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**2019**

**https://doi.org/10.25595/2021**

**Veröffentlichungsversion / published version**
**Sammelbandbeitrag / collection article**

**Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:**

Klaassen, Oliver: *Swimming against the hetero- and homonormative tide : A Queer Reading of Wolfgang Tillmans' Photo Installation (2004-09) in the Panorama Bar at Berlin´s Berghain*, in: Ladegaard, Jakob; Gaardbo Nielsen, Jakob (Hrsg.): Context in Literary and Cultural Studies (London: UCL Press, 2019), 135-155. DOI: https://doi.org/10.25595/2021.

**Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787356245**

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# Swimming against the hetero- and homonormative tide: a queer reading of Wolfgang Tillmans' photo installation (2004–09) in the Panorama Bar at Berlin's Nightclub Berghain

Oliver Klaassen

## Introduction: welcome to the Panorama Bar at Berlin's Nightclub Berghain

Typical for the atmosphere of the Panorama Bar, located on the second floor of the Nightclub Berghain in Berlin is a combination of electronic music, drugs, ecstatic dance moves and hundreds of people. The perceptual disorder of the revelers is fostered not only by drug consumption, but also by repetitive music, the fast-flashing strobe light and the mist on the dance floor. Objects flicker, blur, and dissolve, an even those who are joining in the dance are transformed into artificial figures. On the opposite side of the bar, on the wall above the dance floor, comprising a total length of twelve metres and a width of two metres, two abstract images hang above the heads of the party crowd (Figure 7.1). The surfaces of both images are covered by bundles of dark lines, running like a stream through a mostly blue-coloured space without a quantifiable depth. Most of the lines are connected with other lines, resulting in dark (line-)formations that create spaces with complex structure. On the adjacent wall to the right, next to the two abstract images hangs another image that shows an uncovered human genital area (Figure 7.2). What exactly is this constellation between abstraction and figuration about? What happens in this dialogue?



**Fig. 7.1** Wolfgang Tillmans, installation view, Panorama Bar (Berghain), Berlin. Left on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, Ostgut Freischwimmer (left), 2004; right on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, Ostgut Freischwimmer (right), 2004. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.



**Fig. 7.2** Wolfgang Tillmans, installation view, Panorama Bar (Berghain), Berlin. Left on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, Ostgut Freischwimmer (right), 2004; right on the wall: Wolfgang Tillmans, nackt, 2003. Courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

## Some reflections on a queer reading as a theoretical and methodological approach for analysing visual art

These abstract images in the Panorama Bar are dependent on individual and social contexts that construct and structure their meaning. In contrast to the context of art museums, with their White Cube conditions of neutrality and calmness, the reception in a club like Berghain is a totally different one: here the music and lights, together with the drugs, suggest other attentions, arouse different expectations, and stimulate other behaviours. As I will elaborate below, it is this contextuality of the work that calls for a specific kind of analysis, an oppositional reading strategy that combines a semiotic with an affective approach, thus fusing critique of representation with the potential of fantasy and desire in the process of reception. Starting from queer art studies and its critique of identity and visibility politics,[1] the overall aim of this paper is to find out to what extent the constellation of abstraction and figuration in the Panorama Bar intervenes in normative discourses of sexuality, gender, and desire.

In order to be able to decipher possible pictorial statements, I conduct a twofold analysis. On the one hand, I consider the 'framework', which is to say the spatial, temporal, discursive, and institutional context, which enables the perception of the artwork and retroactively modifies its interpretation. On the other hand, I critically re-examine the modes of representation. My analysis addresses the following questions: what and how does something become visible? What is the purpose of this visibility? Who are the target recipients of this visibility? And what remains excluded? What is made invisible by visibility? In short: what is the what, who, and how of visibility? [2]

My understanding of context is informed by the views of two theorists, Stuart Hall and Judith Butler: first, it is not only the exhibition venue of the two abstract images, Berghain's Panorama Bar in Berlin, but it is also an image of a human genital area displayed next to them which is another important, more complex, wittingly constructed layer of the context. Similarly, in 1997, Stuart Hall, in his analysis of intertextuality in *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices (Culture, Media, and Identities)*, argues that no meaningful element should be considered detached from its context and its interaction with other texts, images, and signs (Hall 1997, 232). Meaning, therefore, is constructed by the totality of all signs; that means signs stand in constant interdependence to one another and their embedment into different contexts is linked to different concepts of knowledge. Second, central for

my understanding of context are Judith Butler's theoretical considerations in *Körper von Gewicht – Die diskursiven Grenzen des Geschlechts* (*Bodies that Matter: On the Discoursive Limits of 'Sex'*) on the possibility of transforming and re-signifying linguistic and social meanings, norms and conventions, and their use for purposes for which they were not intended. Of particular interest for me is the ability of signs and visual expressions to break with contexts and to create new contexts. This essay's underlying understanding of the intersection between politics and aesthetics is based on a foundation of semiotics, according to which political opposition can be realised by attacking the symbolic order through the alienation of existing signs.

As I will show, in the case of the Panorama Bar, it is the interdependence of different image realities, which, as a performative strategy in the process of reception, not only entails anticipatory and transformative potentialities, but also empowers the viewer to engage in queer reading. Queer theory, as I define it, is a post-identitarian mode of thinking and articulating difference (always referring, though never limited to gender and sexuality), which underlines the transformative moments of representation and investigates the dynamic interplay of power and desire in social and cultural relations.[3] Because queer reading favours multiple points of view, including the detection of contradictions and the deviation from social agreements, it hardly needs mentioning that my interpretation manifests itself in the selected Panorama Bar installation[4], in which associations and contents are evoked, not as fixed and stable givens, but also as ephemeral practices, dependent on the situation-based reception of my own person. Consequently, it is my aim to produce ambivalences instead of smoothing them out into a reductionist interpretation.

In addition to the framing component, an important starting point of my analysis is that the understanding of visual material depends on the viewer's background knowledge, their visual habits and expectations as well as fantasies, desire, affects, and feelings. As elaborated throughout this paper, the very 'nature' of the constellation of different images in the Panorama Bar installation invites the viewer to make sense according to his_her[5] own ideas and fantasies, rather than trying to anticipate the intentions of the artist.[6] In order to analyse the identification and projection processes to which the visual material in the Panorama Bar installation invites the viewer and which can be charged with different aesthetic, emotional and affective meanings,[7] a shift of focus towards the perceptual experience is necessary, in particular the potential of fantasy and desire in the process of reception: what makes the arrangement of

different pictures resonate with me as a viewer? What is set in motion? How do movements of desire take place? And what kind of connections does it create? The theoretical foundation for this is provided by Antke Engel, who combines the concept of performativity with the concept of fantasy. According to Engel, in the process of reception imagination can develop social and political productivity by causing trouble in the ruling concept of heteronormativity.[8]

The first part of this paper analyses the abstract images and how they were made. The second part examines the Panorama Bar installation. The third part focuses on techno and rave club culture. In doing so, I will not only give some background information about the characteristics of Tillmans' curatorial practice and the setting of his installation, the Panorama Bar, but I also want to take a closer look at a constantly recurring motive in the artist's oeuvre: party subculture. My conclusions are drawn in the final section.

## Freely swimming between abstraction and figuration

Upon first glance it is immediately noticeable that the abstract images are reminiscent of bodily fluids, muscle fibre structures, underwater landscapes, as well as astronomical and biological-microscopic phenomena (Figures 7.3 and 7.4). Although the images might elicit analogies, they are in strictly technical terms nothing less than luminograms, camera-less generated light-spaces. The depicted structures on the surfaces of the photographs are a result of gestural and chemical operations in the darkroom. With the help of sources of light, the manual manipulation of light-intensive photo paper creates



**Fig. 7.3** Wolfgang Tillmans, Ostgut Freischwimmer (left), 2004, courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

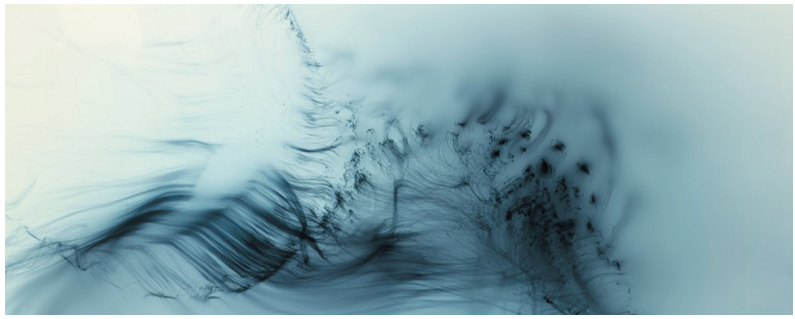


**Fig. 7.4** Wolfgang Tillmans, Ostgut Freischwimmer (right), 2004, courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

a random accumulation and scattering of colour particles in and on the fibres of a chemically reactive paper. Abstractly gesturing with flashlights and lasers creates sweeping washes of soft color – as if someone was drawing with light. The reflections of light produce surfaces that are both determined and indeterminate and that shift between different optical markings: between form-formlessness, abstract-figurative and similar-dissimilar signs. After creating the originals in the darkroom, the two camera-less photographs were scanned, coloured, enlarged, and afterwards installed in the Panorama Bar as unframed inkjet prints. Abstraction is thus structurally inscribed in the photographic image. It is embedded as aesthetic processes that consistently results from the fallibility of photographic recording techniques in analogue photochemistry. Instead of labeling the *Freischwimmer* photographs as 'abstract', I understand them as open images with an unexplained reference.

Both photographs are part of the ongoing series *Freischwimmer* (*Free Swimmer*) (since 2001) by Wolfgang Tillmans. Part of this larger project of luminograms are also the series *Blushes*, *Einzelgänger* (*Loner*) and *Urgency* (all since 2001). All of them have something in common: they are depicting similar things, namely coloured collections of filigree thread structures with varying density. Strictly speaking, nothing figurative is depicted. Although the photographs were created without a lens or camera, the eye perceives the photographs as reality. Tillmans describes this play with the belief in photography as a medium that depicts reality in an interview with Gil Blank as follows: 'I'm trying to challenge people's assumptions that every photograph is reality, by presenting abstract forms that somehow look figurative' (Blank and Tillmans 2004, 119). It is only through the act of reception that the photographs become figurative.[9] Tillmans thus pursues an inherent media reflection

of photography. The surfaces on the camera-less photographs, characterised by a mix of indeterminacy and determinateness, confront the viewer not only with his_her deficient perception, but also with the precarious principle of photography. That is, the simultaneous act of registration and erasure.

The two camera-less photographs are titled *Ostgut Freischwimmer left* and *Ostgut Freischwimmer right*. According to the *Duden* the German verb *freischwimmen* (*to swim freely*) means to learn to stand on one's own feet, to be independent and emancipated. In addition, in a literal sense, *Freischwimmer* is the most basic lifesaving level in Germany and Switzerland. After successfully completing a swim test, which is carried out in advance by practice, it is an official proof that people can keep their heads over water for a certain period of time. Despite its emancipatory connotations, *freischwimmen*, however, also has an ambivalent meaning because, in order to feel free, people must first learn to leave things behind them. Shihoko, too, comes to this realisation in her analysis of Tillmans' *Freischwimmer* photographs:

> The space of these photographs is filled with a sense of liberation and sensual joy, but they do not automatically usher us to freedom and independence. In order to swim there, we need the courage and strength, just as when swimming in the ocean for the first time or stepping onto a diving board. The sea of freedom and independence is wide. A strong will and sincere convictions are required to continue swimming in it proficiently. (Shihoko, 2004, 104)

Considering the ambivalent connotations of *Freischwimmer*, I want to find out to what extent does the translation of this ambivalence into the visual argumentation of the Panorama Bar installation have negative (the resolution, deconstruction, or disappearance of the subject) or positive (a release and depiction of the process of individualisation) effects.

As mentioned before, besides the two camera-less photographs on the adjacent wall to the right hangs another image: this photograph depicts the lower half of a human's torso. Sitting on a chair the person is leaning back and to his_her left and wears a grey top. Naked with parted legs from the waist down, the photograph *nackt (naked) is* exposing an uncovered human genital area (Figure 7.5), which, at first glance, could be identified as female* because of the labia. It is strongly reminiscent of *L'origine du monde* (1866) by Gustave Courbet (1819–1877), a painting that has caused a sensation since 1866: in an unusual perspective, a life-sized female* body section is depicted as a classic torso stretching



**Fig. 7.5** Wolfgang Tillmans, nackt, 2003, courtesy of Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

from the thighs to the breasts. The viewer's gaze falls on the spread legs, on the genitals, which feature slightly opened labia. It was particularly the explicit act of showing a female body opening which was contrary to the ideal figure of the European art academics until the twentieth century and that made the boundaries between art and pornography brittle. According to the art historian Linda Hentschel, this painting not only reflects the connection between deep space and the female body, but also the sexualisation of the visual act itself. In her 2001 published book *Pornotopische Techniken des Betrachtens. Raumwahrnehmung und Geschlechterordnung in visuellen Apparaten der Moderne* (*Pornographic Techniques of Viewing: Space Perception and Gender Order in Visual Apparatuses of Modernity*), Hentschel devotes herself to the patterns of relationships between the history of optical apparatuses, the techniques of seeing, and historically conditioned gender constructions, searching for hetero- and androcentric structures of desire in the history of art. In this context, she reveals the interfacing of the female body and image space as characteristic for the gender-producing techniques of the Western image. Therefore, the central perspective is related to the angle of a voyeuristic male viewer, resulting in a feminisation of the space as well as a sexualisation of the act of seeing ("Gustave Courbets" Hentschel 2004, 205). Hentschel uses the concept of 'pornotopia' to describe

feminine-connoted landscapes as a penetrative act of male-coded space (207f). Art history thus fosters fetishism, hidden in the landscape, by the inversion of the feminine body and the medial space in the form of pornotopia (210). Against this background, throughout the paper, I want to find out whether Tillmans' installation continues a heteronormative and androcentric tradition of a gaze that takes central perspective and can be characterised as male and voyeuristic. And, if not, how he breaks with this tradition?

## Tillmans' Panorama Bar installation in context: Berghain and the club subculture

The photo installation was created for the Panorama Bar in the legendary nightclub Berghain in Berlin. The Berghain originated from the club Ostgut in 2004, which ran from 1999 to 2003 in Berlin-Friedrichshain. As an integral part of the gay house and techno scene in Berlin, it was the first venue for gay fetish and sex parties as well – so-called *snax events* – and thus a safe haven, especially for gay men*. Even today's Berghain guarantees a high degree of sexual freedom and variety: views from outside by looking at its theme parties and flyers, as well as from inside by looking at the sexual implications of the interior architecture, e.g. the darkrooms[10], especially frequented by men*, reveal a sexual atmosphere that especially speaks to the LGBT+[11] community. Berghain is still the organiser of gay sex parties, such as the legendary *Snax Club*, that only take place in parts of the premises, the so-called *Lab.Oratory*. Although the club continues to speak to a non-heteronormative – especially gay – audience, it has opened up to a broader target group in recent years. One of the reasons is the great media interest in Berghain after being voted the best techno/house club in the world by the British music magazine *DJ Mag* in 2009. The fast shift over the last years from a gay underground venue to a tourist magnet has not been without consequences. The cultural recognition of Berghain has changed with its entry into the public cultural discourse. Since being awarded this distinction, the club has been mythologised by mainstream media. It is all so widely known and spoken of by those around the world who happen to find themselves in the know: the protracted intake process, the non-observability from the outside, the prohibition of photography inside, as well as the promise of sex, the giving over of oneself to disorder and ultimately transcendence. This promise should be critically questioned because nowadays the club is following a capitalist market logic.

The origins of the musical and social movements of the house, rave, and techno scenes go back to the disco culture of the USA in the 1970s, to scenes mostly framed by gay men and people of colour. From the very beginning, this scene was related to a habitus of tolerance (Seifert 2004, 244). The aim was to create safe-spaces that escaped from the rules of the normative, white, heterosexual majority and thus offered protection against discrimination.[12] In addition to being against the prevailing conventions of dominant culture, the emerging techno culture opened the door to an alternative world, an exaggerated and delimited world in which not only normal grids constantly move, but also boundaries of space, time, and body seem to dissolve. In the context of techno, the prevailing principle of deconstruction takes place on many levels: on a methodological level in the form of collages, montages and samplings, and on an aesthetic and a subject-theoretical level in the form of a fragmentation of the self (348). Tillmans' arrangement in the Panorama Bar, in which different image realities are brought together, resembles a collage. The metaphors and aesthetics referring to the techno are wide landscapes, space, water, flowing movements, and the resolution of space, which can also be found in the *Freischwimmer* photographs.

Club subculture has been a constantly a recurring motif in Tillmans' oeuvre. Since the early 1990s, he has been known as a visual chronicler *par excellence* of the contemporary techno, rave and house subculture, which he has repeatedly captured amidst raves, concerts, pride events, and domestic places before or after a party.[13] Not only in his photographs, but also in interviews, Tillmans constantly draws attention to the extremely stimulating landscape of club culture: 'What people see in a disco is already an abstraction. It is set up in such a way that people go back and forth between what they see and what they are no longer able to make out clearly' (Schneider 2015, 26). For him, the mixture of light, music, desire, social interaction (body), and dance (movement) transforms Berghain into a place of utopian narratives (30).

When it comes to dance marathons, not only the physical experience of the self has priority, but also the desire for the total experience of a group ritual (Seifert 2004, 266f.). For a Raver, the reason for the over-spending in ecstatic dance is driven by the desire to dissolve into the whole and become one with the mass. In the past, Tillmans has repeatedly tried to capture masses in nightclubs under bad light conditions: for example, in the photograph *hundreds (2002)*, traces of the blurred motion of dissolving and transforming human bodies are depicted. In the photograph *rig* (2002), the individual body on the dance floor is not in

the field of view. Instead, hundreds of dancing bodies, together with the light effects, suggest the mass of a body consisting of thousands of people.

Not only is the separation between the materiality of the physical bodies – the imagination of the body merging with the others – blurred in the act of dancing, but also is the separation between bodily perception and inner bodily experience (Klein 1999, 185). With that said, what is depicted on the surfaces of the *Freischwimmer* seems to visually express shared communal experiences of decentred corporealities – extreme inner bodily experiences such as ecstasy, trance and the loss of orientation hundreds of dancers collectively share in an atmosphere where boundaries of place, time, and identity are blurred as a result of a potent combination of electronic dance music, vibration, rapid light, dancing, and drugs.

## Exploring the limits of visibility

With his installation in the Panorama Bar, Tillmans critically foregrounds the promise of free gender expression and sexuality at Berghain. In an interview with Thilo Schneider, he explains his selection of photographs as follows:

> Initially, I was thinking of just hanging the two big *Freischwimmer* works there. Then I thought that their non-figurativeness needed a counterpoint. Abstraction is indeed problematic insofar as it blanks out a lot of realities and consequently doesn't pose specific questions. As an object and as pictorial content, an abstract image refers completely to itself and to the compositions and color gradations depicted. It is only in a figurative sense that it becomes a picture of the world. By also hanging the over-sized photo of the lower abdomen of a naked woman in this gay club, I wanted to broaden the perspective on sexuality – which is so important to me – and archive a more open way of dealing with it. (Schneider 2015, 32f.)

Even though I want to distance myself from identifying the ambivalent genital area as being clearly female (the heavily swollen labia on the photographs seems to be reminiscent of a scrotum), against this background, the installation can be understood as an enlightening moment: in its plea for the increased inclusion of other genders, the photography *nackt* (2003) can be understood as a conscious act of

provocation for the gay male core audience, especially taking into consideration that the public was predominantly characterised by male homosexuals in the first years after the opening of Berghain. As the art critic Dominic Eichler in his 2005 published article *Bilder der Nacht: Sound und Vision* (*Pictures of the Night: Sound and Vision*) notes, Berghain is thus marked as space with power structures that produces inclusions and exclusions: 'It is not surprising, then, that his [Tillmans'] work shows up at Berghain – precisely in this context, the bluntness not only invites reflections on gender, biological necessities and constraints, but also counters women's contempt of some guests with progressive openness' (translated from German into English by Oliver Klaassen). Even today, the techno scene is still dominated by men*. Access to the music production and to DJ positions is largely blocked for women*. The frankness of the abstract photographs together with the explicitness of the figurative photograph mirrors the hedonism of Berghain and its (Ostgut) roots as a totally unapologetically way of expressing gay sexuality. Besides the reference to the necessity of the inclusion of other genders, the two *Freischwimmer* photographs can be read as a kind of Ostgut reminiscence, because, as already mentioned before, each of the photographs bears the name of the club in the title. They remind one of a place of (homo)sexual freedom, a non-judgemental platform for the exploration of human sexual desire and identity. By avoiding explicit representations of the human body, the former club is marked as a safe space, in which norms are negotiated differently. (Hetero- and homo) normative forms of visibility are avoided; instead, visibility is produced without being decipherable within hegemonic frameworks. At this point it can already be summarised that the meaning of *Freischwimmer* runs in a literal sense like a common thread through Tillmans' installation: not only in terms of the production process of the camera-less photographs, in the sense of a light floating and the form, the clash of different image realities, but also in terms of content, in the sense of free-floating away from hetero- and homonormative boundaries, away from prejudiced body images to new visual worlds.

In addition, my point is that through acts of (re)combination and (re)contextualisation, the *Freischwimmer* photographs together with a photograph of an erotically and sexually charged genital area produce a moment of radical ambiguity.[14] In this 'undisambiguous'[15] ('VerUneindeutigung') ("Wider die Eindeutigkeit" Engel 2002) state, the photo installation works as a deconstructive, denormalising and anti-hierarchical project that attempts to push forward other ways of thinking. Persisting in a trembling state of interactive (de)construction, a back

and forth movement between the dissemination on a photo technical level and the act of overcoding by the neighbouring figurative photograph, the photo installation brings forth a heterotopic space.[16]

The different image realities and their associative arrangement on the wall asks for a readjustment of the gaze. The installation creates a situation described by Elspeth Probyn as 'outside belongings', a depersonalisation of identity without the desire[17] for belonging while losing its significant and effective value. Instead of one 'preferred' belonging, there are multiple desirable belongings in the Panorama Bar installation. I would go even one step further and claim that – following Engel's theoretical reflections on the reconceptualisation of desire to activate subversive and destabilising potentials in *Queer / Assemblage: Desire as Crossing Multiple Power Relations* – the photo installation sets free 'queer desire', meaning connections resulting from movements of desire which undermine hierarchies, exclusions, and norms.

In this threshold zone, in which absences are crossed and defended and discrepancies are produced, the resistant potential of resignification comes into play,[18] fostering an expansion of the viewer's field and a complementation of his_her deficient perception. Visual habits are set in motion, provoking a different perspective on familiar images: in its destabilising and unsettling effect, the visual argumentation of the abstract *Freischwimmer* photographs makes the fixed genital area appear in an androgynous light. New denormalising and non-hierarchical associations of signs and images arise, which not only counteract normalising or stereotypical patterns of decision-making, but also propagate forms of difference without following any kind of classificatory logic of difference. The result is a rhizome-like structure, which is composed of multivalent and polymorphic embodiments, referring to unstable and merging subjects that are not predetermined, but performatively produced.

The photo installation is the first out of three that Tillmans has created so far for the Panorama Bar. With the second one, Tillmans seems to implicitly criticise the ongoing rising symbolic and market value of Berghain, which has not only changed the cultural perception, but also the social formation of the audience. In 2009, all three photographs were replaced: the *Freischwimmer* photographs by the camera-less photographs *Neutral Density (a)* and *Neutral Density (b)* (2009) and *nackt* (2003) by the photograph *Philip, close-up III* (1997). With an aggressive gaze at the back of a bended male subject position, spreading his buttocks with his left hand and thereby exposing his anus, Tillmans continues with sexual explicitness. As the photographer mentions in an interview, with this

selection he wanted to comment on the heterosexuality of the audience in the Panorama Bar:

> In the meantime, the public in the Panorama Bar had become much more heterosexual. Which of course isn't bad, and the people who go there are certainly not homophobic, but in order to maintain this presence and this confrontation with oneself and one's own identity, it seemed appropriate to me to show that picture. It is indeed fascinating that this boundary still remains in place. (Schneider 2015, 35)

Since 2015, the three photographs *Weak Signal (P Bar, left)* (2014), *Weak Signal (P Bar, right)* (2014) and *Mundhöhle* (*Oral Cavity*) (2012) have been installed in the Panorama Bar. What is striking about all the three installations, but especially the last, is the way they seem to scramble any available gendered code – focused entirely on the tonsils, the glistening back of the throat stands utterly unspoken in terms of genderedness. In all three installations, the interdependence of different image realities promotes a feeling of radical ambiguity. Whether the exposure of a vulva and an anus, or a close-up of an open mouth, the recurring motif is bodily openings and thus a constant exploration of limits of visibility and perceptibility. The installations try to unmask the secret source of invisible power structures: they encourage not only a critical reflection on the acts of seeing and recognising, but also they help the viewers to learn how visual constructions work. Therefore, the Panorama Bar installations remind the viewers of what is always already implied in representations: namely the unavailability.

## Anti-hierarchical, borderless, provisional and intimate: Tillmans' queer installation practice

A first glimpse of all of Tillmans' exhibitions leaves the viewer with an unusual provisional and intimate impression: room-overlapping, associative assemblages and glued installations that seem to be in a constantly changing mood. Instead of choosing one presentation technique, different approaches and elements are combined: a wide range of hangings (salon-style hang, horizontal, single and linear hang, salon, studio walls, bedsit-style, etc.), a mixture of three-dimensionality and different formats, often unframed and fixed with adhesive tape or braces to the wall. With exhibitions in which order and hierarchy make

room for equality and openness, Tillmans challenges conventions of display typical for art museums by not adhering to the formal character of a contemporary presentation. The translation of flexible and complex subjectivities in Tillmans curatorial practice brings forward not singular but heterogeneous subject positions.[19] Along with a meta-theoretical understanding of sexuality, gender and desire as movable and socially convertible on the level of content, the photographer creates arrangements, which, instead of the monolithic order of the central perspective, privilege rhizomatic intertwinements, as well as generate moving topographies.

A second glimpse of Tillmans' exhibitions reveals that the constellation of abstraction and figuration in the Panorama Bar installation is no coincidence. Instead, sharp contrasts in themes and motifs run like a common thread throughout the photographer's photo installation practice.[20] Strikingly, in his exhibitions very often the investigation of the chemical foundations of photography takes place in dialogue with figurative photographs, which, for example, explicitly address relationships with his lovers, friends, the ecstasy of clubbing, HIV prevention and the complexities of LGBT+ experience. As Bob Nickas puts it in his article "Pictures to Perceive the World", Tillmans' aim of '"borderless" picture-making' (Nickas 2006, 1), the abolition of strong boundaries between abstraction and figuration, is pursued with a conscious, dissonant composition:[21] 'In gallery installations of his photographs, when abstract and representational works are placed side-by-side, it's clear to see that for Tillmans the relationship between them is reciprocal. They inform one another, to be sure, but it's also apparent that these are not wholly separate bodies of work.' (5) Depending on the context (the exhibition in general and the constellation with other photographs within a particular exhibition), one and the same *Freischwimmer* photographs may unfold different meanings. Tillmans' curatorial practice that aims at a constant (re)contextualisation and (re)combination, favors discontinuities rather than continuities of meaning. This shows us the structural 'unsaturation' of contexts, and thus the impossibility of final determination.

With his installation practice, it seems like Tillmans is therefore proposing a unique act of seeing that is free of ideology, in which rules of perception are constantly broken, meanings are disturbed, and everyday practices of attributions are reduced to absurdity. The triggering of a linear topic, which is caused by his flexible methods of displaying, acts as a political statement because it opens up new discursive visual spaces of open links and therefore invites for constant reinterpretation.

Against this background, Tillmans' installation practice can be described as an activist in that it is all about formation, dissolution and a new formation of pictorial and symbolic alliances and combinations.

## Concluding thoughts

With my analysis of Tillmans' installation in the Panorama Bar I offered a reading, in which the patterns of subculture, underground, resistance, and dissent can be found. The queer potential of the photochemical iterations on the *Freischwimmer* photographs unfolds in the moment of (re)contextualisation and (re)arrangement, especially against the backdrop of the setting of the installation in the nightclub Berghain in constellation with a photograph of human genitalia and the techno and rave club culture context in general. Tillmans' photo installation brings forth more alternative, non-assimilatory queer politics of visibility and transformative knowledge not only by attacking the normative symbolic order through radical ambiguity, over-semantisation, discursion and irritation, thus leading the way to cross, disturb, negotiate and change gestures, codes and signs of sexuality, gender and desire, but also by advocating for a modified understanding of queerness that favours more the notion of communality than of difference. My intention is to emphasise the inescapable dimension of context in both art production and its reception and interpretation with my queer reading of Tillmans' photo installation. A consideration of the artist's curatorial practice in general that favors discontinuities rather than continuities of meaning requires us to realise this multivalent and open-ended character when analysing Tillmans' art. Therefore, a sensitive and informed engagement with art requires cognisance of its context in all of its complexity, while simultaneously necessitating continued interaction with meanings forged in ever-changing contexts of reception.

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## Notes

1 Since the 1970s and 1980s within queer-theoretical and art-scientific discourses ever growing attention has been paid to the importance of both artistic and everyday cultural aesthetics and forms of expressions pertaining to the construction of gender, sexuality, and desire. Artistic work and art-scientific analyses are constantly exploring the imaginations, ideas, emotions, images, meanings, symbols and constructions of gender and sexuality that circulate in societies under specific historical and political conditions and that can be described with the concept of gender and sexuality imaginaries. For a detailed review on the topic of queer art history see Getsy, Hoenes and Paul, Jones, Jones and Silver, Krass, Lorenz, Lord and Meyer, Paul and Schaffer, and Zimmermann among others.

2 In queer theory, social change and the formation of subjectivity are closely linked to questions of representations as a battleground that has always allowed the expression of different perceptions, norms and knowledges about sexuality, gender, and desire. Following post-structuralist and deconstructivist approaches, which emphasise the performative and transformative potential of the visual, my queer reading of the Panorama Bar installation is based on a broadened understanding of representation, which combines approaches from semiotics, discourse analysis, and gender studies. This constructivist and non-fixed understanding of representation is a helpful methodological tool for redefining the relationship between representation and reality (Schade and Wenk 2011, 171). Constitutive for a critique of representation are questions about the conditions of visibility, the relation between the processes of making visible and the surrounding knowledges as well as questions about possibilities of subversion and change. With notions of visibility and invisibility I refer to semantic nuances of which are important to understand in context. Visibility is often presumed to be intrinsic to presence and self-representation in the social space (being seen and heard), but it is also linked to the judgement and stigmatisation that arise from the gaze directed to the 'other'. Conversely, invisibility refers both to marginalised people – often deprived of the power of being seen and heard – and to 'normality', which makes it possible to pass unseen. As a basic approach to postcolonial and queer politics, the critique of representations aims not only for making visible formative and often unquestioned image patterns but also for deconstruction and, if possible, change. More details on the topic of the critique of representation can be found in Hall among others.

3 I am using queer as research perspective as well as a starting point for the critical

analysis of visual material in order to avoid the danger of emptying the term of meaning/its political charge and encouraging its de-politicisation. Originally used as a homophobic term for abuse, in the late 1980s and early 1990s queer was positively picked up by LGBT*QQI*P activists as a counter-concept to heteronormativity and has since then served as an affirmative mode of self-reflection. The initialism LGBT*QQI*P stands for people who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, queer, questioning, inter*, and pansexual. Looking from the perspective of the history of science, since the early 1990s queer theory has emerged from discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and feminist theories. It has been positioned as an opposite of and reconceptualisation of gay and lesbian studies and as such, queer theory has been developed as a critical and political concept and a field of research focusing on diversified society, as well in addition to the critique of fixed and stable identities, deconstruction, (un)doing gender, queering, performativity and representation are among the most important concepts of queer theory. More details on the topic of queer studies as field of research can be found in Degele, Hall and Jagose, Paul and Tietz among others.

4 The work displayed in Berghain's Panorama Bar can be read as a site-specific installation, especially – as I will explain later in detail – considering the fact that the artist's practice of hanging the works, often unframed, with tape, nails, and bulldog clips, has become an iconic and recognisable part of his oeuvre.

5 In attempt to use gender-fair language, the gender gap (_) marks the diversity of gender-based ways of existing. According to the philosopher Steffen K. Hermann, on a linguistic level the underscore interrupts unquestioned representations and reproductions of the two-gender system and instead gives trans* and inter* subject positions an intelligible space between masculine and feminine suffixes. In addition, by making use of the asterisk (*), I want to signal the denaturalisation and social and cultural construction of man*, woman* etc.

6 Which is the reason why I am more interested in the secondary context, i.e. in what circumstances the work is displayed (the social, historical and cultural setting in which the work was produced) than in the primary context (the artist's attitudes, beliefs, interests, values, education and training, and biography).

7 In my analysis, I rely on Johanna Schaffer's psychoanalytically well-founded reflections on the conditions of a self-reflective practice of seeing, based on the theories of the art historian Kaja Silverman and the philosopher Judith Butler.

8 Antke Engel asks whether desire can activate subversive and destabilising – queer – potential and comes to the following conclusion: 'The movements of the images make it possible to liberate desire from being bound to a subject or an object and thus also elude the hierarchical subject/object arrangement.'

9 As the curator Lida Shihoko puts it in her essay *Wolfgang Tillmans: Spirit of the Freischwimmer*: 'Described objectively, it is "an image, not a thing", formed by physical particles on photosensitive paper through a chemical reaction between light and the developing solution. We only see in it what we want to see. A photograph is an image. In Tillmans' case, photography is not superior to painting in terms of recording facts. His photographs are not abstract just because no concrete image can be seen in them. There is something concrete in abstraction from the beginning. Naming is an act of representation.' (Shihoko 2004, 106)

10 In this context, with darkrooms I mean darkened rooms in nightclubs, gay bathhouses or sex clubs, where sexual activities take place.

11 It should be noted that by choosing the initialism LGBT+, I am seeking to not only simplify things but also to be open to a plurality of sexualities and hoping to contribute to the social and artistic recognition of people who form part of and identify with these communities.

12 The exhibition *Party out of Bounds: Nightlife as Activism since 1980* (Sept 18–Oct 10, 2015) at LA MaMa Galleria in New York is just one among many examples for the close link between nightlife and politics, focusing on the entanglement of the continuing HIV/AIDS crisis and nightlife since the 1980s and its transformative potential.

13 Tillmans' photo reportages on the young club and music scene as well as the

emerging techno culture were also published in subcultural, left-oriented magazines such as *Tango, spex* and *i-D*, which – as the photographer describes in an interview – were offering identification possibilities beyond the mainstream: 'The main attraction was that it showed you that you can create your own identity, or rely on your own identity without having subscribe to any official rules of how to behave and how to look in order to be right or to be cool.' (Tillmans and Halley 2002, 12)

14 In line with a large number of arguments, gathered in the anthology *Radikal Ambivalent. Engagement und Verantwortung in den Künsten heute* (*Radically Ambivalent. Commitment and Responsibility in the Arts Today*) published by Rachel Mader in 2014 and in the monograph *Wider die Eindeutigkeit. Sexualität und Geschlecht im Fokus queerer Politik der Repräsentation* (*Against Unambiguity. Sexuality and Gender in Queer Politics of Representation*) by Antke Engel in 2009, in my dissertation project *I SPY MY EYE WITH! A Queer Reading of Radically Ambiguous Politics of Representation in Contemporary Photography,* I argue that ambiguities and political commitment are neither mutually exclusive nor inconsistent with one another. Especially in times of neoliberalism and homonationalism, when Eurocentric political agendas such as demands for equal rights, gay marriage, and domestic partnership assume a gay citizen whose affective fulfilment resides in assimilation, inclusion and normalcy (Duggan, Puar), ambiguities in the field of the arts and visual culture can be an empowering and protective tool for the LGBT+ community against surveillance, control, fixation, stigmatisation, stereotypisation, and discrimination.

In *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times*, Jasbir Puar locates homonationalism as sexual exceptionalism in which queer individuals are incorporated into the Western nation state, in order to cordon off sexual citizenship to bodies that are properly defined as belonging, and thus demarcating the bodies that are not. Homonationalism, Puar continues, 'corresponds with the coming out of exceptionalism of the American empire. Further, this brand of homosexuality operates as a regulatory script not only of normative gayness, queerness, or homosexuality, but also of the racial and national norms that reinforce these sexual subjects' (Puar 2007, 2). This opposition falls between white, secular hetero- and homosexuals, on the one hand, and the racialised bodies that are placed under the frame of homophobia and religious extremism, on the other.

15 Engel describes 'undisambiguity' ('VerUneindeutigung') as a 'strategy of queer politics of representation' (*Wider die Eindeutigkeit.* Engel 2002, 224, translated by O.K.) that favors, contrary to previous descriptive definitions of gender and sexual differences within politics of representations, 'denormalizing, destabilizing and deconstructive potentials' (225, translated by O.K.).

16 With heterotopia, I refer to Foucault's concept of other spaces or counter spaces, used for the first time in a radio broadcast for the culture channel France-Culture in December 1966. Originally, the concept of heterotopia comes from medicine and means healthy tissue that is not in the anatomically correct position.

17 My investigation is based on an understanding of desire as a movement, referring to the philosopher Gilles Deleuze as well as to the sexologists Elspeth Probyn and Margrit Shildrick. In 1996, Probyn argues in *Outside Belongings* that a reciprocal relationship exists between images as transportation of desire and the movements of desire that can create images. The movement of desire in images can be explained with the help of psychoanalytic explanatory models: the recipient's desire is looking for a sign in the object (picture), which stand for a wish fulfilment and therefore the recipient's fantasy is needed. In other words: an action is followed by a network of connections which, in turn, can create movements and a social space.

18 Starting from the question of how the discursive means with which one's subjectivity is produced can be expropriated, Judith Butler, in her 2006 published book *Hass spricht: Zur Politik des Performativen* (*Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*), reveals that through the revaluation and decontextualisation of a sign, through the break with prevailing meanings, a

performative force can evolve which subversively exposes the uncertainty of standardised meanings and therefore contributes to the expropriation of an authorised discourse (Butler 2006, 230 and 246).

19 As the artist and curator Julie Ault in her essay "The Subject is Exhibition" aptly points out, 'Tillmans' belief in his own complex, flexible subjectivity – and the extension of its validity to one and all – inspire its methods, which subtly decenter institutional authority and redistribute display. Identity is irresolute. Self-construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction are vital dimensions of Tillmans' artistic formation. His practice reflects continually shifting subjectivity, necessitating that design always be anew.' (Ault 2006, 126)

20 Tillmans expresses his interest in the dialogue of different image realities as follows: 'The human eye has a great desire to recognize things when it looks at a photographic print. I made use of this phenomenon and found I could speak about physicality in new pictures while the camera-based pictures could be seen in a new light as well. So they kind of inform each other, rather than being pitted against each other.' (Eichler and Tillmans 2008, 235)

21 For Tillmans' photographic work, Lane Relyea also notes the following leitmotiv: '[T]o treat pictures, including abstract ones, not as isolated phenomena but as always interrelated' (Relyea 2006, 90). Bob Nickas comes to a similar conclusion: 'In gallery installations of his photographs, when abstract and representational works are placed side-by-side, it's clear to see that for Tillmans the relationship between them is reciprocal. They inform one another, to be sure, but it's also apparent that these are not wholly separate bodies of work.' (Nickas 2006, 5) Last but not least, Mark Wigley notes: 'There is no clear line between these seemingly abstract images and seemingly realistic ones.' (Wigley 2006, 154)