

## Youth Cult

Julian Stallabrass

'Pretty Pictures in a Show Without Focus' [Wolfgang Tillmans at Tate Britain], *Evening Standard*, 9 June 2003.



Tate Britain exhibition installation, 2003

In Tate Britain's large, impressive and often very pretty display of Wolfgang Tillmans' photographs, there is a picture of an attractive girl lying on a cliff edge, gingerly peeping over. She's wearing very nice clothes. Seen in a style magazine, you would probably think about the clothes, the model and the location of the shoot. Seen in the Tate, surrounded by other pictures of greatly varying size and style, framed and unframed, hung in patterns, it is meant to mean something else. The fate of an entire generation, perhaps.

The Tate have played a significant role in Tillmans' reinvention as an artist, not least in awarding him the Turner Prize in 2000. You would hardly know from the publicity material or the catalogue (in which the word 'fashion' appears just once) that he had made his name with stylish, loose, snapshot-style work for *i-D* and *The Face*. That past is safely buried with plentiful references to art history.



Tillmans, *rat, disappearing*, 1995

Tillmans' subject is youth, and his eye (it should be inferred from the casual character of his work) is the innocent eye of youth, which fixes with wonder on each visual fragment of the world, whether banal or provocative. The film on a cup of black coffee, a rat escaping down a drain, a penis beside a bedside breakfast tray are fixed with the same stare. That vision, as you would expect, also finds beauty in unexpected places, as in the picture of candy-coloured blocks of air-freshener reflected in the slick metal surface of a urinal.

Tillmans' world is the arena of a segment of privileged, mostly white youth, and aside from people in fashionable clothing, he depicts clubbers and Berlin's Love Parade. These are set alongside a set of youthful political concerns—gay pride festivals, homelessness and opposition to war. All this is gilded with the spirit of youth itself, with its directness, sexiness, idealism and melancholy awareness of its own transience (indicated here, entirely conventionally, with wilting flowers and over-ripe fruit). To take against this display would seem churlish and fogeyish.

Yet to remember Tillmans' past is to reveal the other side of his world, particularly the cult of youth fostered by the corporations that prey so intensively on just these people. In representing them, Tillmans' work was meant to sell the image of youth back to itself. The question is, in their move from page to gallery, and snapshot to art, do these photographs reflect on the tensions inherent in the youth cult or merely exemplify them? Do the juxtapositions between pictures build significance or just suggest that they should? Tillmans has said that in photographing, say, gold ingots he indicates something meaningful about money and value. An old remark by Bertolt Brecht is useful here: that a photograph of a factory tells you nothing about the relations between the people inside it. The title of the show—*If One Thing Matters, Everything Matters*—gives the game away, as well as reflecting a recent but prevalent art-world prejudice for the straightforward depiction of the 'real'. What is really being granted here are various naturalistic glimpses of objects and people. Access to the real demands a higher price—in thought, knowledge and the building of structures, and in the realisation that some things do matter more than others. Otherwise, the cliff is just a cliff, the girl just a model and the clothes just product.