



NEUTRALITY
GUY TILLIM

Guy Tillim was born in Johannesburg in 1962 and lives in Vermaaklikheid in South Africa. He started photographing professionally in 1986, working with the Afrapix collective until 1990. His work as a freelance photographer in South Africa for the local and foreign media included positions with Reuters between 1986 and 1988 and Agence France Presse in 1993 and 1994. Tillim has received many awards for his work, including the Prix Roger Pic from Scam Société Civile des Auteurs Multimedia in 2002; the Higashikawa Overseas Photographer Award (Japan) in 2003; the 2004 Daimler-Chrysler Award for South African photography; the Leica Oskar Barnack Award in 2005; the first Robert Gardner Fellowship in Photography from the Peabody Museum at Harvard University in 2006; the Quai Branly Photography Residencies in 2015; and the Henri Cartier-Bresson Award in 2017. He has had solo exhibitions at the Huis Marseille, Museum for Photography, Amsterdam; the Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson, Paris; the Museu de Serralves in Porto; the Peabody Museum at Harvard, Cambridge; the Foam Fotografiemuseum, Amsterdam; and the Museum of Contemporary Photography in Chicago, among other venues. His work was included in documenta 12 in 2007, the São Paulo Biennial in 2006, and the touring exhibition *Africa Remix* (2004–07), presented at the Centre Pompidou in 2004. – Address: c/o Michael Stevenson Gallery, 160 Sir Lowry Road, Cape Town, 7925, South Africa. E-mail: guytillim@yahoo.co.uk.

When I think about what makes a picture good, I sometimes remember what Bob Dylan once said when he was asked what one of his songs meant:

“Have you heard the song?”

“Yes.”

“Well, that’s what it means.”

So, what makes a picture good? It’s hard to say. Ways of reading photographs change with time, and visual vocabulary evolves. Compare making photographs in the 1980s, say, when competence in the field required specialist knowledge, to now, when we’re all photographers. Now, old unwritten rules of composition and grand themes are swamped by the onslaught of visual diaries of our lives.

What was thought to be good is changing. In the future, one may be able to see a line of successful photographs somehow linked, informed by each other, yet distinct, full of intention and insight. But now, is there a thread and can we glimpse it? Perhaps we can, a little.

At Wiko it’s hoped that encounters with other Fellows at our daily lunches together will lead to inspiring exchanges. At one such meal I’m sitting next to Heiko Hecht, who is Professor of Experimental Psychology at the University of Mainz. Our conversation drifts to whether there exists a stock definition of a “good” photograph. I think of Bob Dylan for a second (it’s good if it holds you?) but I take the plunge and share a thought about landscapes.

A photograph of landscape might be called good if you look into it rather than at it. It’s a window/mirror analogy. In one, you see yourself, in another – and this makes it good, I think – you have a possibility to forget yourself. The picture as window is evoked by creating an equality of elements, or equally weighted elements in the frame, where one is not quite sure what is photographed and consequently the gaze wanders. If it wanders, you’re in it.

Let’s test that, said Heiko.

He came up with the word “Scapes.” A definition of sorts. Landscape, Cityscape, Seascape.

So it goes at Wiko. Wednesdays were my favourite lunch. Buffet. Followed by Friday’s fish.

Sometime near the end of the year in our apartment at Villa Walther, I had a visit from the future. A next year’s Fellow came to look at her accommodation. She barely registered me, I was the as-yet unformed relic of the soon-to-be past; she was making the most of a fleeting visit to size up her soon-to-be accommodation. I wondered if she lived anywhere near the tropics as I did and if she had any idea of the fierceness of the Berlin winter that awaited. Perhaps not, and neither had I, and in the end it was this winter, the

winter that made all elements of any given street seem equally grey, that offered me my window of forgetting.

This evenness of the grey streets held allure for me because I'd always loved the deep tonal qualities that European photographers evoked in their black-and-white pictures. These tones seemed impossible to reproduce under a bright African sky where I learned my trade. And now here I was in Berlin, for an entire year, and I embraced the opportunity to use the winter as palette and source of inspiration.

I'm exquisitely alone on a quiet street on a frigid morning. In the busier avenues, I'm undisturbed as people pass by wrapped up against the cold and masked against the pandemic. I'm perversely grateful for this latter aspect because my wanderings that are erratic, often uninformed, are nevertheless situated in a time. If the pictures are revisited at all, they would have this, a certain nostalgia.

I lose myself in constructing the images, mixing elements of different frames in a single one. Making panoramas from multiple images. I'm curious to investigate these new possibilities of image-making and the implications for a documentary form from which I sprung. It would seem that now one can effortlessly create images with a compositional dynamic heretofore only dreamed of. But it is not so. It is an exercise in restraint, not indulgence. All at once, I'm hugely grateful to Wiko for this sustained immersion in Berlin.



Alexanderplatz





Perleberger Straße

