallation practices'.<sup>14</sup> I seek to build on Stigter's 'conservator's testimony' by utilising the messy text approach which acknowledges 'the central importance of the participants as meaning-makers'.<sup>15</sup> It is employed here in order to make room for the uncertainties and ambiguities that curator Isabelle Malz and I attempted to address in our in-depth process of discussions and negotiations with the artist and his assistant Maria Bierwirth, trying to map out just what kind of obligation the museum was about to take on with keeping *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)*.<sup>16</sup> Following the messy text approach, this conversation between the artist, his assistant, the curator, and the conservator is allowed to become visible, in contrast to the traditional use of artist interview excerpts in which the interlocutors are edited out of the text. It offers a more exploratory approach that might clarify confusing issues and anticipate future possibilities to the museum, while at the same time opening up new perspectives to the artist who is not the subject of study but a source of evidence, meaning-maker and peer reviewer in this endeavour.

### Wolfgang Tillmans' artistic practice

This part of the paper identifies three key elements of the artist's practice that are relevant to this case study: his appreciation of materiality; the development of his signature display format which has led to acquisition of his installations by institutions; and his certification practice which in turn was borne out of the desire for open display.

In contrast to many of his contemporaries who rely heavily on highly specialised imaging labs to produce their large-scale photographs, Wolfgang Tillmans continues to produce his inkjet prints in his studio, retaining control over the fabrication of each and every print. Great care and an immense knowledge are invested into the making of his works – and no print leaves the studio without specific care and handling instructions supplied by the artist.

Tillmans arrived at photography via the detour of the quintessential tool for DIY culture: the photocopier. From



**Figure 3** Installation view, Buchholz & Buchholz, Cologne, 1993. (Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans.)

the start of his career, Tillmans established that working with photography does not necessarily require a camera.<sup>17</sup> The enlarger function of digital photocopiers enabled him to deconstruct and modify images, creating 'a distribution of surface patterns', a 'kind of noise' which comes across as 'super-specific yet meaningless'.<sup>18</sup> While at first, he predominantly manipulated existing visual material including his own travel photos, he eventually started taking photographs in order to have more source material at his disposal. In the early 1990s, further technological advances in the printing industry opened up an exciting new path: inkjet printing. The emergence of this new technology provided the artist with a choice regarding materiality: he was suddenly able to migrate his images between visual formats and make use of an aesthetic very different to that of the chromogenic print.

Since the 1980s, when face-mounting<sup>19</sup> of large-scale photographs had become ubiquitous, Tillmans considered producing and exhibiting unframed prints as an act of material rebellion.<sup>20</sup> In conversation with Julie Ault, the artist asserts: 'I wanted the experience of the ink in front of your eyes, the special intense yet washed out feel of colour; a big photo that doesn't become a mirror, a big photo that doesn't reek of mimicking painting'.<sup>21</sup> With this slam, the artist refers to the distinct, high-gloss appearance of face-mounted photographs (where through the PMMA face-mount, enormous depth is added to a photograph's appearance, resulting in what has been described as a wet look) as well as the perception of photography striving to

take the place of painting.<sup>22</sup> The point that Tillmans makes with his quip seems relevant in relation to the question of photography's 'medium' status. Perhaps the works of the artists of the Becher School, in their scale and object-ness, contributed to the view of contemporary photography as 'fixed' objects much like paintings.<sup>23</sup>

### Establishing a signature display format

Tillmans' embrace of the uncovered print resulted in establishing an unconventional signature display format. In his 1993 exhibition at Daniel Buchholz's two spaces in Cologne, he famously showed a combination of unframed chromogenic prints alongside magazine spreads and laser photocopies of photographs at Buchholz & Buchholz on Breite Straße (Figure 3) and large inkjet prints at Buchholz's second space on Albertusstraße. At the space on Breite Straße, Tillmans presented his works in dense, unruly clusters, as well as in a stark single straight line, and used tape, nails and clips to mount them to the wall. With this rather revolutionary display technique, his work was presented in an egalitarian fashion in which offset print tear sheets of his editorial shoots for magazines were on a par with his developed chromogenic prints of similar subject matter that he produced in his darkroom, consequently upturning the hierarchical presentation strategies commonly used by galleries and museums.<sup>24</sup>

Juxtaposing images in different formats (size as well as medium) highlights their materiality, and the immediate

display and the way with which they are affixed to the wall shows off their differences – their surfaces, their colours and their paper supports.<sup>25</sup> It is a space of experimentation: how does a picture change when it is scanned and enlarged and printed as a massive inkjet print? How does the printing technique of an offset print affect a picture's physical manifestation as well as its perception? Tillmans' display strategy requires that viewers find their own ways of deciphering the visual overload. Ault advocates for considering 'installation design as an aesthetic medium'<sup>26</sup> and makes a convincing case that it is in this fashion that Tillmans uses it in his practice. In view of this, I contend that it is significant that lately, it is predominantly Tillmans' *installations* which are acquired by collecting institutions.

Out of the development of this particular way of dealing with photography as installation arose Tillmans' need to circumnavigate the prints' vulnerability. His prints were thus susceptible to damage while on open display, particularly the early inkjet prints that were produced with unstable dyes rather than the significantly more stable pigment-based inks of today, so 'it was essential to find a way for people to perceive them as permanent'.<sup>27</sup> To build this trust in collectors right from 1993, he resorted to certification which then became such a crucial part of his practice that it will be examined in some detail in what follows.

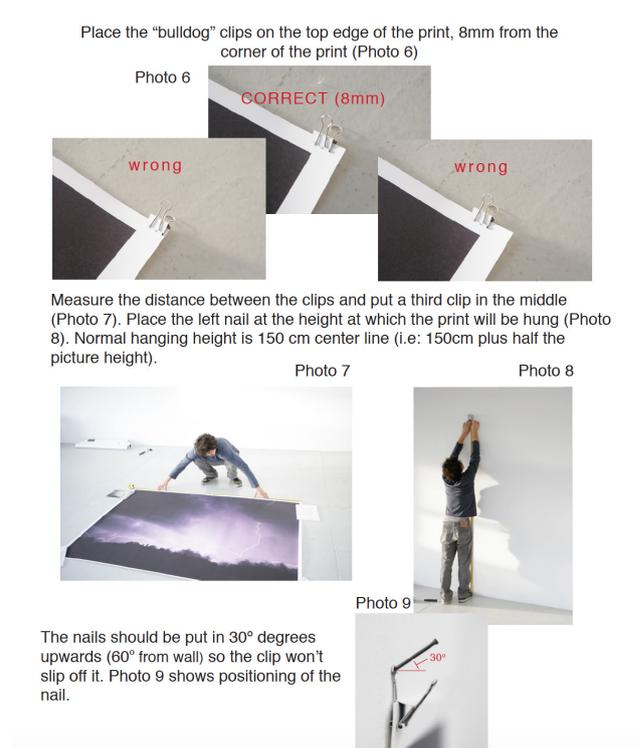
### 'Paradoxical permanence': Wolfgang Tillmans' certificates

As implied by art historian Martha Buskirk's famous quip that they are 'the new works on paper', certificates increased in importance as artists succeeded in establishing that artworks need not be enduring physical objects.<sup>28</sup> According to Susan Hapgood and Cornelia Lauf, 'the use of the artistic certificate was a deft legal and administrative strategy to facilitate creative liberty'.<sup>29</sup> Wolfgang Tillmans started providing certificates for his inkjet prints in 1992. With the certificates, he currently issues exhibition copies accompanied by an installation manual which explains the intricacies of the uncovered display in depth (Figure 4).

Currently, for each of his inkjet prints, the owner receives a signed certificate, an exhibition copy plus the white binder clips (19 mm width) for mounting it, a data CD and an unsigned 40.6 × 30.5 cm colour match print.<sup>30</sup> The certificates determine the terms of presentation, for example, the certificate for *Venus Transit, drop* (2004) which is part of *Life is Astronomical* (2001–2012) stipulates:

This artwork should be displayed unframed using the clips provided. ... For installation, the inkjet print should be hung from four binder clips (19mm width), two at the top and two at the bottom. All corner clips should be placed no more or less than 8mm from the top corner of the print. Please refer to the enclosed guide for the exact positioning of the clips.<sup>31</sup>

It also gives precise guidelines for refabrication:



**Figure 4** Excerpt from the manual provided by the artist in 2016. (Source: Wolfgang Tillmans.)

This piece includes a CD with data from which the inkjet print was produced. In the event that this inkjet print fades due to exposure to daylight<sup>32</sup> or ages in any way, the owner has the right to produce a new inkjet print provided that the owner destroys the existing copy. A new print may be produced on an Epson 11880 series printer or a similar inkjet printer available in the future. Use Hahnemühle Photo Rag Ultra Smooth, 305 g/sqm paper or similar paper available in the future.

The information given is specific (Epson 11880 series printer) and flexible (a similar inkjet printer available in the future) at the same time. Tillmans thus anticipates the printing industry's relentless advances, allowing the creation of successive prints on the technical equivalent that may be available in the future. The statement regarding lighting is also crucial, as it makes clear that the physical output produced from the file is not intended to last. The artist thus underscores that it is part of the concept that one printed version replaces the next when one print's life span is deemed to be over – reproducibility provides the answer to the medium's battle with longevity, so to speak.

He recalls:

One has to note that photography will be photography and just is not for eternity, but I wanted to take that into account, yet still create a lasting option that is future-proof. The solution I found in

1992 makes the work de facto permanent. As long as economy, politics, and nature play along, and no comet hits the earth and these printers continue to exist, it [certification] offers an authentic solution for updating the work.<sup>33</sup>

Tillmans essentially proclaims here that his certification system circumvents the problems of colour photography's limited life span by offering a solution for perpetually updating the work. According to his rationale, certification and refabrication of his inkjet prints is to be understood as a preservation measure,<sup>34</sup> one that is intricately tied to his artistic concept of presenting his artworks uncovered in room-spanning installations, and lit as brightly as paintings.

However, while the certificate addresses the issue of the temporal gap between reprintings and dependency on technical developments, there is no clarification on how much deviation is acceptable. This uncertainty may prove to become a stumbling block in the updating process, as a brief detour to Tillmans' *Hirshhorn Installation, 1992–2007*, acquired by the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC), affords some insight into the issue's grey areas. The Hirshhorn's chief conservator Gwynne Ryan reports that Tillmans himself proposed to migrate an image from chromogenic print to inkjet print when one of his framed chromogenic prints was damaged, because he is of the opinion that currently available photographic papers 'produce inferior results to that of the present day inkjet printing'.<sup>35</sup> The case is at present unresolved as the museum values the 'original chromogenic print process' more, according to Ryan. Thus, even though refabrication in the most appropriate technology available is part of the artist's strategy for uncovered works, the museum is reluctant to accept the same approach for a framed work they perceive as 'unique'. This example demonstrates that the realities of migrating one type of print to the technology available in the future probably requires further conversation as the priorities that the different stakeholders have identified may diverge.

This in-depth examination of Tillmans' certification practice shows that Tillmans anticipates the complexities of entrusting the future existence of his works to third parties. According to Miwon Kwon this makes it the kind of certificate that 'functions as a statement of intent'.<sup>36</sup> The certificates make his vulnerable inkjet prints displayable – and collectable – despite their inherent vice (the choice to certify and replicate thus allowing for a more feasible purchase process for both the artist and his collectors). Yet, the Hirshhorn case presented above illustrates that Tillmans' certificates are not so much tools for a straightforward handover of a work but a 'promissory note that requires a serious level of trust and faith for all parties involved'.<sup>37</sup> The owner of the work becomes the keeper of intent, so to speak, striving to abide by the rules established by the artist. In the case of Tillmans' certificates, curators and conservators find themselves at the epicentre on the questions around the artwork's identity due to their roles as interpreters of intent as well as orchestrators of the refabrication process.

## Photography's 'distributive unity'

Following this examination of Tillmans' certification practice, it is helpful to investigate the theoretical context around reprinting. The infinite reproducibility inherent in digital printing has been identified as a crucial characteristic by Peter Osborne, whose critical voice has come to impact significantly on scholarly thinking on the ontology of photography. He reasoned that the photograph is 'distributed across the sites of its process, de-realized (spectral), albeit in a peculiar ontological state of dependency upon the processes that it transcends, in each of its different technological forms'.<sup>38</sup> This observation certainly holds for Tillmans' inkjet print/certificate idea which, according to him, provides 'de facto permanent' prints through reprinting. If there is a direct ontological affinity between photography and the conceptual aspect of art, as Osborne argued, it would seem that treating Tillmans' works according to the ontological framework for traditional artworks (such as works on paper) is inadequate because it disregards their *distributed* nature which manifests itself in the certificates the artist issues.

Tillmans also puts the finger on Osborne's ontological issue of photography's distributive unity: through reprinting, his ephemeral works would achieve a 'paradoxical permanence'. The artist raised this important conceptual aspect repeatedly. For instance, in conversation with Peter Halley, Tillmans explains that presenting the unframed prints in all their vulnerability 'protects one from the disappointment of seeing them fade' for his inkjet prints have 'this built in as a concept':<sup>39</sup> their fragility is obvious but the owner also has the master file and can reprint the work when necessary. Thus, the material form of the inkjet print, for Tillmans, is indeed no longer located in a single material substrate but takes on a 'distributed form'. The artist appropriates the administrative format of the certificate to assuage owners of his works worrying about the dangers of open display and the medium's permanency. In conversation with Michelle Kuo, the artist explained: 'While this [certification] was a practical solution, it also afforded viewers the opportunity to break down certain barriers of materiality – attaining a paradoxical permanence even as attachment to the "original" print was obviated'.<sup>40</sup> Perhaps Tillmans' departure from the traditional stance on 'the original' as something to be revered is swayed by installation art with its ephemeral nature and durational element. Time-based media installations in particular are less object-centric than traditional media, as their preservation hinges on migration as technology evolves – the digital file has no inherent value as a unique object. Rather, in the words of conservation scholar Pip Laurenson, it is the 'transformation of the media element, via the mechanical system, into sound and picture' that creates the artwork.<sup>41</sup> Tillmans' statements analysed above indicate that he has recognised that the split between file and output may actually offer an answer to photography's eternal dilemma. Digitally generated images are also files which are translated into printing or projection via technology, or as Osborne puts it, 'they are the *visible* copy of an *invisible* original'.<sup>42</sup> Consequently, it would seem that the ontological framework for time-based

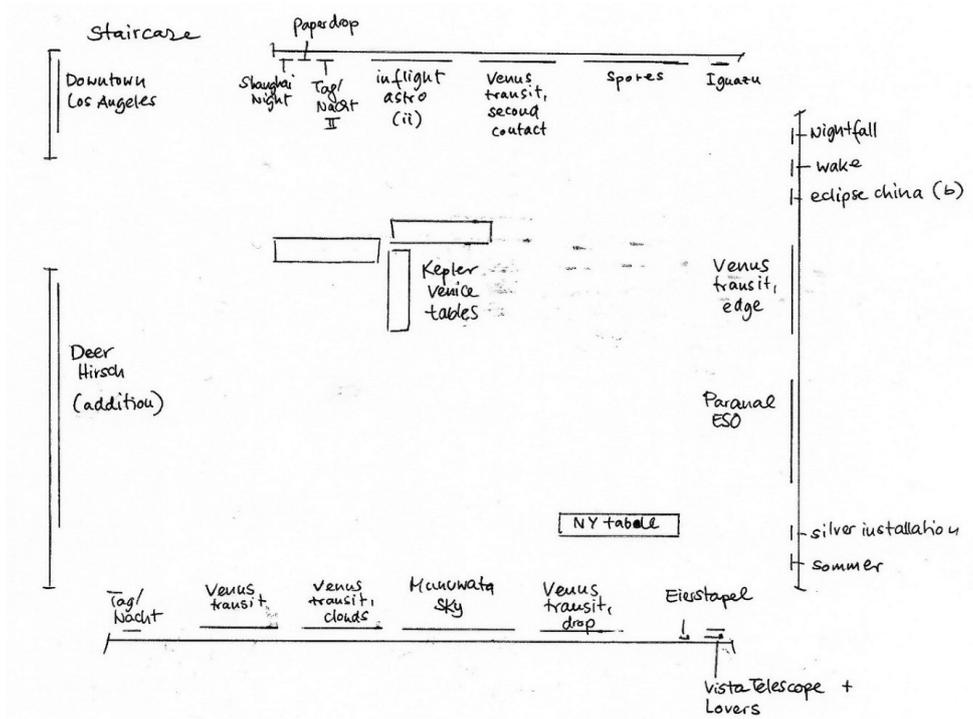


Figure 5 Footprint of 2013 iteration (K21, basement level, central space).



Figure 6 Installation view of *Life is Astronomical* Installation (2001–2012), Bel Etage Version, room 2.003, as installed in 2016. (Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.)

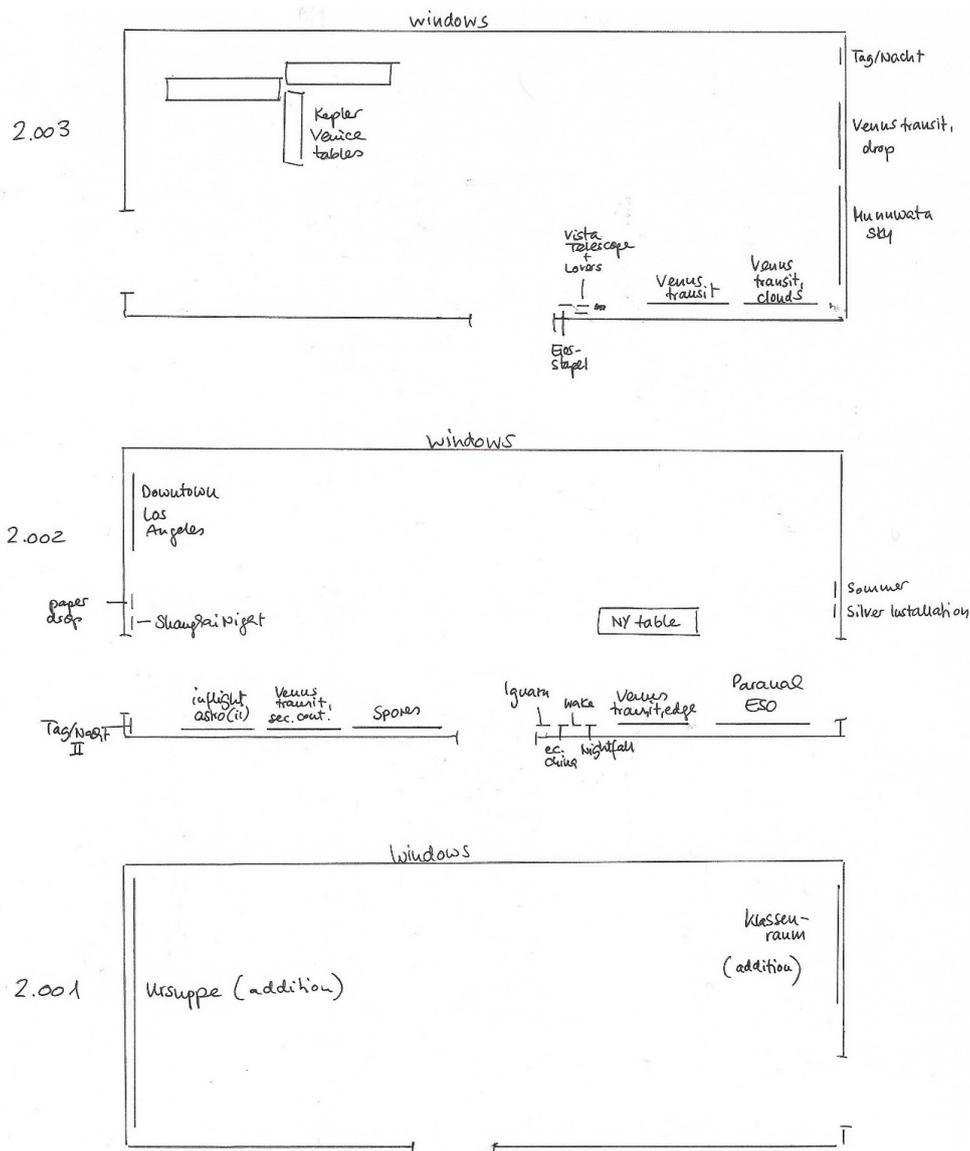


Figure 7 Footprint of 2016 iteration (K21, Bel Etage).

works rather than that of traditional artworks is applicable to Tillmans' practice.

### Grappling with the accessioning of *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)*

The on-site discussion with Wolfgang Tillmans and Maria Bierwirth during the install of the Bel Etage version of the work in October 2016 brought to light the complexities of the knowledge transfer necessary for perpetuating this artwork. First, we discussed how the artist evaluated the adaptation of the installation to the Bel Etage (Figure 1) in comparison with the 2013 iteration (Figure 6), and which version of the work should be our point of reference for future iterations. A comparison of the footprints (Figures 5 and 7) of the two iterations of *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* shows that Tillmans adapted the installation to the very different space of K21's Bel Etage by keeping sections of the 2013 version intact. The order of the

works in room 2.002 and 2.003 follows the 2013 version, only anti-clockwise.

Tillmans explains that the 2013 iteration (the works installed in this particular way/ specific order/ in these specific groupings, including the tables placed within the spaces) is the reference point for the future – ideally, the layout of the 2013 version would be faithfully copied in future iterations.<sup>43</sup> While a presentation in one single space is preferable to one that spreads across several rooms, he explains that the installation could be adapted to other exhibition spaces – but he requests that future iterations respect the order and spacing as sanctioned by him for the 2013 display; regrouping is strongly discouraged.<sup>44</sup> He also cautions against 'compressing' the installation into a space without sufficient metres of wall space.<sup>45</sup> However, the installation is not to be regarded as site-specific because flexibility is key to his way of working:

I am familiar with these points of resistance, once you're decided on an installation, you embrace this

thought so much that you're not open to the opposite [showing a part of the installation or an individual work]. People display resistance against this idea, but my work is very much based on accepting oppositional things. Life isn't always black and white. Opposites are compatible.<sup>46</sup>

He emphasises that it is indeed possible to show individual works or groups of works. Thus, Isabelle Malz and I learned that the Kunstsammlung acquired a body of work that functions as both an installation (in which the 'original' entity is not the individual prints but the concept/installation strategy) and as singular artworks. Together, we pondered what the wall label would state in such a case:<sup>47</sup>

*IM:* If it is more than one work, we call it 'part of ...'? But when we show an individual work, we do not make the connection?

*WT:* Exactly. You could say 'six works from ...' but then there is no connection to the installation ... So maybe 'part of' is better?

*IM:* We don't list the individual works?

*WT:* Yes, but these should go below. The title would be 'Part of ...'.

*NQ:* First, the print's title, then 'part of *Life is Astronomical Installation*', right?

*IM:* Of course, we have to start with the individual work's title.

During the back and forth of our discussion, snippets from Jon Ippolito's seminal essay 'Death by wall label' repeatedly came to mind, in which he quipped: 'the first job of wall labels is to educate; it is time for them to start doing their job, by taking a form that reflects the new curatorial realities they describe'.<sup>48</sup> It was striking to realise how we struggled to describe the fluid nature of Tillmans' work on a wall label.

## The sticky issue of the 'slightly more original' chromogenic prints

Thinking through the details of presenting individual works or groups of works, we encountered the next stumbling block when we discussed the topic of exhibition copies. The studio handed over one set of prints for the inkjet prints (as future copies would be produced following the guidelines stipulated in his certificates), but two sets for the chromogenic prints – one set of signed prints, and one set of unsigned prints designated for open display. We were nonplussed when Tillmans explained to us that, if individual works are selected for presentation in a different context or required for loan, we are to frame the *signed* prints.<sup>49</sup> It was a complex concept to get our heads around that the signed print (usually safely stored) gets called into action in case of presentation outside of the installation context. This wish constitutes quite a departure from traditional surrogate-print-scenarios<sup>50</sup> as established in the preservation of

contemporary photography, so we had trouble understanding why we should use his signed prints when individual works are requested for loan. We probed some more until Tillmans explained:

As things go in an institution, that work [the unsigned print] is not going to be unframed again. ... And this would really go against my ethics. It would be really upsetting, the thought that a museum frames a print which I only gave them so they don't have to worry about taping it to the wall.<sup>51</sup>

This statement illustrates the artist's frustrations with what we might describe as the default preservation mode he apparently frequently experienced when dealing with museums: ideally, the owners of his prints would embrace uncovered display but, in reality, his prints would end up in frames for reasons of protection more often than not.

Tillmans stresses he is not a fan of exhibition copies, but he explains that enabling the open display format (presenting unprotected prints directly on the walls) trumps the concept of the 'original' work – hence he provides unsigned prints for taping:

>Because I know, if you [the museum] only get the original, then conservation won't allow me to tape it to the walls, or only with great effort and a massive barrier ... That's why I do this, why I still prefer to work with it [the exhibition copy].<sup>52</sup>

Seeing us struggle with this concept, the artist described the analogue chromogenic prints which he (or his assistants) developed in the studio as 'slightly more original' than the digitally enlarged versions created by imaging labs.<sup>53</sup> Yet, even though the latter is not as precious to him because he did not develop it in the darkroom himself, he prefers using the slightly less original print produced by the imaging lab because it can be installed unframed.

As a rule, Tillmans does not issue certificates with reprinting instructions for chromogenic prints. It seemed a contradiction in the artist's future-orientated approach, so we probed further:<sup>54</sup>

*IM:* I have to ask, provocatively, what is the difference between a c-print and an inkjet print for you? Does the c-print have a different status for you because you printed it in the darkroom? Otherwise it could be certified just like the inkjet prints. What makes the difference for you, emotionally?

*WT:* It is not emotional.

*IM:* But you do differentiate, because the original exists.

*WT:* The inkjet print is not an enlarged print from a negative, but an enlarged copy of the [digitised] c-print. ... A chromogenic print is always an interpretation of the negative. The negative looks orange, it has this strange amber colour, it really only gets inter-

preted in the darkroom. The positive will be changed around between yellow, blue, magenta and green, and light and dark – that is happening on the sheet of paper. If you take a negative of one of my 1997 works and send it to Grieger [a renowned imaging lab in Düsseldorf] tomorrow to have it scanned and printed as an inkjet print, then there is none of this interpretation. That's why they are two distinct categories, that's why the large-format enlarged inkjet print comes with the file and the colour match ... This includes the interpretation of the negative and because of that it is reproducible time and again. The source material does not have to be interpreted, it already is interpreted.<sup>55</sup>

Here, Tillmans' concept obviously departs from Peter Osborne's theorisation according to which 'there is no more reason to privilege the chemical basis of traditional photographic image-creation in the delimitation of the parameters of the concept of photography than there would be to constrict the parameters of "painting" by the chemical composition of pigments used during the Renaissance'.<sup>56</sup> The artist's answer illustrates that there is perhaps an analogy to be made between a primary and secondary source as equivalent to the chromogenic print and the inkjet print where with the former, one must always go back to the negative as the primary source, whereas the latter is produced from a secondary source which has already been interpreted and therefore can be reproduced again. One may argue that this tallies the negative with a source-code or score or two-stage process.<sup>57</sup>

Due to the fact that we dug in deeper at this point, we came to understand why the artist is loath to adopt the certificate approach for chromogenic prints which he, or his assistant with him, has interpreted in the darkroom himself. However, this discrepancy in the treatment of the two different materials poses a major problem for us as owners striving to adhere to his wish to present his works uncovered and brightly illuminated, a point which I tried to make here: 'The c-prints are much, much less lightfast than the inkjet prints, but as part of the installation, they will be exposed to the same light levels. Your response was to hand us this set of exhibition prints, so the signed prints can be placed in storage.'<sup>58</sup> While the certification makes it possible for owners to handle them the inkjet prints quite freely – one can show them in daylight, for example – but by all rights the less lightfast chromogenic prints should be the prints with the in-built-replication modus. Also, apart from light-induced change, it is likely that visitors leave their traces on the unprotected prints. What if the prints suffer wear and tear? Giving the matter more thought, Tillmans conceded:

On the one hand, I only hand it [the exhibition print] out for you to use it. ... But, on the other hand, you are perfectly right. People touch it, and I would be inclined to say – and this is uncharted territory – if I am not around anymore, or the studio ... one would

have to say, you scan your original print and reproduce it according to the state of the art technology.<sup>59</sup>

The artist, acknowledging the challenges that follow as the Kunstsammlung strives to fulfil his intent, considers granting the museum a privileged status. At the same time, he is obviously hesitant. Once the image files are entrusted to an institution, there is a risk: unauthorised copies could easily be made.

This issue clearly weighed on him, and even though we took a break so he could check on the install progress, he revisited the topic when we continued our conversation: 'But I wanted to say: we really haven't solved the issue of the unframed c-print. Who is allowed to reprint? Why aren't you allowed to reprint those if the inkjet prints are reproducible? I just believe in this vintage print and its aging.'<sup>60</sup> The artist raised an interesting point here: his statement challenges the assumption that the chromogenic prints which he provided as exhibition copies for uncovered display will become unsightly over time.<sup>61</sup> One wonders, however, how the potential disparity in aesthetic within the installation will play out when at some point in the future faded chromogenic prints are presented alongside bright, freshly reproduced inkjet prints.

### Getting to grips with the intricacies of reprinting

Somewhat puzzling to us custodians remains the fact that Tillmans privileges newness value for the inkjet prints, even though these works (while based on digital data) are still lovingly crafted in his studio.<sup>62</sup> Thus, Isabelle Malz and I were keen to find out more about the logistics of reprinting. What happens when our set of exhibition copies of the inkjet prints are 'used up' but advances in printing technology produce prints of a very different aesthetic? The important issue for the artist is that the work is shown:

The unframed inkjet prints really are reproducible. Though there has to be an authority within the institution who knows how it's supposed to be. Don't let the fear of not getting it a 100% right stop you from doing it! That's really important, if I may speak for posterity here. I prefer an approximate realisation to a non-realised ideal version! The work lives when it is being shown. For example, when there is a choice between matte paper and glossy paper and a lab makes a glossy print out of one of the large inkjet prints, then that's no good and shouldn't be shown. But if for some reason there is no longer any matte paper in 50 years' time, then I think it is more important to show the picture, in whatever technical fashion it can still be realised in, which could even end up being a flat screen ... When everything is digital and there's no more paper. Then it would be more important to me that it exists, than have someone decide this isn't what it was in 2011 and thus we are not going to show it.<sup>63</sup>



**Figure 8** Installation view of the reconfiguration of *Life is Astronomical Installation* (2001–2012), in room 3.018, as installed in 2019. (Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans and Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.)

The artist makes it very clear here that he prefers migrating to whatever format will be available in the future rather than cease to show the work – although the final decisions will always be made jointly with the artist's future representatives, as the certificates stipulate that, should reprinting of the inkjet prints be deemed necessary, the owners are required to consult with the artist's dealers. Our conversation left many uncertainties but as Isabelle Malz told the artist at the end of our session:

Things will still change. Possibly also your attitude. If need be, you, the studio, can approach us. Also, you will receive a written report of what we determined today. If there are any changes – perhaps you will change your mind regarding some points. Or you want to specify some points ... We are recording this as a process, not as completely fixed and written in stone.<sup>64</sup>

The open-ended nature of the artwork, one might say, is mirrored by the openendedness of the dialogue between artist and custodians. The stakeholders involved understand that, while the parameters identified during the accessioning serve as a basis for the presentation and preservation of *Life Is Astronomical Installation* (2001–2012), revisiting the issue of reprinting is necessary as the artwork's life unfolds.

## Reviewing the outcome of the first conversation

Based on our conversation and the jointly edited transcript, I drafted an Identity Report for the installation, which we reviewed one year later at the artist's studio in Berlin.<sup>65</sup> This joint review proved to be a crucial step in eliminating mistakes and assumptions. Even though I deemed myself deeply familiar with the contents of our previous conversation and was convinced that the Identity Report I compiled was a fair representation of our discussion, Tillmans questioned the way I had interpreted, streamlined and collapsed the data into the report. The stumbling blocks we encountered in our first discussion remained in place and required revisiting.

One major outcome of the follow-up conversation was that Tillmans authorised which specific 'extracts' of the installation that the Kunstsammlung would be able to show by looking through the images of the 2013 installation and identifying clusters of works that can stand alone.

The 'slightly more original' chromogenic print was an issue we kept circling around in this conversation, too, together with the unresolved question of how to accommodate the museum's preservation concerns regarding exhibition copies. Chromogenic prints being prone to dark fading, stockpiling further sets of exhibition copies does not solve the problem. Tillmans finally concluded:

The long and short of it is, the only thing we can do is that I state my intent to reproduce damaged or used-up prints at production cost, and that I ask the estate to go along with it. ... My main aim is that the work remains exhibitable. That people aren't scared to exhibit it, right? The worst for me would be if the work wouldn't be shown, because that would also be its destruction.<sup>66</sup>

With this, we reached as much consensus as possible at this point in time. It seems the wisest approach to take is to show the work as much as possible, both in the form of the entire installation and in 'excerpts' and even individual works. In December 2020, excerpts of *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* were installed as part of the permanent collection in K21's room 3.018 (Figure 8).

This occasion was the first time we made use of choosing from his authorised excerpts and carried out the installation without the supervision of Tillmans and his team. Through exhibiting the work in different spaces over time, we will likely reach practical answers to what at present remain abstract questions.

## Conclusion

The accessioning of *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* required the stakeholders to accept that the notion of ownership understood as holding on to the work's current physical manifestation needed reconfiguration. While technically speaking, *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* consists of works on paper (chromogenic prints and inkjet prints), conceptually it is installation art, and consequently a dynamic rather than a static entity. In this sense, the work is paradigmatic for much of contemporary art, inasmuch as that assumptions based on traditional notions of materiality no longer apply.

In the research process and the dialogues revolving around this acquisition, a collaborative approach in which the curator and the conservator worked in tandem and with the artist was taken. In conversation, through delving into details such as loan, display and reprinting requirements, together the artist, his assistant, the curator and I were able to identify parameters of display and preservation of *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)*. For the museum, the accessioning of the work could be regarded as a means of revising traditional museum practices. For the artist, this joint investigation and addressing of questions at the point of accessioning his works was also novel. Exchanging points of view and concerns provided him with new perspectives and showed him that the institution takes into account and respects the dynamic nature of his work.

Due to the open-endedness of the endeavour, in this paper, the accession of *Life is Astronomical Installation (2001–2012)* has been explored in relation to the idea of a 'messy text', to make clear that there is not one single conversation that is able to transmit all that this artwork is. The dialogues which I quoted at length in this paper show

the messiness of the process of communication between us – artist, assistant, curator and conservator. In this messy text, we do not remain objective, invisible interviewers, but become human beings and disclose ourselves: there are moments of probing, of thinking out loud, of frustration, of revisiting answers and strategies. The unfolding dialogues document the moment-to-moment details of our collaborative thinking. We co-constructed knowledge while being immersed in the research process, then went on to jointly mediate the written output (the interview transcript, the Identity Report). Framing this co-constructed map of intent as a 'messy text' allows the multiplicity of voices to be acknowledged, and the messiness, the contingency and happenstance, as well as the openness behind the practice of co-creating intent.

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## Notes

1. Institutions that have acquired Tillmans' installations include CAPC (Bordeaux); Folkwang Museum (Essen); Gallery of Modern Art (Glasgow), Hamburger Kunsthalle (Hamburg); Hirschhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden (Washington, DC); Museum Kunstpalast (Düsseldorf); Sprengel Museum (Hanover); MMK (Frankfurt); Museum of Modern Art (New York); Tate (London); Walker Art Center (Minneapolis). My thanks to Wolfgang Tillmans and Lena Zimmermann, Galerie Buchholz, for reviewing my list.
2. The 2016 acquisition was a result of staging the exhibition *Wolfgang Tillmans*, curated by Isabelle Malz and organised in cooperation with Moderna Museet, Stockholm, held at K21, Düsseldorf, 2 March–8 September 2013.
3. The 2016 iteration was assembled from 14–20 October 2016 by art handlers Matthias Röser and Torben Röse, with the help of in-house technicians Sven Kamp and Andreas Volkmer and head of conservation Otto Hubacek. Hanging of the prints took place under the supervision of Tillmans' assistant Maria Bierwirth. Although we were familiar with mounting Tillmans' works from our cooperation in 2013,

- having Maria present to guide us was invaluable because Tillmans' visually unassuming mounting techniques are de facto technically very intricate.
4. I recorded and transcribed our conversation, edited the language of the transcripts together with Isabelle Malz, and passed it on to the studio for peer review. The excerpts quoted throughout this paper were translated from German.
  5. Petterson 1999; Fiske 2001; Davies and Heuman 2004; Hummelen and Scholte 2004; Irvin 2006; Sterrett 2009; Wharton 2009; Van Saaze 2013; Ryan 2016)
  6. Fiske 2001: 24.
  7. Tillmans et al. 2016: 5.
  8. An exception is Julie Ault's essay, 'The subject is exhibition': Ault 2006.
  9. The importance of acknowledging the co-constructed nature of artist intent was first explored by Vivian van Saaze (2009).
  10. Marcus 1994.
  11. Sermijn et al. 2008: 647.
  12. Marcus 1994: 567.
  13. Van Saaze 2013: 122.
  14. Stigter 2015: 104.
  15. Denzin 1997: 225.
  16. The first conversation took place in Düsseldorf on 19 October 2016 (Tillmans et al. 2016). A meeting to follow-up on unresolved questions was held at the artist's studio in Berlin on 21 November 2017 (Tillmans et al. 2017).
  17. Halley 2002; Kuo 2012; Herbert 2013.
  18. Tillmans in conversation with Martin Herbert (2013: 63).
  19. In the face-mounting process, a clear poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA) sheet is permanently adhered to the surface of a photograph with silicone rubber adhesive or a double-sided pressure-sensitive adhesive: Pénichon et al. 2002.
  20. Ault 2006; Kuo 2012.
  21. Ault 2006: 133.
  22. Germany's art scene, the home of artists known as the Becher School as well as the renowned imaging lab Grieger, experienced something of a deluge of these works by the mid-1990s.
  23. Obviously, I do not wish to say that paintings are 'fixed' objects at all – they undergo change and decay as much as every other object as it moves through time and space, even if they do so at a more imperceptible pace.
  24. That Tillmans' unique way of presenting photographic works struck a nerve and remained relevant until today is underscored by the fact that this exhibition was recreated in loving detail twice. First, as part of the group show *Fast Forward Image* at the Hamburger Kunstverein in 2000, then again at Frieze Art Fair in 2016 as part of the section *The Nineties*, curated by Nicolas Trembley followed by Museum Brandhorst, Munich, 2019/2020.
  25. According to Tillmans: 'Works made with a camera exist in the following three sizes: 40 × 30 cm, 60 × 50 cm, and 138 × 207 cm. For a small number of works there is an individual mural scale size of up to 400 cm. A 10 × 15 cm postcard size exists for wall installations. Since 2012, the 60 × 50 cm format has been replaced by a slightly larger individually sized format' (email from Tillmans' studio, 31 March 2021).
  26. Ault 2006: 121.
  27. Kuo 2012: 423.
  28. Few scholars have devoted attention to the intricacies of certification practice in art. A rare exception is Martha Buskirk's essay 'Certifiable' in the exhibition catalogue *In deed: Certificates of Authenticity in Art*, in Hapgood and Lauf 2011: 98–102.
  29. Hapgood and Lauf 2011: 78.
  30. In the beginning, collectors received the original C-print to enlarge from, instead of a CD and a match print. My thanks to the artist for kindly supplying this information.
  31. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Certificate of Authenticity*, 14 July 2016. Retrieved from the object file at the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen.
  32. Because the print is conceptually meant to be reprinted in the future, Tillmans intends it to be displayed at full light levels normally used for painting and sculpture.
  33. Tillmans et al. 2017: 19.
  34. Reprinting as a conservation strategy has been explored by Kennedy et al. 2016; Ryan 2016; Marchesi 2017; as well as the SFMOMA Artist Initiative Symposium on Photography: Reprinting Color Photographs as a Conservation Strategy (2019).
  35. Ryan 2016: 202.
  36. Kwon 2006: 296.
  37. Kwon 2006: 298.
  38. Osborne 2013: 124.
  39. Halley 2002: 29.
  40. Kuo 2012: 423. This statement seems to indicate that for Tillmans the importance of 'the original' is completely diminished. However, the discussion of the future of his chromogenic prints which follows reveals that this is not the case.
  41. Laurenson 2006: 157.
  42. Osborne 2013: 129.
  43. Tillmans et al. 2016: 4.
  44. Ibid.
  45. Ibid.
  46. Ibid.
  47. Tillmans et al. 2016: 10.
  48. Ippolito 2008: 127.
  49. Tillmans et al. 2016: 5.
  50. These usually entail that either the reserve print stands in for the collection print once that has reached a level of unacceptable change – a system in which eventually both prints are used up, or the exhibition print gets exhibited, while the collection print never leaves storage – it exists for reference only, so to speak: Kennedy et al. 2016.
  51. Tillmans et al. 2016: 5.
  52. Tillmans et al. 2016: 6.
  53. Ibid.
  54. Tillmans et al. 2016: 6–7.
  55. Ibid.
  56. Osborne 2013: 126.
  57. I would like to thank my anonymous reviewer for bringing this point to my attention.
  58. Tillmans et al. 2016: 6.
  59. Tillmans et al. 2016: 7.
  60. Tillmans et al. 2016: 9.
  61. His thoughts are echoed in current photo conservation scholarship, for example, Nora Kennedy et al. (2016) perceptively observed that there is an acceptance for colour change in prints predating the reserve print acquisition practice of recent years.
  62. All inkjet prints are produced by the studio, and the large-format prints involve a complex splicing of the paper supports as well as manual retouching which Tillmans developed in the early 2000s. To date, the splicing process has not been carried out by third parties.
  63. Tillmans et al. 2016: 11.
  64. Tillmans et al. 2016: 16.
  65. Tillmans et al. 2017.
  66. Tillmans et al. 2017: 20.

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