



Wolfgang Tillmans, Transit of Venus, 2012

What Else Can a Photograph Be?

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In a conversation with Wolfgang Tillmans for *Interview* magazine, Bob Nickas comments on Tillmans's work by saying that it seeks to answer the basic question, "What else can a photograph be?"¹ This question also describes my thoughts when I first encountered Tillmans's work. Taking it as a starting point, I will first frame it by referencing work by several Kenyan artists whose approach towards using lens-based media seeks to address this question.

In his 2012 series *Undefined Constructions*, James Muriuki observes a city whose architectural landscape is rapidly changing.² Buildings under construction soar while swathed

in brown tarp and multi-level scaffolding. The increase in seemingly misplaced high-rise buildings in Nairobi interrupts a skyline that is also scarred with Brutalist, colonial era and Kikuyu-Gothic³ architecture. In this regard, Muriuki's work presents a reading of the city by questioning how sites of construction were determined and what purposes they might have served in the past.

I am also reminded of *VALUE*, 2015, by Tahir Karmali.⁴ This work presents a series of provocative images documenting Nairobi's male sex workers. Each person is photographed with his most treasured possession, leaving the viewer to perceive that object's value through the subject. *VALUE* is not simply a cataloguing of those in the sex industry, but

an active force in articulating, shaping and contesting their "value" within the public sphere.

Lastly, there is *Naijographia. A Play on Travelling Time and Place*, 2017, by Jepkorir Rose, Bethuel Muthee and Mbuthia Maina.⁵ "In *Naijographia*, we drift using Nairobi as a document bearing personal and collective memories," Jepkorir writes in the catalogue essay.⁶ This drifting is documented by Muthee and Mbuthia through a series of hazy images also featured in the text-based catalogue. There are photographs of buildings, trees, a section of the railway-station, a herd of cows feasting on garbage, petrified wood and piles of stones set up in strategic spots where vendors and hawkers trade their wares. The trio relates these small altars to an active act



Wolfgang Tillmans, Sahara, horizontal center line thirty kilometers, a, 2018

of performance where rituals and transactions occur. It is a collective labour of both love and necessity that lies in the building and rebuilding of these temporary structures. In his text, *Naijografia*, Muthee begins and ends by asking, “Uko wapi?” or “where are you?”⁷ He writes:

“To read a city is to assume the blankness upon which what is legible is written. It is to assume that a city begins as a void, a barren space, a suspended innocent space waiting for the inscription of culture and history in order to become the narrative of place.”⁸

Within the artworks mentioned above, Nairobi becomes a site where layered histories, truths and meanings are interrogated, thus facilitating opportunities to re-think the image. Tillmans also rejects the idea of being boxed within the confines of a photographer. He describes his process as making pictures. He is not interested in single readings of his work but rather in constructing networks through images with layered meanings capable of reflecting the complexity of the subjects. In my own practice, I have come to embrace this fragmented way of seeing by exploring a singular definition of who I am as an artist and by extension as a human being.

What else can a photograph be?
 One of the earliest uses of photography in Kenya was the documentation of the Kenyan population, land and wild animals by the British colonialists. A huge chunk of these records is housed at the Kenya National Archives. A popular search topic at the archive is Mau reparations and the Maasai land treaty, an agreement through which the British colonial government acquired Maasai lands for settler development. The British accorded more respect to the wildlife that inhabited these lands than to the Maasai people, and subsequently parks and reserves were created without their consent, pushing them further out of their homes. In the Greek myth of Iphigenia, a story is told of a king’s son who killed a sacred deer on his way to war. This senseless act of violence later set off a series of unfortunate events. This respect for animals can be seen in the busy city of Nairobi today, where a surprising yet common sight is that of Maasai herders crossing busy highways and penetrating the inner city with herds of cows grazing on the few chunks of grass yet to be dried up by the scorching sun. It is always sad to see this because it means there is drought where they came from, and as pastoralists they must move in search of greener pastures with their cattle or else they will not survive. A reverence has always been bestowed upon the Maasai and their animals.

If you are driving and the cows happen to be crossing the street, you are not to hoot your horn or try and rush the herd. They have the right of way.

Finding animals in unexpected places directs me to one of Tillmans’s most iconic photographs, *Deer Hirsch*, 1995. Tillmans demystifies this photograph by stating:

“This photograph for example, is a good illustration of this correlation of chance and control. What looks like a heavily staged photograph has actually been a chance encounter on a beach in Long Island, where there happen to be wild deer. We were feeding our food to the greedy deer [laughs] and, then, when nothing was left, Jochen was gesticulating that there’s nothing left in his hands. I saw that and just said: ‘hold it!’ I just rewound the situation by one second, and took this photograph of an attempted communication between animal and human.”⁹

Sometime last year I came across a striking tintype photograph online of a black woman holding a deer. The caption was “A young Kenyan woman holds her pet deer in Mombasa.”¹⁰ This image first came to light around 2013 when *National Geographic* released archives to celebrate their 125th anniversary. There are disputes as to whether she was even Kenyan, whether that was

a deer and not a dik-dik and whether the photograph was indeed taken in Mombasa. The location is sometimes listed as Zanzibar. The photograph was taken in March 1909 and is credited to *Underwood & Underwood*, a stereographic distributing company founded in 1881 by the brothers Elmer and Elias Underwood. The identity of the woman in the photograph is still unknown, the markings on her face making her even more mysterious. By researching the archives, we could perhaps discover her identity or trace the circumstances that led to this picture being taken and how she came to own a deer. Coincidentally, this image of woman and deer as companions would later be mirrored by Nickolas Muray’s photograph of Frida Kahlo with her pet deer Granizo, taken around 1939, and Bob Willoughby’s photograph, *Audrey Hepburn with Ip in the Supermarket*, 1958. Some of the earliest images captured as works of art were of women and children. They almost always had the theme of mother and child and depicted the nurturing figure of the mother cradling, lying or standing beside the child. This common representation of women as caretakers is given new meaning in this captured moment between woman and animal, making it both refreshing and enchanting.

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It is 2 February 2018 and I am among millions of people whose eyes are glued to the sky, or in my case a screen, waiting to witness the live launch of Falcon Heavy, the biggest rocket yet. The main attraction is a car that is on board, about to be catapulted into deep space for an indefinite fantastic voyage. “The image is startling, incongruous, barmy,” *The Guardian* reported:

“A car floats in space. At the wheel is a space-suit, seatbelt on. Earth hangs behind it. The two objects don’t work together. The image jars like bad Photoshop. But it is real. (...) It is human folly and genius rolled into one, a picture that sums up 2018 so far. Life on Earth feels precarious, so we look to the stars.”¹¹

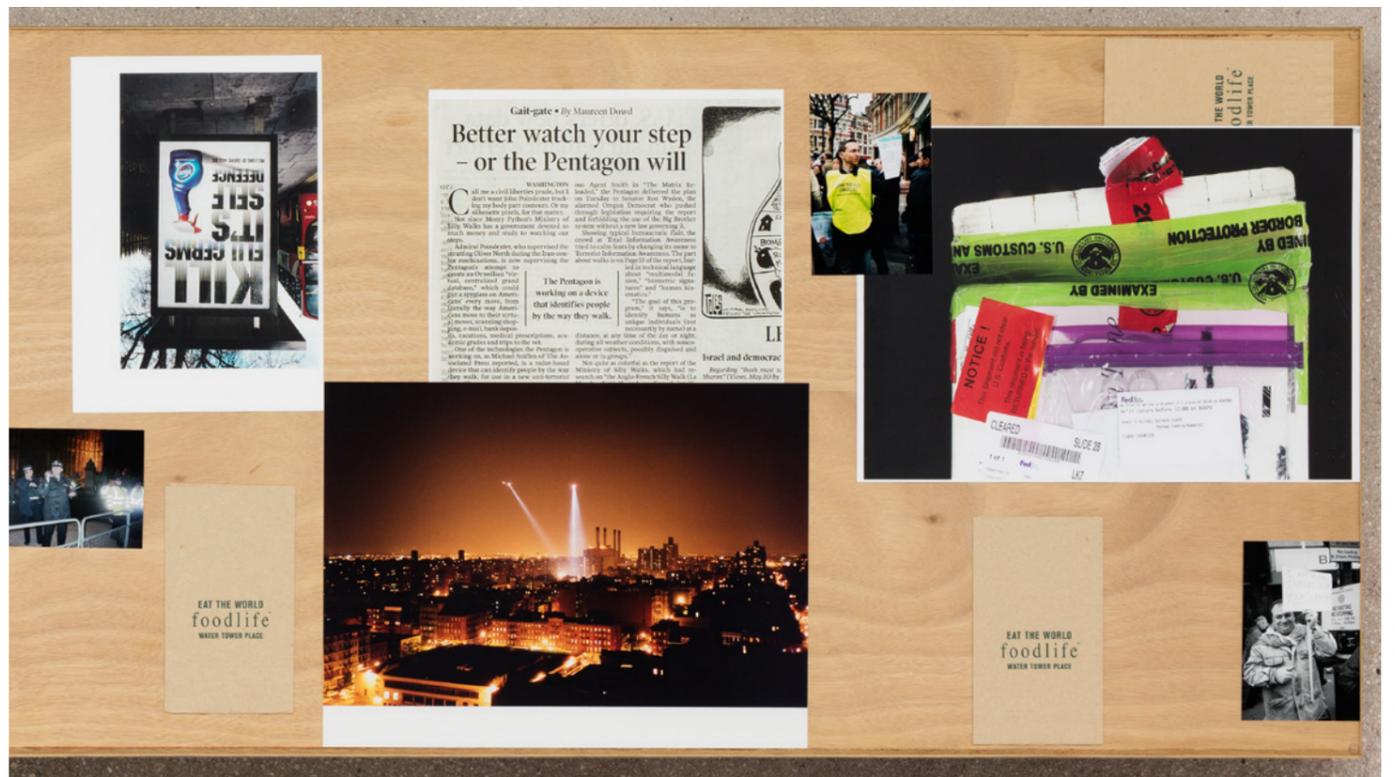
Stargazing and anxieties about life, especially the future, are particularly scoffed at because such theories and thoughts are dismissed as escapist and can only become manifest as dreams or works of fiction. This reminds me of a line in Spike Jonze’s 2002 film *Adaptation*: “Life seemed to be filled with things that were just like the ghost orchid. Wonderful to imagine and easy to fall in love with but a little fantastic, fleeting and out of reach.” Tillmans’s passion for astronomy began when he was very young: “There was something that I found deeply comforting about it all. I was always an inquiring boy, but I remember that with the stars, with this encounter with infinity, with this connection to something larger, I had a sense of not being lonely.”¹² This is well captured in the making of the *Venus transit* photographs. His ESO images, 2012, explore the work of the European Southern Observatory’s telescopes at Cerro Paranal in Chile, where Tillmans turns scientific data and imagery into works of art.

I have been fascinated with such fantastic journeys in my own work as well. *There Are Worlds Out There They Never Told You About*, 2016–2017, is a collection of drawings, video and installations portraying a vast and vague world seemingly set in space where a black man wanders in search of home. The sparse terrain is often littered with crows, ladders, watchtowers, satellites and fences, and a sense of chaos and transmission looms. Space is alive. Entertaining the idea of an

alternative world is less about occupying physical space and more about imagining a society where one is free. Unfortunately, distant lands have always been and still are prime targets for colonisation under the guise of exploration and discovery. Even in an imagined world, home and freedom are elusive. However, this allows for alternative ways of thinking about the self and community, in which our prejudices and biases are called into question.

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Embracing the offerings of nightlife and club culture as a way of liberating oneself brings me to my last reading of Tillmans’s work. His fascination with a myriad of other art forms and the auteurs leading the way has led him to photograph famous music icons such as Kelela, Lady Gaga and Frank Ocean. When Ocean’s long anticipated album *Blonde* came out in August 2016¹³ I was undertaking a residency in London and that album became my summer soundtrack. The tracks *White Ferrari* and *Nikes* particularly still transport me. Tillmans’s photograph of Ocean for the cover of *Blonde*, his cropped hair green and dripping water, is one of music’s greatest visuals, for it compliments both the musician’s art and his status especially in the queer community. In his visual album, *Endless*, Ocean even samples one of Tillmans’s tracks, *Device Control*. Tillmans once took Ocean to Berlin’s infamous nightclub Berghain, a hard-core venue for electronic dance music where anything goes and whose walls are adorned by Tillmans’s photographs. Berghain is not just a nightclub though. It is a site of freedom and diversity. A space for those who have arrived at beauty when people still call it madness. Tillmans had already been documenting youth culture through party scenes much earlier.



Wolfgang Tillmans, TSC 30a, 2006

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His photograph *Morning*, 2009, gives us entry to the aftermath of a party, while *after party (c)*, 2002, shows two mirrors propped beside a wall creating an imaginary time portal that might suddenly play back everything that was reflected upon those mirrors. In his work *In Search of ...*, 2015, Johannesburg based photographer Musa Nxumalo brilliantly captures the daily life and partying of South African youth in his own journey towards self-discovery.¹⁴ A few miles back home and you are bound to encounter similar scenes. A Berghain-esque night out in Nairobi might be a hard find but it is not non-existent if you are keen to search.

Tillmans affirms: "Only when you are aware of how tragic life can be, can you also enjoy the depth of a party through the night." The global video channel NOWNESS describes him as one of the foremost artists working today to explore what it means to be human, with his work extending to his unflinching love for people and community.¹⁵ When discussing his approach to making portraits in this publication, the curator N'Goné Fall aptly describes the photograph *Anders pulling splinter from his foot*, 2004, as a "magical moment." There is a connection, a level of trust and intimacy that allows Tillmans to capture such a tender moment. It is a breaking down of the resistance in another human being to create magic.

I will conclude by echoing Ulises Carrión's rich manifesto, *The New Art of Making Books*:

"New Arts language is radically different from daily language. It neglects intentions and utility, and returns to itself, it investigates itself, looking for forms, for series of forms that give birth to, couple with, unfold into, space-time sequences."¹⁶

Tillmans's oeuvre is based on curiosity, oddities, experiments, failure and play. It is imperative that we as artists give our work the status of a sacred deer and approach the making of it as one does in a lab or space station, where ideas are explored, tested, launched, projected or dispersed into the universe. That might perhaps answer our question, *What else can a photograph be?*

1 Bob Nickas, 'interview with Wolfgang Tillmans, in *Interview*, 7 September 2011.

2 James Muriuki, *Undefined Constructions*, shown in the exhibition *Making Africa, a Continent of Contemporary Design*, Vitra Design Museum and Guggenheim Bilbao, 2015.

3 Kikuyu-Gothic refers to residential houses in Nairobi that follow a similar plan in design and décor. They feature a variety of faux-interiors and furnishings bordering on kitsch whose purpose is purely aesthetic rather than functional. They are representative of the drab trappings of middle-class life.

4 *VALUE*, solo exhibition by Tahir Karmali, Kuona Trust, Nairobi, 2015.

5 Jepkorir Rose, Bethuel Muthee and Mbutia Maina, *Naijographia. A Play on Travelling Time and Place*, Goethe-Institut Nairobi, 2017.

6 Jepkorir Rose, untitled essay, in *Naijographia. A Play on Travelling Time and Place*, exh. cat., Nairobi, 2017.

7 "Uko Wapi?" means "where are you?" in Kiswahili.

8 Bethuel Muthee, "Naijografia," in *Naijographia. A Play on Travelling Time and Place*, exh. cat., Nairobi, 2017.

9 "Wolfgang Tillmans and His (Almost) All Consuming Eye," *American Suburb X*, 24 July 2015.

10 Allison Meier, "Unearthed Photographs from National Geographic's Archive," *Hyperallergic*, 11 August 2014.

11 Bonnie Mulkin, "SpaceX Oddity: How Elon Musk Sent a Car Towards Mars," *The Guardian*, 7 February 2018.

12 Wolfgang Tillmans in conversation with Allie Biswas, *The Brooklyn Rail*, 11 July 2016.

13 *Blonde* is the second studio album by American singer Frank Ocean. It was released on 20 August 2016.

14 *In Search of ...*, solo exhibition by Musa Nxumalo, Goethe-Institut Johannesburg, 2015.

15 See <https://www.nowness.com/series/photographers-in-focus/wolfgang-tillmans> (accessed 14 March 2018).

16 Ulises Carrión, "The New Art of Making Books," in *Kontexts*, no. 6/7, Amsterdam 1975.



Installation view of Wolfgang Tillmans: *Fragile*, Musée d'Art Contemporain et Multimédias, Kinshasa, 2018