

Who Do You Love?

Isa Genzken and Wolfgang Tillmans in conversation



Wolfgang Tillmans and Isa Genzken, Berlin, 2005.

Isa Genzken: I can give you a little tour of my studio. This is a piece for which I finally found a title today. It's called *Kinder filmen* [Children Who Film]. I find it's a beautiful title.

Wolfgang Tillmans: That's what it looks like, children filming.

IG: [*Laughs.*] This one of the dolls is new, too.

WT: Is that one a dog?

IG: No, it's actually a little bear. But the ears are no longer there, and that's why one doesn't quite know what it is. The children have wreaked some havoc—they're romping. [*Laughter.*]

WT: You suggest that they're just playing, but do you also see that they're somehow a bit shocking? They look a little dead.

IG: You think dead, already? No. I mean, if one can hold oneself in that position, then one isn't dead. When one is dead, one is somewhere. . . . I see my work at the moment—as opposed to in the past—as having something to do with the innermost more than something to do with the exterior. One can always explain the exterior. But the inner side one finds difficult to explain. And these sculptures have more to do with the *inner* view.

WT: Yes.



Isa Genzken, *Empire/Vampire III* (detail), 2004, plastic, lacquer, metal, fabric, grains, and wood, 70 27/32 x 27 1/2 x 17 7/10". From the series "Empire/ Vampire, Who Kills Death," 2003–2004.

IG: Do you understand? I see the children as if they just had to do something, as if they had to play

twisted. I don't approach it so formally, in the sense of, "This is the mother and this the little child." Rather, it's more like a feeling that I have for children, for their craziness. But the inner one, not the learned one. Do you know what I'm talking about?

WT: Yes, sure.

IG: That's why the formal in my more recent works is daring in a way because there is little to hold on to, little one can tie things to, except for a sense I have when I am actually engaged in the process of construction and things come together. Yet works like the "Empire/Vampire" sculptures [2003–2004] still came from an aesthetic stance that I've had for thirty years, a stance I continue to develop. The intention is to get a different reaction from the "already known." I can't explain it any other way.

WT: You've always got to allow yourself a new way of accessing your own work. When you're not working with a formula, ideas have to find their own way and take their own time to surface.

IG: There is nothing worse in art than, "You see it and you know it." Many artists seem to work from a theory that they invent, so to speak, and which accompanies them through life, a theory they never deviate from. That's a certainty I don't like. After all, art is often on the edge in the sense that in one moment it seems really very close, and the next moment you find it doesn't. You can see this quality in the artists I love: Mondrian, Ellsworth Kelly, and Carl Andre. I always ask myself, "Who did you love when you were young?" Michael Asher, Lawrence Weiner, Dan Graham, Andre—almost only Americans. And then I ask, "As you got a little older, who did you love then?" Wolfgang Tillmans and Kai Althoff—that's it. And I find that a little comforting. There are hundreds of different approaches, and you have to engage with all of them in some way and ask yourself, "Is there something to it?" You have to always keep your eyes open because the art world is not a department store. It's not that you just see a trifle here or there.



Detail of unfinished sculpture in Isa Genzken's studio, Berlin, 2005. Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans.

WT: I have a hard, judging gaze, but I also have a benign one. That comes from a feeling that these are all people who do their best. I was very impressed by a statement Andy Warhol made in an interview I read in the '80s. He was asked, "Why do you always say everything is great?" Warhol said, "Because life is hard. Everything is hard. Baking a cake is hard." And this feeling that everything is really difficult gives me a point of access, in the sense of a basic respect and appreciation. You can't go around thinking everything's crap.

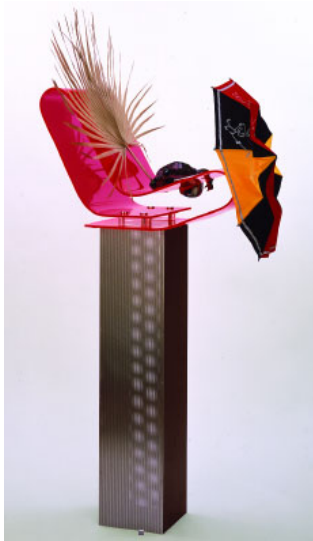
IG: NO! That's not at all how I mean it. Well, there are hundreds of artists, and when you open an art journal, you see this and that, and this sells well and that, too. In order to get out of the confusion of all that's on offer, I ask, "What do I enjoy the most aesthetically? What can I get the most out of?" The others all rob me of energy because they do something that I don't understand. That's not arrogance on my part—it's self-preservation.

WT: Yes, everybody wants full attention, but you only have a certain amount to give, and you have to be careful with it. We could probably like a lot more things if we would let them get to us in a different way. But, for example, the works of the youngest generation today have a different syntax because they come from a different context, and we can't decode the syntax so easily anymore. A *relative* appreciation of all sorts of things outside of your generation is much more difficult because you have to confront so many new and different strategies. A lot falls through the net when you look at it.

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IG: But I'm not an art historian. That's the freedom I have as an artist. Yet you have to get a lot of new visual impressions, again and again. Otherwise you get completely limited.



Isa Genzken, *Kindershirm*, 2004, plastic, metal, wood, palm leaf, and fabric, 86 5/8 x 47 1/4 x 33 27/32".

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WT: I see that as almost the most important duty. To take the freedom is actually the hardest work.

IG: Yes. One often thinks, "I've got this driving feeling. I have to drive the motorway to the very end," and then, "I must do this and this and that." But that's not good. It's much better when one interrupts this routine in order to approach what one does differently. One gains a lot from this process—all that time that one . . .

WT: . . . thinks one is losing, one has actually won.

IG: Yes.

WT: Last year I had an intense experience relating to that. One morning I was on the subway to the studio and thought, "The most incredible thing now would be to just keep sitting on the train and go to the last stop." A minor action, yet I knew what a deed it would be. Still, I didn't do it. I thought, no, I still have things I have to do. A few days later, I walked again to the tube station, and from that station there are also trains to Brighton, and I just got on one instead of going to the studio and spent a day by the sea. And there I decided to change things and move to Berlin for the summer.

IG: That's a great story.

WT: Like taking the lid off your head.

IG: [*Laughs.*] It's important not to be all tensed up in the visual work one is doing. One has to maintain one's sense of humor and wit. A man with special wit that I particularly liked was Joseph Beuys. I was privileged to encounter him several times when he was alive. He had a unique face. Crazy—I was fascinated by it.



View of Isa Genzken's studio, Berlin, 2005. Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans.

WT: He was extremely charismatic, right?

IG: Well, he actually kissed my hand once and said, "You are my teacher."

WT: [*Laughs.*] Really?

IG: Yes. In Venice, with his whole family in the background.

WT: That is fabulous.

IG: I met him only rarely. I once called him and said, "I must talk to you." And he said, "Just come over." I must say there is a certain energy among artists. He didn't say "Okay, when do you want to come by? Next week, or what?" We sat under the cherry tree in his wonderful little garden and he asked, "Well, what do you want from me?" I said, "Architecture is a catastrophe in Germany; we've got to change that." Then he said, "Go ahead, you can always sign for me." [*Laughs.*] I wasn't there for long. Even though we didn't see each other often, we got on really well, in a very direct way. We didn't need to say much. It's beautiful when that happens. That's what it was also like with Dan Graham and Lawrence Weiner. One doesn't need to say so much about things.

WT: One can read it straight away in the other.

IG: Yes, and that is exactly the relationship one has to the person and to the art that person makes. It's pretty much one to one.

WT: Because art is, after all, an extreme mirror of the person. I truly believe that artworks can translate thinking and psychology beyond words, and an interesting take on the world will yield an interesting result in a form that doesn't necessarily follow speech or writing patterns.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Freischwimmer*
26, 2003, color photograph, 70 27/32
x 94 1/2". Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans.

IG: That's why we're dealing with aesthetic problems—in order to visualize what we think. That's what it's all about.

WT: Yes. But most don't even think that.

IG: That is why someone like Léger is a kind of illness to me, because there art is used for something it's never had anything to do with. You know, something strange happened to me recently when I was in the Museum Ludwig. There was an exhibition there comparing Léger and Beckmann. Neither is all that interesting to me, because in a curious way they are both so unrealistic. Léger—nobody looks like he paints.

WT: Neither was ever a favorite of mine.

IG: And when I saw this exhibition, I had the feeling that in these forms of art lie the root of all evil in twentieth-century art, and there is a line right through to today. This is the feeling that came over me; I wanted nothing to do with it. It's different with Matisse, who worked at the same time, after all, or some wonderful works by Picasso, for example. If we're concerned in a certain way with realism, be it in painting or photography, there's another energy there.

WT: I think it's much more radical to see and show things as they look instead of making them somehow subversive through alienation or estrangement. I find it less shocking when it's estranged. It's better if you can show an inner thought or something shocking with a so-to-speak realistic representation, without it becoming immediately "art."

IG: I wanted to ask you something: When I see your photographs I think of painting. Is that wrong or right?

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WT: That is right. But I don't photograph with a conscious wish to paint a picture with the camera. It's because I see that way. I see the pictures; they are right in front of me. I don't seek out what looks painterly, and I don't try to make my pictures look like paintings. That . . .

IG: . . . just happens.

WT: My photographs are first and foremost pictures. And in that respect my frame of reference obviously includes more than just the 150 years of photographic picture making. I don't think in media-specific categories. I think first of all, "A field of color is a field of color."



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Tony Blair*, 2005, color photograph.

IG: I also find your pictures quite classical.

WT: I have always consciously downplayed the classical so that it doesn't look as if I *wanted* it to be painting. I love photography and am very comfortable with it; I find it liberating as a practice. Even the abstracts are assuredly photographic.

IG: Well, how's your work going, anyway?

WT: Good! Last summer was really liberating because of the spontaneous decision to spend it in Berlin. Suddenly I had the feeling that a new time in my work had started. It's not that I changed something radically, but continuing had become possible. And with *truth study center* [Taschen, 2005], the new book which occupied me on and off for an entire year, this process has reached some closure—just as the first book ten years ago was a point of closure so that I could do something new or, more precisely, could carry on. I don't mean closure in a negative way—it's more like capturing the feeling of being alive. You have to do that while the feeling lasts. With the first book I felt the urgency to condense into one volume what I felt during the early '90s. At the time my friends said, "You are crazy to put out a big book with Taschen at the age of twenty-six." But for me it was necessary because I knew this was the here-and-now and the power to catch what it feels like today may go tomorrow. In that sense the last year felt similar, and that's what I aimed to capture in the new book.

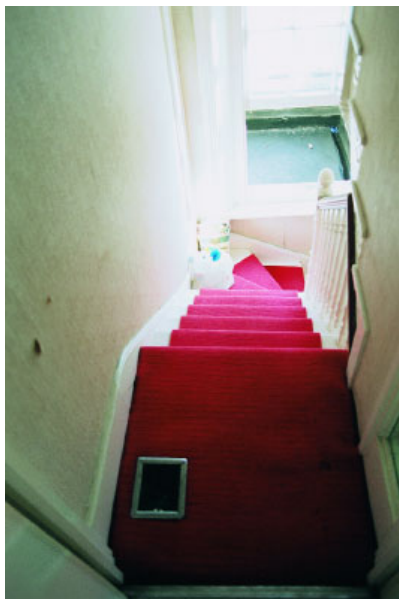
IG: Do you have it with you?

WT: Yes, as photocopies. [*Takes them out.*]

IG: Wow, it's fabulous; very nice.

WT: The most important thing was that there simply be a reason for a new book, and that it feel new. In it, I'm attempting an ordered examination of social surfaces—world and nature—and at the same time, the pictures are arranged in groups and chapters, although these are not named. As far as the energy is concerned, a lot harks back to my beginnings, although in a different form. Having done

several books that treat the pictures in a more precious way gave me the freedom to go full circle in the new book, to pursue a certain flow that's similar to that in the first one.



Wolfgang Tillmans, *Sheet One*, 2001, color photograph, dimensions variable.

IG: Who is that?

WT: That is Conor, who was my assistant for three years, and who was very important in my life.

IG: This woman also seems familiar.

WT: Irm Hermann, the actress in Fassbinder's films.

IG: Oh yes! And I'm represented here as well. Who's that? He also seems familiar.

WT: Tony Blair. [*Laughs.*]

IG: Of course. [*Laughs.*] I wouldn't have guessed it right now.

WT: This is in Cologne at the Diözesanmuseum. The Trinity.

IG: Does it really look like that? No double exposure or anything?

WT: No. It's a medieval woodcarving.

IG: Amazing.

WT: And this was the staircase to my apartment in London.

IG: Not bad.

WT: Red carpet!

IG: It'll be quite a volume. I like the rhythm.

WT: Well, that's the world as I see it—right now, anyway.

IG: One will look at the book repeatedly, most likely. It is contemplative. No layout in the sense . . .



Isa Genzken and Wolfgang Tillmans, *Science Fiction/Hier und jetzt zufrieden sein (Science Fiction/To Be Content Here and Now)*, 2001. Installation view, Kunsthalle Zürich, 2003. Photo: Wolfgang Tillmans.

WT: People sometimes ask why my books don't more directly reflect the layouts of my installations, but they are two completely different things! When you put pictures together on pages, it has nothing to do with viewing them in a room, where you can approach the pictures in the space.

IG: I could look at it again straight away.

WT: Yes, that is the most important thing, that the work also goes on. That one doesn't just slow down.

IG: That, I think, is not possible in your case. You always have to ask yourself, “When did I start? And where am I now?”

WT: That is really the thing. At the beginning of the '90s, I always thought, “In which city do the things happen that are best for me? Booze or no booze? In love or not in love? Unhappy or happy?” And the hard truth is that ninety percent of it lies within you. You can't just get the stuff from outside. There is never a method. The method is always right or wrong at this or that moment, but you can't generalize it.

IG: I've also noticed that with my things. For a long time, I went about my work very conceptually. With the hi-fi photographs, ellipsoids, or with the works made of concrete, I had an idea and realized it forcefully. Then I stopped doing that suddenly, and a new phase started: Just go ahead. And yet the rigor of all those earlier years is still in me. Now I have slowly reached the point where I can say I want to do something again that I think about very *clearly*. I know now that I can do the other thing, too. But I slowly have to return to that which is thought through very carefully. That will be the next step. And it will once again look completely different from everything before. That is an automatic process. That is what I meant when I talked about artists who work according to a *principle*. How something *has* to be. I don't really have that at all. And I like it that way, actually. . . . Keep mixing things up!

Translated from German by Wilhelm Werthern (with Brian Currid).