

# I SEE YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

interview MAGDALENE KEANEY

Immo Klink was born in 1972 in Germany and lives and works in London. His pictures have been shown, among others, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Castilla y León (MUSAC), the National Portrait Gallery (London), Sala Rekalde (Bilbao) and the Northern Gallery for Contemporary Art (Sunderland). He has participated in numerous group exhibitions alongside Allan Sekula, Andreas Gursky, Boris Mikhailov, Massimo Vitali, Thomas Hirschhorn, Tracey Moffatt and Wolfgang Tillmans.

He continues to contribute to magazines such as Another Magazine, Dazed & Confused, FRAME, i-D, CAMERA AUSTRIA, Observer & Independent Magazine and Sueddeutsche Zeitung Magazin. Most of his work is politically motivated. Whether it is shown in a museum or a fashion magazine is not particularly important to Klink; he wants to reach everyone, something he manages fairly well.

For QVEST, Magdalene Keaney, Curator and Creative Director of the Fashion Space Gallery at the London College of Fashion, asks how and why he left his career as a lawyer for international law and who motivated him to become a photographer.

*MAGDALENE KEANEY: We've known each other for a number of years and when I met you, you were working as a photographer. I want to start this interview by not taking that fact for granted because I got to thinking that you haven't followed a traditional trajectory of training or working. You've paved your own way more than most. Could you tell me about finding yourself as a photographer and your path through a career in photography?*

*IMMO KLINK:* My background is not from art school or studying photography at college or being a long-time assistant. I studied law. I have a degree in law and I came to London to do a Masters in intellectual property and international business law. The year I did my Masters degree in London politicized me. Many of the topics that we addressed were about the lack of a legal framework of globalization and about multinational corporations and the injustices that come with that. At the same time protests were kicking off in London, so I saw it from an academic side, but dissent was also happening on the street. Then at the end of my Masters I met Wolfgang Tillmans, who's been quite influential in my early years of photography. I happened to be managing his studio at the time when he was nominated for the TURNER PRIZE. I didn't work for him for very long, but it was immensely interesting. After that I decided I should stay in London and give it a go myself. Since then I've been living and working here as a photographer and artist.

*Staying with that question – did Wolfgang's practice influence you to work outside of the traditional boundaries of »art« or »fashion«? What was the transition from working in his studio to taking your own photographs?*

My law school education helped because it requires a very rigorous way of thinking that has had an impact on how I work now, on how I analyze my surroundings and photograph them. Wolfgang came to be known widely through magazines like i-D and other fashion and style magazines. It was an interesting time because fashion photography was very open. Things could be discussed in a more fluent way in fashion than in a strict art context or a documentary editorial context. I think that had an influence on me. He set new ways of working that proposed you didn't have to be only a fashion or an editorial or a documentary or an art photographer. He was one of the first to

break down these boundaries and it's something I've taken on. I think you can make your own agenda – be it art, editorial or even commercial photography. I photographed before I came to London, I was self-taught. It was the typical thing that my father had a camera and I picked it up and realized I got good results, so I continued.

*I wonder if you can express yourself now as a photographer in a way that you may not have been able to when you started, or even when we met. What particular quality your photography has, or what you think the work you have been doing says or amounts to?*

Even in 2000 when I first met Wolfgang and showed him some images, he immediately said, »I see you want to change the world«. So I think that was already unconsciously there, even then. I've since refined my process and I'm trying to find all kinds of channels to do that. I see different genres – art, editorial, fashion etc – as diverse channels of distribution; they all have different criteria and agendas. I'm looking at the image in terms of what it shows and what it might be able to change in a social context.

*Do you think your work has a particular aesthetic? Is there something about the 35mm format that you consider particularly apt or important to your image making?*

I think it's mostly been about impact, so the image is rarely about photography as such – or questions like »what is photography«? It's always connected to an event of political significance or maybe revealing social circumstance. I set out with a 35mm camera and always come back to it, but I'm not too concerned about formats. 35mm is clearly made for street photography – it's flexible and designed to be fast. I switched to digital a couple of years ago because it is almost a kind of democratic method. I'm quite happy to photograph with what might be considered amateur and non-specialist equipment. I find it interesting to show that you don't have to stick to film or a large format camera to be »arty«. I like to use what everybody can use.

*That's interesting as a conceptual point. I think in your photography there is a trademark aesthetic and energy important to your position that is conveyed through the use of quick, generally color process of 35mm. I*



**PRADA**



*think it would have a different political and social perspective if you were using a medium or large format camera at exactly the same time and place. Again, I don't want to take those choices and what they mean for granted.*

I don't think the choice of format happened all that consciously. A lot of my work is dictated by circumstance. When I came to London in 1999 it was so expensive. I couldn't afford to process large amounts of film. Going digital was a logical consequence because it enabled me to keep working. Of course, I saw the rise of the Becher school of photography, with all the students using large format cameras and in a way celebrating the technology. At first I was quite impressed but then I got a bit over-saturated with this monumental photography. I thought what matters is in the picture, not how detailed it is. There too, I'm different from Wolfgang, bluntly speaking. A picture for me is information. I don't care too much about the physicality of the image, like the paper for instance. For me it could be published in a magazine or in the »blog-a-sphere« or emailed around. At the end of the day I don't mind publishing a not perfect photographic picture if I find what is in it important and it needs to be shown.

*You are talking about the content and subject of the photograph as being of primary importance to you, as something that needs to be shown or seen. I've been thinking about an idea that one way fashion photography can be political is through pursuing content and subject rather than just form. Could you comment on that in terms of images you might make for fashion editorial or advertising? Do you think there is a way to have another subject or content that makes pictures fashion and political?*

I am interested in fashion photography, though you might not know it from the MAYDAY or TOPSHOP pictures. I've sometimes wondered why myself, because fashion is so concerned with a capitalist and consumerist agenda. For me, fashion sometimes has this great sensitivity for picking up moods and new ideas in society before anyone else. For example, in the 90s when fashion photography was very open, it promoted alternative lifestyles, DIY culture or new attitudes towards gender. Equally important is that if you take a fashion magazine, it's the only place where picture people – people who think in pictures – normally have more say than the text people – those who think in words. It's been often said this is the age of the image, but I don't believe in works like that. The world is governed by words, by linear language. Pictures are only »lined up« to illustrate them and then are overwritten by captions. I studied law and that's text. The language of government is made of words, not images. If you want to shut down a power station, you don't do it with pictures, you do it with text. That's how politics works. Fashion is one of the few forums where picture people have more of a say than text people. Though of course compared to the 90s, it seems more difficult than it is today, and fashion again mostly seems to be just about selling things.

*One of the things I love about fashion is that it is constantly moving and changing just as the world around us is always moving and changing.*

*That pace is a powerful quality. I wanted to talk about it in relation to producing commercial fashion that does its job but also suggests content and subject and therefore moves toward being political. So for instance, an alternate lifestyle theme in your LEVI's Vintage shoot that touches on the personal work you did with utopian communities in Europe.*

You have to be careful. If you work commercially, you can get maximum exposure but limited impact, as far as content is concerned. It's almost the opposite in art, where there is very limited exposure to an elite circuit but you have much more control over the content – which then is discussed on a higher intellectual level. I can't say that the few commercial commissions I take on are heroic works of activism, but rather a way to support my family. However, I'm happy if I can have a small influence even in this arena. Before I did them, the LEVI's Vintage campaigns looked very different. I made a shift by introducing 35mm photography, insisted as much as I could on street casting and focused on issues of American cultural history. The positive feedback I received from both the advertising world and the general public was that they liked it because everybody thought it looked less like a look book or fashion shoot.

*So that then introduces different ideas about gender relationships, or life-style choice. Or what the ideal of beauty can be, which might be soft and subtle, but is still important.*

It is soft, because at the end of the day a product has to be sold. But even working with 35mm, with hardly any postproduction, is still a big shift in advertising.

*Let's turn to some of your photographs that aren't made as commercial commissions. The personal projects, where you take on that lovely observation by Wolfgang of »wanting to change the world«. You've produced many series of work over the last fifteen years, and I wanted you to speak broadly a little about them - and your involvement with activist groups as a participant, observer and documenter during this time.*

I want to clarify that, yes, this line of work is somewhat documentary, but it goes further. All the political groups I worked with – Space Hijackers, Climate Camp, The Clown Army, and recently NGOs and charities that are less grass roots and more institutionalized. With all of these it's really thinking about strategies. When I'm with the Hijackers or direct action groups it's always discussed in the meeting beforehand – first, can I come and photograph? Which is an issue now, because my photos may get seized by the police and then everyone gets into trouble. Then, how can we make the most impact with images so people will see them? Sometimes that influences what the action is. Having a 35mm camera helps because I can take part and then quickly step aside, taking some pictures at the same time. This creates more trust, since we are trying to develop something together. I'm not just being a press photographer who then goes home and sells the pictures off to the media. I'm an active participant in the movements and not just a documentary photographer sitting on the fence.

*You mention strategy and impact, so it's not the taking of the image that is*

*an end in itself, but how the image is used and who sees it. So is the platform and dissemination as important as being there?*

It's both the platform and the finding of a forum afterwards – »where can I disseminate these pictures?« But at the early stage of taking the pictures the story is also about my personal involvement. It is my journey over the last ten years trying to clarify and find these new positions. My photos are increasingly received as a part of that exploration.

*What do you think about the very much increased public use of photography in situations of public protest and political unrest? That's very different to your sustained work and your journey, but has been a massive development globally. What are your impressions of this?*

The situation at protests today is amazing. Basically everyone has a camera and as soon as, say, a police officer pushes a protester it will be recorded by hundreds of cameras. It's a whole new dimension – it's like a camera war and a surveillance war from both sides. The police here in the UK have what is called a FIT team, which stands for »Forward Intelligence Team«, a rather aggressive unit that films and photographs everything around a protest. There is an aspect of intimidation, but the recorded material is also being used as evidence in court and to create databases about protesters.

On the other hand, the protesters are aware of this and are now filming back. It's become very clear how important that can be – for example, in the case of the passer-by Ian Tomlinson who was killed during G20 protests in London. First there was denial about any wrongdoing by the police. But then everybody started to sift back through their memory cards and later in court it was possible to reconstruct a narrative from different perspectives and cameras that clearly indicated he was beaten to death by a rogue police officer. People are very aware of that. It's like a war of evidence gathering.

*You are quite well known for the series of MAYDAY pictures, some of which are published here. When were they taken?*

They were taken on MAYDAY (1st May) 2002. In the wake of anti-capitalist protests in Seattle and elsewhere, Mayfair London 2002 was declared on various websites as the official battle zone. The reaction of shop owners and the police was to board everything up to counter the fear of vandalism and destruction, which in the end did not happen. I happened to be there early in the morning. There were no protesters around. There were just ordinary people going to work, clearly confused about the whole scenario, which almost looked like an art installation. You can see all the major brand logos but not their shop windows. It's the brand censoring its own product for one day.

*These pictures have been widely published. Is it correct to say that this is the body of work that in some way defined you in the »style media« and also the »art world«?*

When I saw the images I thought that they somehow nailed it. I hadn't had too much exposure in the art world before, so yes,

the breakthrough really came with these images. I think they were published widely in magazines because for impact you need a connection to something else like a historic event, or in this case the brands. Everyone immediately understands what they stand for.

*How did the use and discussion of the images differ between style magazines and the art gallery world?*

I don't think there was too much of a difference. If you have really good images, all the different sectors go for the same one. Moving on to the more recent TOPSHOP photographs, which you took at the time of the student riots in London in 2010. Obviously in terms of our discussion they fit within your journey, so it's clear why you were there and took the pictures. There seems to be a link to the Mayfair pictures because of the setting of the central London retail precinct. But they are actually different too, because London in 2010 represents a totally different time and era to Mayfair 2002.

Yes, there is definitely another momentum gathering pace now. The student protests and tax evasion protests we saw at the end of 2010 has brought in a whole new generation of young people who see their future opportunities in education being traded off to service a deficit caused by a global meltdown of banks. I think the images show a new velocity in protest movements, the generation that instigated these protests is connected to social media and the speed with which it acts and reacts is incredible.

*I think there's something powerful in the pictures of TOPSHOP as a metaphor for a new generation rejecting and challenging the status quo. Because it's TOPSHOP, not PRADA or YVES SAINT LAURENT that is their brand.*

The velocity is new, but so is the targeting. They clearly targeted TOPSHOP, whose owner made arrogant comments as an official advisor to the government about the waste of public money, while he himself is involved in a major tax evasion scam.

*Describe how you were invoked.*

Well, I knew something was going on, so I decided to go down to Oxford Street. I had the metaphor of broken glass already in my mind because windows are like an invisible barrier – just as cuts in education are. When I got to TOPSHOP it wasn't yet boarded up or secured. Usually with a high street shop like this you only have a small window of time in which to show this attack actually happened, because within hours it will be boarded up, the windows replaced and the next day will be business as usual.

*I've got a perception of London that the city has turned another corner recently, away from slightly indulgent self-positioning as an art capital of the world, to a city that needs to fight to maintain grants for artists, galleries and libraries. I don't think it will be possible for artists and institutions to ignore political and social issues as much as they have in recent years.*

I think there are a lot of artists who don't speak openly about their political orientation, even if they make a political statement in their work. I think it would be interesting for people to take a side. I think the time has come to be more explicit.



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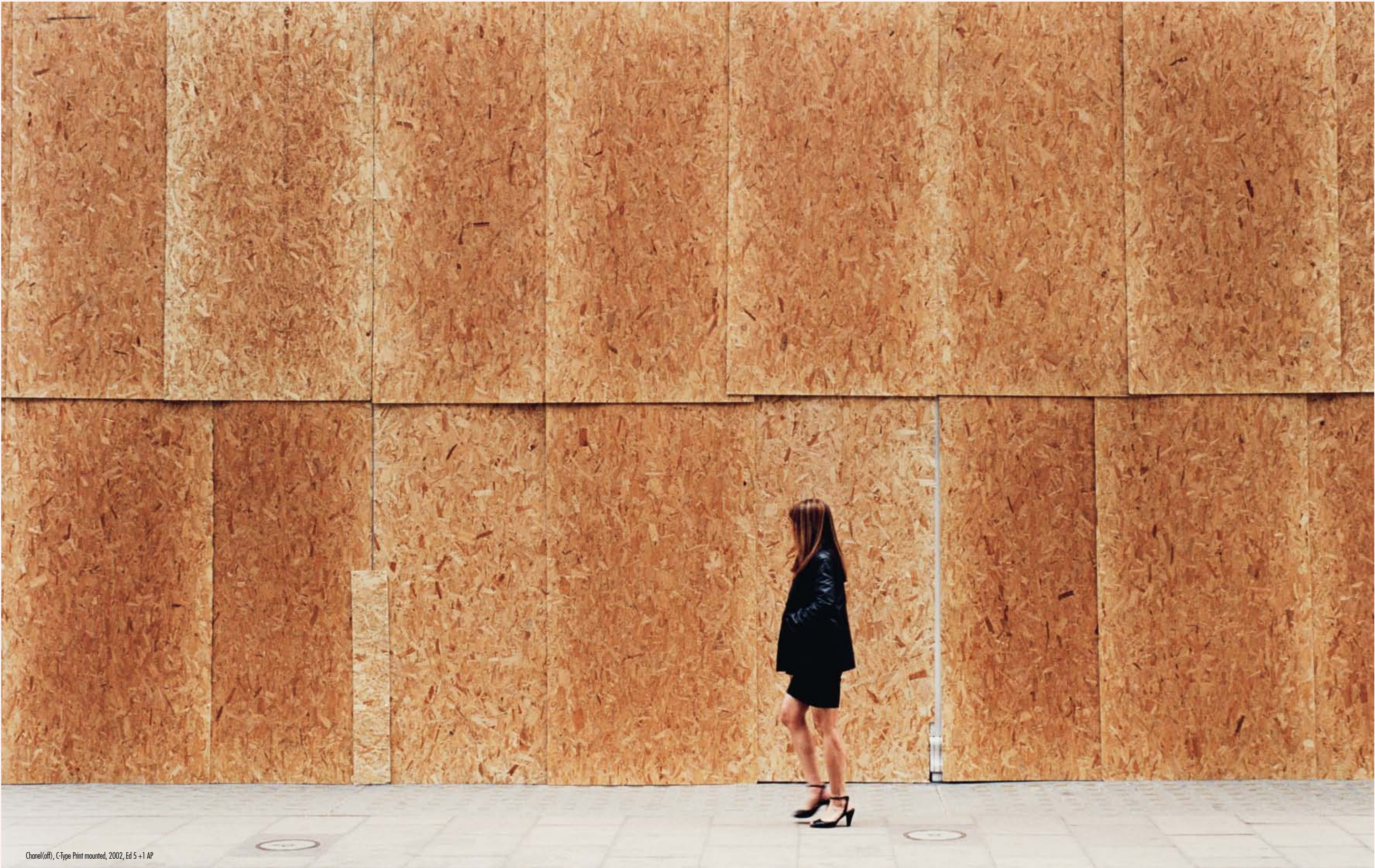




YVES SAINT LAURENT  
■ rive gauche ■







Chanel(Off), C-Type Print mounted, 2002, Ed 5 +1 AP





Left: Topshop Tax Evasion #3 (Detail), 2010, Ed 5 +1 AP, Right: Topshop Tax Evasion #1, 2010, Ed 5 +1 AP









Phillip Green Pay your Tax, 2011, Edition: N/A