



Wolfgang Tillmans, *crossing the international date line*, 2020

Tracing the Aesthetic Queerness of the Photographic Form via Wolfgang Tillmans's Artistic Objects

Kwasi Ohene-Ayeh

I.

"We can talk about the queer identities of sitters in photographs without a word on the queerness or otherwise of the photographic form itself." (kari'kachã seid'ou')

In his keynote address at the *African Modernism: Architecture of Independence* photography exhibition organised by the Goethe-Institut Accra in 2018, the artist-pedagogue kari'kachã seid'ou offered the thought cited here in the epigraph. This was a sentiment critiquing remnants of what he terms the "cultural studies ethos" of African art and curating in present times – tracing back to the later decades of the twentieth century. While drawing our attention to the vital inroads made by this postcolonial wave of postmodernism, which, from an African perspective, essentially injected African subjectivity into the mainstream consciousness of world art, he also

acknowledged the overdependence on identitarian politics or cultural markers, such as ethnicity, language, sexuality, etc., at the crux of Afropolitan advocacy and embedded in it all the way from the transnational and multiculturalist paradigms into the contemporary epoch. In his address, seid'ou reminds us that if this jettisoning of form qua form – hitherto perceived to be apolitical, or attributed to white male paternalism, elitism, and so on – in the postmodernist canon of the Africanist mainstream was necessary for emancipatory politics some decades ago, the same parameters cannot hold for an effective dismantling of empires of our time. As such the enactment of any reversal of the stultifying hold of imperialist and colonialist education in art would have to be done by raising questions anew about form in itself, which deals with more than the iconophilic, contextualist, and part-by-part analysis of works of art.²

The question of form in art has evolved from its structural determinations into plasticity.³ Whether material/dematerialised, aesthetic/deaestheticised, it is first and foremost a question

about the "situation of being"⁴ which opens up further interrogations concerning the sensed properties and qualities of a work of art. This simply raises the point that rather than dwell mainly on what we can know about art (which is what takes us into the contemplative or expressionist status quo of the identities, moods, or feelings of represented subjects in photographs, for example), we can, as well, consider the existential preconditions, constraints, and contingencies that produce a certain kind of artistic appearance. seid'ou thus draws our attention to the need for an ontological aesthetic turn in African art in the twenty-first century – in contradistinction to the hegemonic "cultural turn" – which is not pre-emptively dismissive of any category of criticism in the spirit of intellectual emancipation.⁵

Shifting the context to Euro-American art history, the mid-century late modernist retroactive turn towards three-dimensionality, owing to the "insufficiencies of painting and sculpture,"⁶ is an example of such an attitude that transcends epistemic parameters. It was at this point that the hyper-

Installation view of Wolfgang Tillmans: *Fragile*, Galerie d'Art Contemporain de Yaoundé, Yaoundé, 2019

experimental orientation of the so-called neo-avant-gardists (beginning with the minimalists, conceptualists, and pop artists) departed from the medium-specific principles of high modernism to regard, in pictorial terms, the rectangle not merely as an optical "neutral limit," discriminating timeless space from its literal counterpart, but now as a "definite form" that can be put into dynamic phenomenological situations. Therefore, a work of art need not conform to the contemplative hierarchies determined hitherto (in terms of colour, composition, shape, and surface); it can also assert its obdurate singularity in the theatre of co-presence, revealing contingencies between real time, space, the body, and more. This, if nothing at all, caused another historical departure from the age-old art versus non-art conversation in criticism.⁷

One could say that the advent of photography always disturbed any neat and consistent conceptions of art. The pre-digital thesis of "technological reproducibility"⁸ far anticipated this by giving us an early sense of how history, velocity, and expediency activate new situations and functions for any given still and/or moving picture,⁹ hence undermining classical notions of authenticity to open up new horizons for imaging. (The argument is essentially relevant when extrapolated onto digital and virtual images in visual, gestural, acoustic and emergent forms.) This thesis gave us the insight into the fact that the mechanical transformation of the means of producing art affected not only the object of interest but also our thinking about art as well as about the apparatus of perception with which we access artistic experiences, thereby implying a social and political transformation of sorts. The latency of artistic force in a work designed for reproducibility, according to this thesis, highlights an important distinction: the one between artistic images and ordinary images.¹⁰ Artistic images are operations asserting the complex relations between different image-functions in the direction of freedom and independence¹¹ (which is not the same as autonomy). They separate their operations from the procedures that produce resemblances¹² – regardless of whether this is achieved or not, figurative, landscape, or otherwise. The

artistic image severs any deterministic relationship to an original source, and, so to speak, opens up infinite possibilities, which, in the early days, were certainly present but generally construed by elite culture as so-called cult value. The cult value or documentary efficacy of a photograph is here the symbolic veil that is used to sanitise any condition of artness (or queerness) – that is, to tame it from any surplus manifestations. And it is this repressive tendency that made the "decay of the aura" – a consequence of historical shifts in technological advancement – an ominous threat to art.

In one sense this is what I mean by queerness. By always already undermining autonomy and purity, photography threatened the symbolic order of the representative regime of art organised by the logic of hierarchy¹³ with its essential quality of indeterminacy. This character (or rather, this condition), brought to the fore by polemics in its early days, is explicitly captured by Walter Benjamin when he states that nineteenth-century criticism had missed the point altogether by dwelling on whether photography was art or not. For Benjamin, the real question is "whether the invention of photography [and film] had not transformed the entire character of art [in itself]."¹⁴ That is to say that photography had made it necessary to ask new questions about what art is at that historical moment in time. This ontological regeneration of art is timelessly vital to its emancipatory power, regardless of which medium is utilised as the vanishing mediator via which this negotiation is to be conducted at any historical moment. Anything else amounts to a repression of the queering of artistic boundaries. And as Hal Foster reminds us, by way of psychoanalysis, these repressions have a way of penetrating the seemingly harmonious field of the symbolic, with traumatic or abject effects.¹⁵

On the one hand the Benjaminian insight that the camera pierces into the deepest parts of our natural world to reveal things inaccessible to the eye could be said to constitute a queer relationship between photography and reality. This much is evident to us. On the other hand, once a photograph

(or image) is free to depart from its traditional function in service of verisimilitude or identity, an aesthetic operation may then be actualised making it possible to radically obliterate this task of resemblance, inevitably heightening the dialectical tension between "the idea of the image" and the "imaged matter"¹⁶ through a multiplicity of formal determinations – pictorial, extra-pictorial, and non-pictorial alike. And since fiction is always at play in reality the real point is that even if we take documentary photography in its modest intentions to frame an actual object or a live event, it ends up as a construction – a fictional account of the imaged matter even in its most realistic rendition.¹⁷

The second sense in which I invoke queerness is with respect to José Esteban Muñoz's notion of queer futurity.¹⁸ In temporal terms aesthetic queerness is futural but remains immanent to the past and present. Distinguished by a 'not-yetness,' queerness is characterised by potential – which is to say it stands as the "presence of an absence."¹⁹ As such the affirmative posture of this politics of resistance is paradoxically intimate with (or aware of) its own impotence unless realised by a will. Queerness, therefore, is "essentially about the rejection of a here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."²⁰ It participates in the politics of alterity but exceeds it by positing a practical utopian world through desire. "We may never touch queerness," Muñoz suggests, "but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality."²¹ His affirmative conception of aesthetic queerness as productive desire constitutes an interesting crucible through which to analyse Wolfgang Tillmans's itinerant exhibition *Fragile*, which deals squarely with the ontological aesthetic thesis.

II. On Wolfgang Tillmans's Artistic Images

"I [have] always understood photographs as objects, not just as flat surfaces."²² (Wolfgang Tillmans)

Tillmans's irreverent attitude to art, which might seem like a nod to the European neo-avant-gardes, complicates established

formats even further. His obdurate objects mobilise genres such as portraiture, still life, documentary, and abstraction, and also qualities such as flatness, fictive depth, frontality, and objectness to contingent effects in his politically-motivated practice dating back to the late 1980s. For example, in the three-dimensional *Lighter* works (chromogenic colour prints framed in Plexiglas which he describes as “photographic paper sculptures”), the artist seems to be exploring the arbitrary nature of meaning with titular allusions to actual light, a cigarette lighter, or to weight. The traditional distinction between literal object and depicted content is collapsed into an immanent singularity asserting its own agency through the paper, pigment, light, and glass elements. They betray no hidden meaning beyond their shiny surface and shape but rather rely on the co-present relations formed in every unique situation in which the work has been installed. The artist has said of them that “the photograph here says: I do not represent anything. I only depict myself.”²³ What’s more, the attention given to the physical properties of chemicals used, and to the materiality of the photo papers and photo-developing machines, buttresses the point about going before and beyond the subject matter.

This materialist approach to photography brings me to my next point on the queer: I have talked about the condition of queerness in terms of indeterminacy and futural potentiality. I shall now introduce a third perspective of how an active *queering* of the image and/or the photographic form occurs in Tillmans’s processes.

What I particularly consider to be aesthetic queerness in the artist’s oeuvre is the technique of making ‘dry pictures’ – in other words, the attempt to make photography without the camera.²⁴ Inevitably intensifying the aforementioned dialectical tension between the immaterial form of the image and its imaged matter. In describing his chemograms – works such as *Greifbar* and *Silver* – Tillmans illuminates aspects of his intentions towards process, display strategy, and spectatorship as follows: “[a] sense of fluidity is evoked in the mind of the viewer even though these pictures were essentially made ‘dry’ – only with light and my hands. Created in the darkroom without negatives and without a camera, they’re made purely through the manipulation of light on paper. In this respect, their own reality, their creation and their time are absolutely central to their meaning [...]. They take on a particular significance because of their physicality. As abstract pictures on photographic paper, while they may appear ‘painterly,’ it is important that they are photographic and not painted.”²⁵

The last two sentences highlight a contradiction that collides both temporal and indeterminate dimensions of queerness in Tillmans’s process. The tension congealed in the opposition between the artist’s assertion that his image-things *are* photographic pictures and his recognition of an ambivalent excess in terms of their sensory qualities (in this case appearing painterly) could lead us to the argument that his image-objects *become* photographs – either because they acquire such properties through their means of production or simply based on nominalist terms (or both). Yet still, the

ambivalence identified above points to the surplus qualities in the photographic form whose overlapping relations of emergence and withdrawal simultaneously take us within and beyond the medium. In short, the mechanism of ‘not-yetness’ at play here could render an image photographic and not. Tillmans’s insistence on his image-things as photographs denotes an awareness of this tension. In this sense we could say that by departing from the conventional approach to photography his method of imaging emphasises what Muñoz has described as a rejection of the here and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world or horizon, in terms of picture-making. I find this attitude to form consistent even with Tillmans’s non-pictorial works such as *Truth Study Center* – an ensemble of tables on which newspaper articles are mounted – and his foray into electronic music.²⁶

Tillmans has elsewhere described his particular approach to the technique of queering the photographic image as “the process depicting itself.” In this sense one can extrapolate that the process also reveals things hitherto unexpected to the artist and they must be modest enough to learn from what is being, or has been, produced. If the process teaches then the artist also comes to inhabit an active spectatorial position. Thus, an important dimension emerges, albeit potentially. Formal plasticity, which takes us to the aforementioned “situation of being,” bears consequences not only for the relations between the artist and the physical or dematerialised art object but also for the work of art and the public. Such that, on account of foregrounding aesthetic queerness in one’s artistic process, an alternative pedagogic relationship may be invoked both in terms of the making process and the exhibitionary encounter.²⁷ This technique also equalises the playing field between subject matter, materials used, content, and spectatorship. Hence, Pierre Huyghe’s criticism of mainstream exhibition practices that privilege the human subject as the only one capable of bearing the contemplative gaze in a museum or gallery corroborates this egalitarian possibility when he says that “[i]t’s not a matter of showing something to someone so much as showing someone to something.”²⁸ And the event of showing someone to something can happen as much in the studio, or places where art is produced, as it can in places of spectating (sometimes the two are the same).

The implications of aesthetic queerness present many contradictions which can be approached with optimism. This optimism, as I see it, is the lesson of Tillmans’s process of creating photography.

III.

Finally, the ontological approach to form, i.e. formal plasticity, possesses crucial consequences as far as the notion of change in art is concerned. We have seen its implications beyond structural determinations – for example with Benjamin in the sense that approaching form from this perspective transforms not only the structure of what is perceived as art but also the cognitive conditions under which the conception of art is itself formulated, which inadvertently carries existential consequences for curating and spectating. The political implications of affirming aesthetic queerness squarely situates it in this domain. Plasticity reckons that form is at one and the same time process, object, and condition of understanding.²⁹ Plasticity means that form possesses the ability to receive form, create form (also in the self-transformational sense), and annihilate form. Catherine Malabou distinguishes plasticity from flexibility (or elasticity) by stating that the latter can only perform the first register of receiving form but cannot exercise the powers to invent nor to erase what has been received.³⁰

The plasticity of form permits us to radically enter into the question of what art is as much as what it can do, in addition to what it may mean or represent on account of its



Wolfgang Tillmans. *heatwave*, 2020

KINSHASA 13.01. –
18.02.2018

NAIROBI 12.04. –
11.05.2018

JOHANNESBURG 09.07. –
30.09.2018

ADDIS ABABA 15.02. –
31.03.2019

YAOUNDE 29.11.2019 –
10.01.2020

ACCRA 08.10. –
14.11.2021

uniqueness on the one hand and its universality on the other hand. It allows us to create new freedoms and adventures for art by coming to terms with its historical contingency as well as its futurity. This is the radical potentiality always already present in the ontological aesthetic thesis. If the queer image is transgressive and messianic, it is not totally elusive. In the dynamics between what is known and what is unknown, it occupies the regions of "what we do not know that we know" ("unknown knows"³¹) in relationship to "what we know that we do not want to know" (suppressed knowledge) latent in the artistic unconscious. This is why a repression of it has historically been used to stifle true universality in art. And this is also why the perpetual propensity for the eruption of aesthetic queerness is all the more promised.

1 seid'ou made this statement in his keynote speech titled "In the Art of Darkness: Kumasi's Forgotten Futures yet to Come," delivered under the colloquium theme "Between the High Sea and a Very Hard Rock: Modernity, Modernisation, Modernism" at the inauguration of the *African Modernism: Architecture of Independence* photography exhibition, organised by Goethe-Institut Accra and blaxTARLINES on 6 August 2018. seid'ou was then the dean of the Faculty of Art at the College of Art and Built Environment, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology (KNUST) in Kumasi, Ghana.

2 Yinka Shonibare essentially expresses a similar concern when he states in an interview with Jonathan Jones that "I keep talking about aesthetics [...] because many people, when they talk about the work of black artists, focus on 'the message.' They're looking for a message. [...] White artists don't have a monopoly on aesthetics." J. Jones, "Cultural Appropriation Is a Two-way Thing: Yinka Shonibare on Picasso, Masks and the Fashion for Black Artists," *The Guardian*, 14 June 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/jun/14/masks-monsters-masterpieces-yinka-shonibare-picasso-africa?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other (accessed 29 July, 2021).

3 Pre-1960s formalist discourse was considered to be structural, based on the internal relations of a work of art. But after the neo-avant-garde breakthroughs and the genre-defying work produced thereafter, form came to be established as unpredictable, more open-ended and subject to "infinite extension," as Scott Burton put it when describing the works in Harald Szeeman's watershed 1969 exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form: Works – Concepts, Processes – Situations – Information*. See S. Burton, "Notes on the

New," in *When Attitudes Become Form: Works – Concepts, Processes – Situations – Information*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Berne, 1969.

4 H. Szeeman, "Zur Ausstellung," in *When Attitudes Become Form: Works – Concepts, Processes – Situations – Information*, exh. cat. Kunsthalle Berne, 1969.

5 The dimension of form affirms the radical universality of art – based on the principle of pre-emptive equality, art that is emerging from a void, and without a centre. It is this disposition that has inspired the radical approach in Ghanaian art encapsulated in blaxTARLINES KUMASI. Read more about blaxTARLINES in the special edition published in *African Arts*, vol. 54, issue 2, 2021.

6 D. Judd, *Specific Objects*, 1965, <http://atc.berkeley.edu/201/readings/judd-so.pdf> (accessed 29 July 2021).

7 This was also a period during the postwar era when artists were noticeably attempting to de-link the nexus between studio, gallery, and museum. See Szeeman, "Zur Ausstellung."

8 W. Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, Harvard University Press, 2008.

9 In this sense it is a seminal precursor to Hito Steyerl's expositions on the image, particularly her key text "In Defense of the Poor Image." See H. Steyerl, "In Defense of the Poor Image," in *The Wretched of the Screen*, Sternberg Press, 2012, pp. 31–45.

10 Jacques Rancière contends that the term "image" refers to "two different things. There is the simple relationship that produces the likeness of an original: not necessarily its faithful copy, but simply what suffices to stand in for it. And there is the interplay of operations that produces what we call art: or precisely an alteration of resemblance. This alteration can take a myriad of forms." See J. Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, Verso, London and New York, 2003, p. 6.

11 I owe this thought to Rancière in Rancière, *The Future of the Image*.

12 Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 8.

13 Rancière identifies three regimes of art: firstly, the Ethical Regime of images organised based on harmony and community ethos. Secondly the Representative or Poetic Regime based on a hierarchical vision of community, and subject matter. And the Aesthetic Regime where art emerges as a singularity with equality of represented subjects. See J. Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 2004, pp. 20–21.

14 My emphasis. See Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Technological Reproducibility," p. 28.

15 See H. Foster, "The Return of the Real," in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, The MIT Press, 1996, pp. 127–170.

16 See J. Rancière, *Film Fables: Talking Images*, Berg Publishers, 2006, p. 170.

17 Owing to the fact of being mediated through such contingencies as the technical properties and functions of the device in use (a smartphone, DSLRs, etc.), various kinds of manipulations (digital or manual), and disseminated via

broadcast systems such as social media or even traditional mass media.

18 See J. E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, New York University Press, 2009.

19 See G. Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, Stanford University Press, 1999, p. 179.

20 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 1

21 Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, p. 1. This is also consistent with Agamben's theory of potential: "to be potential means: to be one's own lack, to be in relation to one's own incapacity. Beings that exist in the mode of potentiality are capable of their own impotentiality; and only in this way do they become potential. They can be because they are in relation to their own non-Being. In potentiality, sensation is in relation to anesthesia, knowledge to ignorance, vision to darkness." See Agamben, *Potentialities*, p. 183.

22 W. Tillmans, *Fragile*, exh. cat. Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen e.V. (ifa), Stuttgart, Germany, 2018, p. 4.

23 Tillmans, *Fragile*, p. 5. Rancière also tells us that in the "aesthetic regime in the arts, which was constituted in the nineteenth century – the image is no longer the codified expression of a thought or feeling. Nor is it a double or a translation. It is a way in which things themselves speak and are silent. In a sense, it comes to lodge at the heart of things as their silent speech." See Rancière, *The Future of the Image*, p. 13.

24 It is strictly in this sense that I find Tillmans's practice analogous to younger Ghanaian artists such as Kelvin Haizah and Eric Gyamfi.

25 Tillmans, *Fragile*, p. 4.

26 In 2017 Wolfgang Tillmans directed the music video *Powell – Freezer* by British electronic music producer Oscar Powell. A year later the two collaborated on six-track EP titled *Feel the Night*, released by XL Recordings. Tillmans's discography boasts of other solo projects, EPs, visual albums, DJ sets, and performances.

27 Jacques Rancière theorises the humanist axis of this in his book *The Emancipated Spectator*. See J. Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, Verso, 2009, pp. 1–24.

28 B. Davis, "Is Pierre Huyghe the World's Most Opaque Popular Artist?" in *Artnet*, Nov. 21, 2014, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/is-pierre-huyghe-the-worlds-most-opaque-popular-artist-ben-davis-sizes-up-his-lacma-show-177190> (accessed 30 July 2021). blaxTARLINES embraces both the humanist and post-human dimensions of this in its reformulation of Huyghe's axiom as "Exposing Something to Someone While Exposing Someone to Something." See k. seid'ou, G. Ampratwum, et al., "Exposing Something to Someone While Exposing Someone to Something: blaxTARLINES Exhibition Cultures There-Then-And-Hereafter," in *African Arts*, vol. 54, issue 2, 2021, pp. 36–51.

29 My thinking on formal plasticity in this section is shaped by Catherine Malabou's ideas in *What Shall We Do with Our Brain*, Fordham University Press, 2008.

30 See Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, p. 12.

31 See S. Žižek, *What Rumfeld Doesn't Know That He Knows About Abu Ghraib*, May 21 2004, <https://www.lacan.com/zizekrumfeld.htm> (accessed 30 July 2021).