

Photography, Fungi and Social Ontologies: Wolfgang Tillmans's *Neue Welt*

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In the late 1990s and early 2000s questions of nature and life morphed with contemporary art in new ways. Under the influence of new media technologies and digital networks, artists came to challenge modern ideas of nature in how it had been viewed and historicized. In an exploration of a body of photographic works—*Neue Welt*—made by the German artist Wolfgang Tillmans in and around 2010, this essay argues that at this particular time, digital technologies came to be explored as autonomous machines that could produce new forms of connections, between living and dead matter on Earth. Within the context of digital art photography, the technology of photography presented itself as a quasi-living subject endowed with some social abilities to enter and construe new forms of alliances in the world, providing new perspectives to ideas of subjectivity and agency. Focusing on photography's peculiar alliance with parallel ecologies connected via the machine, this essay argues that new conceptions of nature and social ontologies emerged at this time as photography entered its digital mode of existence.

Photography. Fungi. Machinic-Animism. Avant-Garde Art. The Anthropocene.

1. A NEW WORLD

In 2012 the German artists Wolfgang Tillmans published *Neue Welt*—a selection of more than two hundred images that he had taken in and around 2009 and onwards. The large amounts of images and the spectrum of motifs open up to a reading of the work as an affirmation of a strange world consisting of natural objects, things, and bodies. Almost at the beginning of the book one sees two sheets of glossy printed A4 paper showing two photographs of two different kinds of Eucalyptus trees: one in black-and-white, and one in colour; and a photograph of a termite mound—a sand building or form produced by a termite species that lives in sand (Fig. 1). These are at least the motifs that the titles of the work convince us to believe we are viewing: *Termite Mound* (2012), *Eucalyptus, Tasmania* (2012), and *Eucalyptus, Ethiopia* (2012). Turning a few pages, a spread of two sheets almost completely covered by a close-up photograph—*shark* (2012)—of what appears to be a purple and light grey octopus or shark is seen. It has been placed on light sand on a beach where it is being cut to pieces by a knife, held by two human hands. The title convinces us that what we are viewing a dead shark lying on an unknown beach. The same shark image has also been placed on the previous spread of the book. Yet, it is difficult to actually see the entire motif as five other colour

photographs have been placed upon it, one showing a close-up of a shiny red car surface and the headlights—*headlights (f)* (2012); and a second one showing a group of people on stationary gym bicycles in a fitness class, presumably in Santiago, Chile (*Gym Santiago*, 2012) (Fig. 2). The remaining three images are, impossible to see as the way in which they have been edited, more or less on top or underneath the each other, so that only very small parts of the sides or borders of the photographs are seen, makes it hard to see what they are images of. This confusing delirium continues with another image in the publication—*OP* (2011), a colour photograph of two doctors performing surgery on a human body. The stomach has been cut open and due to a light in the operational theatre of the hospital, placed to make the body parts more visible, the red internal organs of the body are seen. A few pages on, another spread shows a photograph of an airport corridor, empty of people where a signpost with an arrow and the words 'Rest of World' is seen. Next to it, on the same sheet, an abstract image of nothing but an orange surface with some traces of dirt or other particles is to be seen. This is *Silver 100* (2011), an image from Tillmans's *Silver* family, which has been placed here and there in between the representational photographs throughout the

whole book. Other motifs presented on the glossy sheets of *Neue Welt* are a car parked behind an unknown tree carrying large fruits; a close-up of a human hand; a monkey sitting in a tree in a rainforest tree; a close-up of fried meat; shopping mall escalators; Arabic markets; an enormous waterfall; a dark sky full of stars seen from a distance; a close-up of a human tongue and palate; an onion placed on a hub; an exotic bird sitting on a plastic chair, to name a few of the motifs represented in *Neue Welt*. As the shark sheet, all these images are edited underneath and upon each other, in different sizes, on over two hundred and fourteen sheets. It is all a kind of mess, as the images do not provide a clear indication of what the work tries to say about the strange world it presents, if it tries to say anything at all.

According to Tillmans himself, *Neue Welt* had begun as a project to explore the natural world itself. Due to the natural event of the total solar eclipse in Shanghai in 2009, which he travelled to experience and photograph, he had decided to buy and bring his first high-definition digital camera. After the extraordinary total solar eclipse event, he continued his travels to other Asian countries, Africa, Germany, England, South-America and parts of Australia, staying in each country only for a few days. As seen in *Neue Welt*, people, social environments, skies, landscapes, close-ups of sharks, markets, machines, construction sites, ocean water, and various plants, are objects of the world observed and photographed by him with and his new digital camera (a camera that had taken at least most of the images).ⁱ In a conversation between him and the curator Beatrice Ruf, published at the beginning in *Neue Welt*, Tillmans quite directly explains a desire to expand his vision via his camera. As he puts it: "The wish to expand the field of vision was there first." (*Neue Welt*, unpagged). So, this visual expansion was primarily a desire to optically observe and record the total solar eclipse. It should be mentioned that an artistic interest in human vision and stars, celestial bodies, and total solar eclipses, was then not a new dimension of his work. Motifs of outer space have been included in Tillmans's works since the beginning of his engagement with photography. In fact, already in 1999 he turned one of his astronomical studies into a book—*Total Solar Eclipse: Photographs and Drawings* by Wolfgang Tillmans, an artist book consisting of his works (photographs and drawings) from 1979-1982 and 1994-1998. It includes photographs of the sky, planets, sunsets, and soil and grounds with stripes of sunlight, and 'drawings' as in

astronomical diagrams and some found texts on total eclipse of the Sun, sunspots, and the Venus transit, illustrating scientific measures or notes on activity in outer space, observed from Earth (Tillmans 1999). In this sense, the works and motifs of Tillmans's lead us to an assumption that the works illustrate an artistic interest in the world and outer space, now viewed and photographed with a digital camera.

Figure 1: Wolfgang Tillmans, *Termite Mound*,



2012, *Eucalyptus*, Tasmania, 2012, *Eucalyptus*, Ethiopia, 2012, spread 40 and 41 from *Neue Welt*, 2012. Image courtesy to Wolfgang Tillmans and Galerie Buchholz Cologne/Berlin.

Indeed, while *Neue Welt* elucidates photography as a medium that can enable representations of the world, the works, most importantly puts emphasis on an artistic desire to decisively engage with technologies of photography, to explore parallel ecologies of the world and outer space. What remains to ask is if *Neue Welt* was an attempt to conceptually produce new worlds and environments? Tillmans indeed articulates a commitment to photography as an artistic exploration of a new perception and view of the world and outer space, indicating an investigation of forces of natural objects and bodies via means of his new digital technology. In fact, this was accentuated in the interview between Tillmans and Ruf where he recalls that the ambition of *Neue Welt* was to explore the constitution of "life on Earth today." He wanted to explore "how bodies act among themselves." (Tillmans 2012, unpagged). It is here tempting to underline that the "bodies" in *Neue Welt* are living as well as nonliving, as if the shark, the headlights of the car, the bodies and their bikes in the gym, the sand, the escalators were "bodies" that socially interacted with one another, in the world seen in *Neue Welt*. These "bodies" should, therefore, be

understood in light of the theories of Deleuze on Spinoza, theories implying that we do not actually know what “a body can do.” (Deleuze 1988, 17-18). In this sense, Tillmans was not on a world journey to document or record the world or outer space. Surely, a first glimpse of the large project and the images and titles of different tree families, the shark, and the cut open human body, confuse one to interpret the works as related to content of nature documentary footage of remote places on Earth. Yet, pursuing Tillmans’s own artistic notes when analysing these “bodies,” one could argue that the digital camera was a technology used to generate a new world, or at least perspectives of a different world, where relations between art and life, and images and the natural world, were explored in new ways.

In what follows, I first discuss the way in which Tillmans’s approach to photography in the early 2000s should be considered as an investigation of the relation between new media technologies and the world, in light of some process-philosophical theories. Next, I turn to the work spores to underline how his works insist on integrations between new technologies and new models of subjectivity to “metahistorically” explore a sociality of images, beyond generalized history and knowledge. For Tillmans’s photographic exploration opened up a larger investigation of the technology of photography as a means encompassed with autonomy—agency—to collectively form alliances with other beings and systems on Earth. Finally, having discussed the way in which such networked relations motivated Tillmans’s interest in photography, I turn to some contemporary theories of the Anthropocene to expound his use of the medium as a means that can expand some modern ideas of nature and life itself.



Figure 2: Wolfgang Tillmans, Headlight (f), 2012, Gym (Santiago), 2012, spread 46/47 from *Neue Welt*, 2012. Image courtesy to Wolfgang Tillmans and Galerie Buchholz, Berlin/Cologne.

To proceed into the relational potentials between new technologies and new forms of subjectivity, as evocated in *Neue Welt*, a specific avant-garde history where questions of the relation between the world and photography have been investigated, should be mentioned. Since the early twentieth-century, certain ideas of life and art have circulated among the avant-garde to modulate and explore knowledge of the world in new ways. In the 1920s photography paradigmatically became a medium to reflect such concerns in different ways, as in the Dada-montages of Hannah Höch and Raoul Hausmann—works where critical questions of the actual condition of the modern world were raised.² Eventually, some of these ideas were developed among some particular milieus of the late 1960s, where the medium of photography was pointed to a technology that critically could mediate concepts of the history and knowledge of the world in new ways. One of the most paradigmatic projects in this regard is Gerhard Richter’s *Atlas*, a collection of motifs presented via photographs, drawings, new papers, and articles, and images that was modified over the years. Between 1962 and 2013, Richter made and collected 809 ‘Atlas Sheets’, each consisting of a collection of images showing bits and pieces of the world in the form in a seriality of a systematically organized album. In German, the term ‘atlas’ gives associations to a book format that compiled geographical and astronomical knowledge at the end of the sixteenth century. With some similarities with a compiled book of such type, each sheet in *Atlas* has a title that construes the shared motif or theme of that particular sheet: Each sheet shows a selection of carefully taken photographs of the Sun, photographs of the beach, photographs of Venice. In total, the project consists of thousands of images that together form a collection—or an archive—of photographs, where the world itself (like the “atlas”) is explored: *Albumfotos* (1, 1962), *Venedig* (153, 1970), *Strand* (678, 2002), *Sonne* (683, 2003), *Juist* (799, 2013), *Ella* (803, 2007), and so forth. For the sheets show pieces of the world organized as a complex archive or totality of images of the world, a totality that, according to Benjamin Buchloh, should be defined as a response to a “mnemonic device” at a moment in history when the modern European world experienced a “memory crisis.” This was related to the loss of faith in history due to the “almost hysterically accelerated and expanded apparatus of photographic production.” (Buchloh 1999, 136). In this view, *Atlas* was not a traditional visual archive of the world—it was an artistic project that

addressed the “mnemonic” promises of photography to critically engage with how knowledge of the world was construed via new recording technologies, photography.

A different yet similar world investigation appears via photography in the late 1990s, when the artist Gabriel Orozco, for instance, explored analogies between natural and artificial objects of the contemporary world. Since the early 1990s, the Mexican artist had travelled around the world photographing artificial objects placed in nature, such as a plastic ball between two trees, a wooden table placed in sand, and catfish placed on top of watermelons. In his installations, he often combines a large selection of found and collected objects that he would place on the floor with images of different objects on the walls. At Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Sweden in 2012, he for instance placed a careful selection of stones in different forms and shapes among many objects and photographs. In line with the images, the installation as a whole somehow became a reflection on a particular archive of different objects and their material existence in the world. The point to be made, is that the works of Höch, Richter, Orozco, illustrate how critical ideas of the relations between images, technologies (and other forms of objects) and the world have circulated in modern and contemporary art through the twentieth-century. Yet, in comparison with these artists, the technologies, images and motif of Tillmans's works are different. The difference does not only lay in the motifs that are seen and how they are presented, but also, and most importantly, how life on Earth and beyond is explored in process-oriented terms. In order to explore how this may occur, we should return to *Neue Welt*.

2. DEAD AND LIVING MATTER

The claim that the “bodies” seen in Tillmans's *Neue Welt* should be explored in some processual—social ontological—terms arrives

from spores, a digital colour photograph taken by Tillmans in 2012. The image shows a close-up of the trunk of a real tree (Fig. 3). Some parts of it are covered in light grey and white bark, while the rest of the light brown trunk is bare. The background of the tree is not visible; it is light grey and out of focus, hence, blurred. Some parts of the trunk and bark are also out of focus. Yet something else is very visible on the trunk, some objects that are growing out of it. These are the light- brown and purple fungi in different forms growing out of the stub. They are in focus, providing a detailed and rich vision of the fungi. The photograph was taken by Tillmans using a digital camera, a camera that technically enabled this richness of visual details. In the real world, fungi are rather small objects and when taking this image, the artist has been forced to either zoom or come closer to his object in order to get these details. In the case of spores, Tillmans has come very close to the fungi with the camera lens to provide a sharp and detailed view. This is why the background is white and does not make any object visible, and the reason why we are not given any visual information of the environment where the stub and spores exist. Is it a studio photograph? Is the tree standing in a natural or urban environment? Is it alive? The tree is not a studio photograph. It was photographed by Tillmans himself, outdoors in Sao Paulo, using a Canon Full Format Sensor Digital SLR.3 Due to this closeness between the camera and the motif, the work provides a rich detailed image of the fungus. Viewing the image, one sees little holes and lines running through the fungi, appearing as blood veins or the skin of a living body. Dirt particles and very small particles of the bark have fallen off and are now sitting on top of some of the fungi objects. All these parts are also very visible. The image, in other words, enables a very fine representation of this natural object, making the fungi appear to be almost moving, living soft things growing out of a large and dry tree stub where the bark is dry and dead and falling off parts of the tree.



Figure 3: Wolfgang Tillmans, spores, 2012, spread 208 from *Neue Welt*, 2012. Image courtesy to Wolfgang Tillmans and Galerie Buchholz Cologne/Berlin.

It may be argued that Tillmans's made this precise image of fungi not to provide a representation of the natural object in the semantic sense, but to point to photography as a form of technical mediation that enacts some relations between parallel ecologies of the world. The title of this particular work—spores— informs us that we are viewing spores. In biology, a spore is a reproductive unit that is capable of giving life to new individuals without sexual fusion. One of the characteristics of the fungus is that it self-efficiently produces new individual lives for its own body. It is this particular fruit of the fungi species we see in spores. In fact, the fungus seen in spores is a fungus species named *Auricularia auricula-judeas*, an edible *Auricularia* fungus found worldwide. The fruiting body of this species often grows upon older, dead, or dying wood. The reason for this, is that all species in the *Auricularia* are saprotrophic or saprophytes.

They are species that can provide organic matter to decay, via a particular process that provides them with nutrition via cells. It is a cord system called mycorrhizae or fungal roots that performs—a complex process that expands a network between organic life fungus and dead material. For these mycorrhizae cords are invisible organic roots that exist underneath the fungi, leading nutrition from the surrounding environment into the species. This makes the *Auricularia* not a parasite but a species that exists in relationships with its hosts (the plants and trees that supply them with organic nutrition) and the dead material of the tree. In her recent work on mushrooms, Anna Tsing has similarly underlined an interpretation of the fungus as a connecting species:

A mycorrhizal fungus without a plant collaborator will die. But many ectomycorrhizas are not limited to one collaboration; the fungus forms a network across plants. In a forest, fungi connect not just trees of the same species, but often many species (Tsing 2015, 139).

Is the mycorrhizal fungus seen in *Neue Welt* in this sense a species that can create environments by connecting plants and other kinds of species—a species that can form larger environments and collaborations between different species? What makes Tsing's work particularly interesting is that she understands the mushroom as a species that substructures life to dead material in a larger network where there are no distinctions between subject/object and life/nonlife. Tsing goes as far as to say that the mycorrhizal—or any form of mushroom—could be used as a type of living matter to analyse analogies between parallel ecologies. Her work uses the mushroom to unveil relations between natural ecologies and economy and life and nonlife in our contemporary capitalist society (for instance, she mentions environmental crisis, terror, poverty, and so forth, as events where the ecological process naturally taking place in real mushrooms should be applied to other ecologies of the world) (Tsing 2015, 139-40). Interesting in respect of this study, is that this particular species was now—the early 2000s—being (re)discovered in art via digital photography.

This mushroom interpretation is of importance as *Neue Welt* notably refers to the living fungus system to indicate photography as a being that can operate similar as a saprophyte. For instead of showing a seriality of images of natural motifs of ocean water, landscapes and portraits, as in the works of Richter, one could argue that *Neue Welt* conceptualizes photography as a type of

living process that operates in the world almost as it would withhold some form of life. As a photograph, spores shows an image of the spores, the fruit, of the fungus and the dying wooden tree and bark that the species lives upon. Yet, more than representing the world mnemonically, as in Richter, the particular way in which Tillmans has photographed the mushroom— as in the focus on the spores, its rich textures, and the digital colours of the image— seems to refer to the photographic object beyond representation. This goes to argue that Tillmans has photographed this natural system to hint to images as force (like the fungus) that can operate as a saprophyte between living and dead materials. Hence, that it exists as an entity that makes different parts of networks 'speak' with each, forming some relations between parallel ecologies. In this sense the motifs seen in the works notably inform us of a "metahistory" of the natural object photographed. This term comes from Hayden White, who argued in 1973 that the some nineteenth-century historical knowledge of the natural world should be reconsidered (White 1973). She writes as history is "not a science" and that knowledge of the historical world has been predetermined by some "kinds of generalizations one can make about the present world, the kind of knowledge one can have of it" (White 1973, 21). Historical writing is here associated with literary writing, and she argues that a narrative interpretation of art, texts, poetry, and so forth, over time has eliminated an objective scientific history. Implementing the idea of "metahistory" to the motifs and their rich details and textures of the natural object seen in spores, it seems as the work explores a "metahistory" of the fungi system photographed, beyond generalized history and knowledge.

Now this perspective of photography and the mushroom seen in *Neue Welt* activate an avant-garde history of the 1960s when certain artists explored the species to insist of the potentials of art to establish alternative knowledges of nature. By no surprise, an indication of the mushroom as a means to challenge some historical ideas of nature and art has already been made by Gregory L. Ulmer. Writing on the art object in light of postmodernism of the 1990s, he neglects symbolic language and conventions of "representation of the object of study" as a means to understand art. He celebrates the break with "mimesis" and assumptions of art objects and literature as values of "realism"—a break that according to him was underway as he wrote his essay in the early 1980s (Ulmer 1983, 83). What is in particular interesting here is that he explored

the art (and mushroom eating) of the composer John Cage. The mushroom showed up in Cage's writings and performances again and again (in particular his own writings in *Silence* (1961) and *Mushroom Book* (1972), where it was considered as a natural object whose biological processes were connected with processes of technologies (in particular ones related to music production). Cage eats mushrooms. He also devoted himself to the "contemporary mushroom" as a species to explore processes taking place in musical instruments (Cage 1961, 275). By exploring his profound engagement and writings on mushrooms, Ulmer underlines that Cage conceptually evolved the "symbiotic ecology" of the mushroom. What becomes peculiar with Ulmer's work, is that he indicates to the artwork as an object that can produce relations between ecologies. He too underlines that mushrooms have a biological ability to be "living off the decay of dead organisms in a way that makes life possible for living plants." (Ulmer 1983, 105-06). He thus uses the mushroom as a model to point to artworks as objects that can produce organic structures between living and dead objects—as an organism that makes life possible to dead matter. Such view informs a process-oriented view of art—a view where the natural and material are understood as closely tied together. In *Neue Welt* neither mushroom eating, performance, nor poetry are exploited. But similar to the works of Cage and the writings of Ulmer, Tillmans's strange world seems to involve mushroom systems to conceptualize photography as a means that socially can develop relations between the dead and the living.

The art objects we are encountering with in *Neue Welt* are mediations capable to perform some form of agency via digital media technologies. For while spores unveil a "meta-history" of the natural object beyond historical knowledge of the world, the works seems to point to the digital camera device as a purveying system that operates similar as the fungus. Hence, as a mediating force that can make dead materials (such as the dead wood) speak with living plants (spores). Because, as Bruno Latour defines the term in his actor-network-theory, a "mediator" can socially connect to different entities, as well as to different forces and matter (Latour 1991, 78-9). Latour notes that the connection between objects is a force of action that "should remain a surprise, a mediation, an event." (2005, 45). An object, a technology, a medium, plant, a photograph, or any other object, is neither a subject nor an object but a "quasi-subject." Or to be more precise, it is an odd thing that acts as a "quasi- subject" as it establishes

new relations via social connections and meetings with other objects. As Latour sees it, these objects are real, or “quite real,” and they are not human yet “collective.” They attach us humans to one another as “they circulate in our hands and define our social bond by their very circulation.” (Latour 2005, 89). If following this perspective one could argue that the photographs seen in *Neue Welt* explore photography as a digital system that can operate as an autonomous quasi- subject in between the living and the dead, like the fungi system itself. Or to be more precise, spores and the entire images of *Neue Welt* seem to inform us that the different chord systems and networks seen in the works can connect different natural systems with technical systems. A biologist would say that a saprophyte only can exist in the natural world where water, soil, air, and light—materials essential for life to exist—occur. Yet, by turning to some specific ideas that were circulating at the time *Neue Welt* came together, it may become possible to consider technologies as means encompassed with forms of life, not necessarily organic in the biological sense.

In 2010 the philosophers Angela Melitopoulos and Maurizio Lazzarato provided a useful concept of these others forms of lives when they published their text “Machinic Animism” for Ansel Franke’s exhibition *Animism* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin the same year. Photography was indeed a central medium exhibited. They were, however, not viewed as mere representations but indicators of ideas that criticized ideas of oppositions between nature and culture, which according to Melitopoulos and Lazzarato have dominated the modern Western thoughts of the world. Following the work of Félix Guattari and his wish to escape from “subject/object and nature/culture oppositions”, they note that a “de- centring of subjectivity” is essential to understand the universe in which we exist. Most important in the context of this essay, is their development of the concept of “machinic animism”—an extension of the notion of the “machinic.” “Machinic animism” implies the idea that every type of machine (technical, social, or biological) has the power to produce an “animist subjectivity.” (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato 2010, 102-03). Animism emphasises the nature of machines that constantly produce and engender “their own assemblage.” This notion comes from the idea that because each type of machine, living or not, has a vital autonomy, a form of subjectivity, that does not necessarily indicate a biological life like an animal or human, but vital forces that due to its power of action have an ability to “enunciate” despite its lack of biological life (Melitopoulos and

Lazzarato 2010, 102). This means that technical machines can be considered to have a form of vital life, based on their ability to express and form interactions. Melitopoulos and Lazzarato explain this “enunciation” in the following words:

Guattari, detaching himself completely from structuralism, goes on to elaborate an “enlarged conception of enunciation” which permits the integration of an infinite number of substances of non-human expressions like biological, technological, or aesthetic coding or forms of assemblage unique to the socius. (Melitopoulos and Lazzarato 2010, 102).

In this sense, technologies can produce nonhuman forms of subjectivities and processes—forms of life not necessarily living in the biological sense. This means that technical machines and their systems can form a friendly assemblage where interactions between different forces of systems—parallel ecologies—may take place. As of the cords of fungi, a “socius” interaction in these “machinic animism” terms can most likely take place between the living and the dead, as underneath the spores and trees. Hence, it is a process that takes place underneath the surface of the Earth itself (and underneath the image surface of the photographs). Is this perhaps what Tillmans tries to tell us when depicting fungus in *Neue Welt*—that the digital photographic image is a surface that is related to these “machinic” processes?

A “machinic animist” of photography is precisely what Tillmans’s *Neue Welt* realizes. Following the idea of technical, biological and aesthetic social integrations, digital technologies may here not be understood as a technology that simply produces images as in visual surfaces, but as a machine that can distribute life between dead and living matter, like that of the fungus. In this sense, one could argue that Tillmans’s machines have a form of life that is not biological. All this is taking place inside the system. On the surface of the images of *Neue Welt* we see bodies, plants, fungus, animals, and so forth—motifs that show the networks and ecologies underneath each natural object photographed. But one could argue that Tillmans also explored the living operations of the digital machine—as if the light signal and the programmed codes within the device upheld “life” in the machine. “Life” is here enacted because of the digital machine’s ability to, as Lazzarato writes, modulate and “crystallize electronic waves” and “packets of bits.” (Lazzarato 2006, 185. In this sense, the digital camera operates as a living chord—myzachose—that via physical light signals

transports information before it modulates it into packets of programmed bits: pixels of colours and hues. It is, in other words, the light signal that operates as the roots of the camera device, transporting organic nutrition to and from the living environments of the technological device. As of the dying or dead wood where the fungus lives, the hardware of these technologies is here the dead material on which the fruit 'sits' on top of. Yet, underneath the material device and motifs of the image surfaces, a large and complex digital operating system is connecting the light signals that carry pixel information within the image sensor. This operating system of the digital camera makes it a living environment where life constantly is produced (at least when the camera is in operation). Technical hardware is thus never entirely dead. On the contrary, it is in symbiotic relations with the living media environment that its chords produce. These social processes of the machine unveil the digital camera as a kind of quasi-living being that can exist in between the biological and the technical. Almost as if Tillmans's explored the living operations of the digital machine as something that upheld "life" in the machine.

3. PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE ANTHROPOCENE

These particular "life" concerns contributed to thoughts in art production where life on Earth was explored in some specific non-anthropocentric terms. In *Neue Welt* a particular world view of physical and digital life on Earth and beyond, seems was formulated by Tillmans himself in the conversation with Ruf, where he calls for a critique of our human assumptions that life on Earth is something separated from "us" humans. As he writes: "We live on the earth," "We populate the earth," and "Save the planet!" just isn't so, because we are the planet." (Tillmans, *Neue Welt*, unpagged). The distinction between the world and "we"—assuming that the planet were separated from us and our acts—evidently bothered Tillmans who underlined that "we are the planet" (2012, unpagged). An assumption that "we" as in the human beings, are the planet implies that there are no distinctions between humans and other forces on Earth.

Indeed, such artistic questioning of how certain modern terms had formed the meaning of nature and life itself, are connected to some political concerns about ecological crisis that were circulating in the late 1990s and early 2000s. In 2007 Timothy Morton, among others, underlined a similar issue on how concepts concerning "nature" since the Romantic period continue to "re-

establishe[s] a comfortable distance between "us" and "them" (2007, 19). This form of ecocritique lies in how human language and ideology have retained a fixed distinction between nature and culture, which has formed set understandings of nature as a "fascinating object." Like Tillmans, Morton wants to "dissolve" this object to explore the Earth beyond the nature/culture divide, hence to interpret the Earth without any distinction between culture and nature. For the ambition to rethink the we on the planet, like both Tillmans and Morton, was a response to human existence related to the environmental crisis and discussions of climate change, revealed in connection with an enormous political focus on the Anthropocene, reaching its summit in the realm of art around the same time as *Neue Welt* was made. The Anthropocene describes a new geological era that is determined by human activity, which began to be the core of contemporary debates about the state of life on the Earth in the early 2000s. To this end, *Neue Welt* unveils a moment of the early 2000s when art became critically engaged with concerns of nature and life in light of the Anthropocene. At this specific time, several museum exhibitions and artists addressed life and the Anthropocene to question its philosophical stakes. As *Neue Welt*, art critically engaged with causes and effects of climate and environmental changes as well as the technological impact, where the divide between nature and culture, subject and object, and life itself were indeed rethought via the technical production of new forms of subjectivity.

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i All the images of the publication, and the *Neue Welt* moment in general, were however not taken with a digital camera, although Tillmans never wants to say whether individual images are analogue and digital. It is also worth noting that Tillmans started to use the digital camera rather late as the technology had appeared on the market already in the 1990s.

2 I am here in particular referring to Hannah Höch's work *Album*. In 1933 she compiled over four hundred photographic images of subjects from nature, technology, sports, dance, the new woman, film, ethnology, and other areas of interest. These images had been collected from national and international magazines and newspapers, which she cut and mounted into one book. It should be

Tillmans, W. (2012) *Neue Welt*. Taschen, Berlin.
Tillmans, W. (1999) *Wolfgang Tillmans, Total Solar Eclipse: Photographs and Drawings by Wolfgang Tillmans*. Galerie Daniel Buchholz. Köln.
White, H. (1973) *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-century Europe*. Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore.

ENDNOTES

noted that this was four years after Albert Renger-Patzsch had published his critically acclaimed artist's book *Die Welt ist Schön* (the world is beautiful)—a collection of images of machines, plants, and other objects. See Boswell, P, Makela, M, and Lancher, C. (1996) *The Photomontages of Hanna Höch*. Walker Art Centre Publication, New York. Due to the scope of this essay, I will not have the time to fully explore these works in relation the ambition of this essay.

3 This information is comes from an email correspondence between the author and Wolfgang Tillmans, May 2018. I am sincerely grateful to Wolfgang Tillmans and Lena Zimmermann at Galerie Buchholz in Berlin for their enormous help when conducting this research.