



CONSTRUCTING THE SEXUAL SELF: WOLFGANG TILLMANS'S PORTRAITURE AND BUTT MAGAZINE

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Abstract

The overarching goal of this visual essay is to analyze Wolfgang Tillmans's photography as it relates to gender representation and queer identity. In particular, I attend to theories set forth by Sigmund Freud, Kaja Silverman, and Judith Butler in an effort to engage historic and contemporary psychoanalytic thought with visual cues present in the artist's portraiture for *BUTT Magazine*. My aim is to expand upon socially constructed notions of masculinity and femininity, to illustrate how Tillmans's images represent a contemporary portrayal of gender, and to cultivate a deeper critical reading of the artist and his work.

Keywords: sexual difference, queer identity theory, Wolfgang Tillmans, Portraiture, BUTT Magazine, Sigmund Freud, Kaja Silverman, Judith Butler

The Construction of Sexual Difference

Given the past five decades of academic and social discourse on the construction of sexual difference, it is important to note that the hierarchical power dynamic between two parties—whether sexual or not—still exists in contemporary cultural production. While distinct masculine and feminine roles are currently becoming more fluid, gender binaries are solid tenants of current heteronormative culture. Considering Michel Foucault's position in *The History of Sexuality* (1978), the idea that these binaries are deeply woven into social structures still rings true today. Gender roles have become less rigid in the 21st century household, and the LGBT community continues to gain a more diversified visibility in popular media, but unfortunately, these advances do not necessarily break down the underpinnings of gender binaries and hierarchy.

As Judith Butler (1993) has written, it is not a subversive act for a man to simply inhabit the space traditionally reserved for a woman, or vice versa, since simulation is central to all forms of gender and sexual identity. Butler (2004) further explains that the task is to coerce society to embrace people who have traditionally been excluded and to compel a "radical rethinking" of gender constructs (p. 180). Following this, queer identity theory can be understood as breaking from traditional hierarchical structures between male and female to allow a new subject to emerge. Wolfgang Tillmans's portraits of men for *BUTT Magazine* challenge binary gender ideologies, in part by calling attention to stereotypes of masculinity and femininity. In these portraits, I find images that embrace subjects on the fringe and question the meaning and construction of gender and sexual desire. I posit that these images convey anti-hierarchical themes from the juxtaposition of gender-role symbolism and blurred distinction between binaries, thus becoming visual signals for queer subjectivity. In playing with antiquated gender roles, the artist adds subtle elements of humor and the absurd and ultimately creates an affirmative space for the gay male subject.

Anti-Hierarchy and the Artist's Environment

Early in his artistic career, a defining moment for Tillmans can be linked to his collaboration with *i-D Magazine*, a publication which began in 1980 as a fanzine dedicated to the street style of punk-era London. Photographer Jeurgen Teller, pop musician Madonna, and designers like Tom Ford are also among the cutting-edge artists to appear within the pages of *i-D* (*i-D Magazine*, 2014), and the magazine has since grown into a glossy publication that documents current fashion and contemporary culture. *i-D* appealed to Tillmans in the way that it enabled readers to create their own identity without having to follow a set of popular guidelines. It went beyond the luxury commercialism of fashion magazines; for example, prices were listed on items in fashion spreads, but the price-points were intentionally kept affordable, making style and glamour personal and accessible without the need to buy into high-end markets or brand names (Halley, 2004). Identifying with this punk-aesthetic, Tillmans began to capture the free-spirited, anti-commercial way of life that surrounded him.

Anti-hierarchical themes are also present in the way Tillmans installs his exhibitions. The artist rejects the traditional gallery show of framed works hung in orderly succession, and instead, he chooses to arrange his work in an informal and seemingly disjointed manner, one that is meant to reflect the way viewers might perceive the barrage of images that constitutes their surrounding environment (Solcombe, 1999). Photographs are often unframed and taped directly to gallery walls. Pictures rest next to newspaper clippings and editorial work done by the artist, and in some cases, published reproductions have been torn directly from the magazines where they were printed. Portraits, both formal and casual, are hung alongside still life, landscapes, and works that feature the artist's unique photographic process that stylistically suggests abstract expressionism. By mixing genre and medium, and through his all-over, salon-style presentation, Tillmans creates a viewing environment that intentionally undercuts traditional modes of hierarchy. This style of exhibition has since become the artist's signature, and this theme spills over into many other aspects of his work.

Anti-Hierarchy and the Artist's Portraits

Generally speaking, the overall critical analysis of Tillmans's portraits can be summarized as images that reference a snapshot aesthetic and feature the social circles and nightclub scene with which the artist was involved (Aletti, 2006; Braun, 2002; Gopnik, 2007; Jobey, 2010; Kernan, 2000; Molesworth, 1996; Paz, 2004; Saltz, 2010; Sheets, 2007; Shihoko, 2004; Swenson, 2010). As curator Benjamin Paul (2004) stated: "Tillmans' world is wonderfully convivial, public, and cheerful. His subjects seem relaxed, open-minded and unpretentious, uninhibited by the camera or social etiquette" (p. 11). Reinhard Braun (2002) describes Tillmans's portraits as part of the artist's endeavor to provide a narrative for youth and subculture.

Stylistically, the artist utilizes a lighting technique in which the "unaffected gaze" of his subjects is brought to the forefront (Smyth, 2010, p. 31). In other words, Tillmans seeks to present the models' subjectivity from their unconstrained sense of self, believing that highly stylized, dramatic lighting does not communicate an individual's agency or inhibition (Blank, 2004). The artist tends to feature his subjects in their daily lives and habitats, using only available light or a carefully directed flashgun to lend clarity to his models (Kernan, 2001). Furthermore, Tillmans does not manipulate or rearrange his subjects' settings, and in doing so, the artist breaks hierarchy by detaching from the traditional photographer-subject-studio approach.

Tillmans generally does not speak about his portraiture in distinct terms of sexuality and gender, nor do critics. However, in an interview with Neville Wakefield (2004), Tillmans expressed his love for people and portraiture and his belief that sexuality is less about gender binaries and more about how socially defined gender roles are bridged. Tillmans's love for the human form and his sensitivity toward an individual's identity is evident in his portraits. These ideas, specifically those that involve the fluidity between masculine and feminine, are illustrative of the artist's anti-hierarchical approach. In what follows, I discuss these ideas in relation to his portraits for *BUTT Magazine*.

Wolfgang Tillmans and *BUTT Magazine*

Tillmans personally identifies as a gay male; as an artist, he consciously chooses not to focus his work solely on gay subjects (see “Tail-piece,” 1997). The artist certainly does not limit himself to subject matter or artistic medium, but it is possible to identify a body of work where Tillmans has focused on images that depict gay male desire, with one notable example being his work for *BUTT*, the gay lifestyle magazine. The artist began a relationship with the magazine at the time of its formation in the summer of 2001 and continues to maintain active status on *BUTT*’s current roster of contributing photographers (see *BUTT*, 2014).

A selection of iconic photo spreads and interviews from *BUTT*’s earlier years was compiled and published in a book to celebrate the magazine’s five-year anniversary. In the introduction, the magazine is touted as an “amazingly realistic view on today’s homosexual man” (van Benekom & Jonkers, 2006, p. 5), and two specific series by Tillmans stand out in this collection: the first shows Bernhard Willhelm, a gay fashion designer, and the second portrays Julian Ganio, who is also a designer as well as a staple in the gay London nightlife scene of the early 2000s. Willhelm’s portraits were included on the cover of the very first issue of *BUTT* in 2001, and the picture story of Ganio was featured in the 16th issue, published in 2006. Both models participated in a question-and-answer style interview, and in many ways, the style, composition, and visual cues in these images mirror one another. Together, these two series form the focus of this essay.

Constructing Masculinity

In both magazine spreads, masculinity is presented to the viewer through several cues, with the most prominent being the feeling of sexual flirtation and phallic potency that both subjects portray. In Figure 1, the portrait is set within a meagerly furnished domestic interior. Willhelm is seen in the corner of the room against stark, white walls, wearing only his underwear and knee-high sport socks. His body is turned toward the wall, yet his face is seen in three-quarter profile, and his gaze directly engages with the viewer. To Willhelm’s right, a small heap of clothes, shoes, and

a plastic shopping bag are casually strewn about the floor, and an ironing board is placed in front of him at a steep angle toward the wall. Willhelm holds the board with his left hand and an iron with his right; the iron’s cord functions as the image’s visual entry point as it travels from the very bottom of the composition and snakes across Willhelm’s thigh, ultimately leading to his direct gaze. The ironing board in this image acts much like a phallic symbol as it extends from his groin out toward the wall, adding sexual tension, potency, and a sense of flirtation to the image.



Figure 1. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Untitled, Bernhard Willhelm* (2001).
Image courtesy of the artist; reproduced with permission.



Figure 2. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Untitled, Bernhard Willhelm* (2001). Image courtesy of the artist; reproduced with permission.

Figure 2 shows Willhelm fully nude from behind and standing in a cramped doorway. He is flanked by two white walls and fills the negative space created by both. Standing in front of a tiled wall, with a cabinet hovering over his right shoulder, Willhelm can be seen leaning over a bathroom sink as he brushes his teeth. Such an act is hardly something that would entice intimate thoughts, but the model has sexualized the situation by posing nude. This feeling of sexual playfulness is asserted in the way he looks over his left shoulder and smiles coyly as his hair falls gently in his face. The toothbrush, like the ironing board, functions as a phallic symbol, and as the model holds it to his mouth, the feeling of sexual intimacy is intensified. Lastly, a covert hairbrush, which can be seen on a small table in the lower right corner of the image, deepens this feeling of sexual intimacy as its handle points directly at Willhelm's posterior.



Figure 3. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Untitled, Julian Ganio* (2006). Image courtesy of the artist; reproduced with permission.

In these images, the models are made to seem overly masculine through the few articles of clothing that they wear. Specifically, Willhelm is seen in knee-high socks, while Ganio, who is pictured in Figure 3, wears sneakers; both images reference athletic gear donned by soccer or tennis players. Masculinity is also demonstrated in the monumentality of each model. Both instances are reminiscent of Richard Meyer's (1992) essay "Rock Hudson's Body," where the author explains how Hudson's physical masculinity is amplified through intentional art direction. According to Meyer, Universal Studios, the movie production house that represented Hudson, decided that in at least one scene of every film the actor starred in, Hudson would overflow the dimensions of a normal-sized doorway to frame his body in a larger-than-life manner. In Figure 2, we see similar evidence through the light and dark contrast of the image, which is furthered by the narrow space where Willhelm brushes his teeth. We also experience monumentality in the image of Ganio (Figure 3) as he kneels in front of the oven and nearly fills the entire frame of the composition.

Male/Female, Masculine/Feminine

To understand gender binaries and the resulting masculine and feminine tropes, it is insightful to revisit the psychoanalysis set forth by Sigmund Freud. For Freud, identity theory stems from several concepts, but particular importance is placed on the Oedipal complex. A definition of the male Oedipal complex can be understood as a path marked by a deep fear of an impending castration at the physical, bodily level. Conversely, a female subject experiences the Oedipal complex through the discovery of an already realized biological castration (Cherry, 2013). Queer theorist Kaja Silverman (1983) explained in *The Subject of Semiotics* that the existence of the Oedipal complex depends on the presence of both genders and the consequences of the male/female binary opposition cannot exist without one another. Furthermore, the human female's castration discovery provides an immediate reading of her anatomical difference as a deficiency. Silverman takes this further by stating: "[Freud] associates the male subject with aggressivity, voyeurism, and

sadism, and the female subject with the antithetical but complementary qualities of passivity, exhibitionism, and masochism" (p. 138). For Silverman, what is at issue here is not just the female subject's biological inferiority, but also her symbolic exclusion from cultural privileges which define the male subject as sufficient and powerful.

This power dynamic is echoed by the writings of queer theorist Leo Bersani (1987), who defined the sexual transaction as an act that inevitably polarizes its participants into "relations of mastery and subordination" (p. 216). The assertions of both Silverman (1983) and Bersani (1987) provide influential counter-narratives to Freud's limited arguments regarding the ideas of power, strict hierarchy, and phallic penetration. Through these contemporary assertions, sexual binaries become the ever-present themes that are central to a queer reading of sexual difference.

The Male as Passive

As discussed earlier, Figures 1, 2, and 3 show Willhelm and Ganio as actively masculine figures. While this is apparent at first glance, a deeper reading of these images shows that both models also display many characteristics that stand opposite to masculinity; more specifically, both subjects simultaneously present themselves as passive. These characteristics are seen best in Figure 2, as Willhelm is caught in the act of brushing his teeth, and Figure 3, as Ganio turns his back to the viewer. Here, both models command and dominate the space in which they occupy and, at the same time, render themselves vulnerable through the posture of their bodies.

Another aspect of the passive male is shown through suggested penetration, an element that is perhaps most visible in Figure 1. The iron's cord, which rests closely against the subject's body and faces out toward the viewer, calls attention to Willhelm's body as a vessel for the phallus through the use of the AC/DC electric metaphor and through the placement of a rather large hole in the rear portion of Willhelm's underwear. Oral and anal penetration is evident in the image of Willhelm holding the toothbrush to his mouth and the hairbrush that points directly at his backside. By mixing both active and passive sexual roles for the sexual pleasure of men within a male figure, who is known and named

rather than anonymous and objectified, we see queer subjects who traverse the multifaceted aspects of gender binary ideology to create fluid gender and sex roles, which in turn, parallels the ideas expressed decades earlier by Leo Bersani (1987). Furthermore, through his understated and expertly crafted style of portraiture, Tillmans presents a figure that is both sexually enticing and undoubtedly human.

The Odalisque

Male femininity is also deepened in the following three images, seen in the way both Wilhelm and Ganio are posed to recall the odalisque, a submissive, sexualized, and idealized form of repose used to illustrate women within the canon of Western art history and put to use most famously by 19th century French artists (Grove Art Online, 2013). Perhaps these images of Wilhelm and Ganio relate best to *Olympia* (Figure 4), the now celebrated painting by Manet that features an active subject in possession of her own agency while simultaneously representing the unspoken world of sex and sexual fantasy (Williams, 2002).



Figure 4. Edouard Manet, *Olympia* (1863). [Source linked to here.](#)

In Figure 5, Wilhelm is seen lying on a bed, with bunched-up sheets and blankets at his feet and with wet hair, suggesting he has just come from the shower. Looking directly at the camera, the model's right leg stretches outward, and his left leg flexes in a way that highlights his lean muscles, especially those of his thigh and lower leg. His body is angled to cover himself from the camera, and this sense of modesty is furthered in the way the model's left arm crosses his body, covering his chest. Here, the use of low contrast by the artist creates a soft, approachable scene, which is reflected in the slight smirk on the model's face. Wilhelm's smile, direct gaze, and active sense of modesty portray a model aware of the viewer, which fills the image with both exhibitionism and voyeuristic elements.



Figure 5. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Untitled, Bernhard Willhelm* (2001). Image courtesy of the artist; reproduced with permission.

Figure 6 shows Ganio in a professionally styled kitchen surrounded by organized chaos as utensils, ingredients, pots, pans, and filled bins cramp the shelves that travel across the background of the image. Ganio leans back with his weight resting on his arms and hands as he sits on the type of stainless steel table one would find in a restaurant. He is completely nude except for the pair of sneakers and socks on his feet and the pair of white underwear that hang loosely around his ankles. In Figure 7, Ganio is again nude and seen in a state of relaxation, resting on a bed with his body facing the wall. His right arm crosses his stomach, and his left extends outward on a pillow or bunched-up blanket. Discreetly, Ganio turns his head away from the wall and directs it partly toward but not directly at the camera, thus providing the image with elements of submission and sexual availability.



Figure 6. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Untitled, Julian Ganio* (2006).
Image courtesy of the artist; reproduced with permission.



Figure 7. Wolfgang Tillmans, *Untitled, Julian Ganio* (2006).
Image courtesy of the artist; reproduced with permission.

Domestic Life, Humor, and Use of the Absurd

These two photo spreads also share the domestic interior as setting, a space typically reserved for the female, and both stories couple these images with humor and elements of the absurd. By inserting humor into these images, Tillmans, Ganio, and Willhelm all remind the viewer that sexuality should be fun. The addition of absurd elements calls our attention to what is taking place in these photographs while it simultaneously questions it. Furthermore, the reading of these themes can be understood at a deeper level, one that challenges and mocks the narrow stereotypes of power and gender in a system of male/female binaries.

Power is suggested as amorphous through the presentation of these subjects in a playful, entertaining, and pleasurable manner from a queer perspective. Perhaps the most striking element of the Ganio portraits is found in the image where he is bending down in front of the oven. The act is not as odd as the fact that Ganio is nude. Without question, one would expect to see nude photographs in a magazine like *BUTT*, but who would find it comfortable squatting naked in front of an open oven? We also see Ganio wearing shoes throughout the shoot, even while he's in bed. Perhaps this speaks to the model's possible foot fetish or the intended fetish of the viewer, but whatever the case may be, it signals a feeling of spontaneity between photographer and subject, and strengthens the bond between anti-hierarchical experimentation and gender play.

Humor and absurdity are also visible in the series of Willhelm, and these visual cues are best illustrated by Figure 1. Clearly, Tillmans is not attempting to playfully capture the model in the actual act of ironing, as no garment is placed on the ironing board. In fact, the iron is not even plugged in, and its plug boldly faces the camera and rests on the floor. Much like Ganio posing naked in front of the oven, one typically does not complete the chore of ironing by placing the board against the wall and kneeling in front of it. The presence of humor is reinforced by the hole in Willhelm's underwear as well as the smirk on his face, which could suggest the model is in on the joke.

Both Ganio and Willhelm are involved in what was once traditionally considered women's work, and both interact with these stereo-

types in a mocking way. Coincidentally, the use of humor and absurdity in these images is reminiscent of Martha Rosler's filmed performance *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (Figure 8), where the artist uses expressionless humor to call out the oppressive nature and inherent absurdities of women's roles. Serving as an uncanny reference, Tillmans chooses to focus on sexualized subjects and simultaneously calls our attention to incongruous socially constructed gender binaries, sexual exhibitionism, and voyeurism.



Figure 8. Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975). Image retrieved from the Museum of Modern Art Collection. [Source linked to here.](#)

A playful sense of humor is also evidenced by Willhelm's and Ganio's sexual poses as they rest on messy, unmade beds. The iconography of a lived-in bed has surfaced throughout modern art, with Tracey

Emin's *My Bed* (Figure 9) and Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed* (Figure 10) being two well-known examples. Both works share intimate details of the artist's life and are equally as personal and important as a self-portrait, and through this motif, Emin and Rauschenberg speak to the notion of their own insecurities and imperfections. By capturing the model situated in a similar space, Tillmans extends this motif to the bodily level. By sexualizing the situation, the artist presents a depiction of the human body and sexual desire.



Figure 9. Tracey Emin, *My Bed* (1998). [Source linked to here.](#)



Figure 10. Robert Rauschenberg, *Bed* (1955). Museum of Modern Art Collection. [Source linked to here.](#)

Pushing Up Against a New Subjectivity

Throughout Tillmans's work, we see an artist who is disrupting gender hierarchy and masculine/feminine binaries. He accomplishes this in a variety of ways, including through his salon-styled exhibitions and through topical issues like commercialism and gender. By presenting a subject who is simultaneously submissive and active, by conflating phallic symbolism, power, and sexual penetration within the same subject, and by placing the male figure in physical spaces and art historical modes of representation typically ascribed to women, we see Tillmans confronting issues of sexuality and gender in a playful and clever way. The artist presents a more inclusive and less divisive view of sexuality through these portraits, setting the stage for experimentation and viability in art and in life. In these images, the queer male subject is the clear focus, but this mode of experimentation can be applied to female, transgender, and intersex subjects as well as to individuals and couples who are conscious of the relationship that sexuality has with power.

While a theoretical analysis deepens our understanding of gender and the artist's work, these images also reveal Tillmans's intention to create images of individuals who are unquestionably human. Here, both models are seen as unpretentious; Willhelm has soaking wet hair, and both Willhelm and Ganio are shown within messy home atmospheres, often stereotypical of men living alone or with other men, as they pose next to arbitrarily placed personal effects. This idea of everyday life, not glamorized or cleaned for guests or the camera, can also be interpreted as visible comfort with the photographer and potential audience. Above all else, Tillmans shows in his portraiture that humanness of the everyday is sexy and presents compassionate and celebratory images of queer bodies made viable in anti-hierarchical gender constructs and environments. Tillmans's work for *BUTT* is essential to our understanding of his portraiture, and it strengthens the artist's style of storytelling, which is at once multifaceted, subtle, humorous, and visually compelling.

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