

In Both Bi- and Triennial, Wu Tsang Talks Community

by *aimee walleston* 02/14/12



Wu Tsang was born to reform. Working in installation, film and event planning, Tsang's work is a pioneering example of art and activism. The only artist included in both "The Ungovernables," the upcoming New Museum Triennial, and the Whitney Biennial—as well as MoMA's Documentary Fortnight—in the next few weeks Tsang will deliver a trifecta of projects that combine the artist's critical interest in the interstice between individual and community. "With my work, I'm always asking 'what does it mean to speak for oneself, but on behalf of a group?'" says Tsang. This question is thoroughly fleshed out in Tsang's first feature length documentary film, to be screened as part of the Biennial's cinema series, and premiering at Documentary Fortnight on Feb. 22. Tsang has titled it *Wildness*, for a weekly party he threw from 2008–2009 at the Silver Platter bar, popular among Latin trans and queer people. "The Silver Platter is a home space for a lot of people; people celebrate Christmas and Thanksgiving there," says Tsang, who attended the Art Institute Chicago for undergraduate and received his MFA from UCLA in 2010.



Wu Tsang, Full Body Quotation, 2011. Performance.; Wu Tsang, Full Body Quotation, 2011. Performance.

"When *Wildness* started, it was a really different group of people. But then the party started becoming really cool, and there was some high-level press," says Tsang. The party became a platform for artists like Ron Athey and Ryan Trecartin to develop their performance. Tsang responded to the gentrification by going into documentarian mode. "I felt that the party had become politicized, and I felt a mandate to articulate that this was a party that was inclusive, and not just for artists."

Tsang approaches the film through character development and cohesive narration. "A narrative *could* be the worst possible thinking about trans women, about immigrants and my community of queer artists," says Tsang. "It *could* imply that we're all freaks, and that we found a bar where we all fit in, and it's a really happy home." Tsang created a less restrictive by making a talking bar the main character. "It's me and the bar, and I'm this young, idealistic person, and the bar is a parental figure, who loves me but gets really annoyed with me when I'm being stupid," he says. "It's a love story between me and the bar." *Wildness* informed the work for the triennial. "I would be at a film market event for *Wildness*, and people would say, 'Oh, it's like *Paris Is Burning*,'" remembers Tsang. "Just because it's about queer people of color?" The misconception that all films about queer people of color are alike led Tsang to imagine an experimental performance-based film project, *For how we perceived a life* (2012). Tsang researched archival materials and responses to Jennie Livingston's legendary 1991 documentary, specifically the way that the performers' appropriations of "white" glamour were re-interpreted. In the piece, Tsang includes an unedited conversation between Livingston and one of her subjects. The voiceover from the film—one that appears to idealize wealth and white culture—is revealed to be an angry reaction to Livingston's ease with privilege in the ball community. "I feel like I got into Jennie Livingston's head," says Tsang. "I was trying to understand her intention."

The second film for the Triennial, *Shape of the Right Statement* (2008) appropriates a proclamation originally given by autistic rights activist Amanda Baggs. In the film, Tsang is framed from the shoulders up, in front of a sparkly silver curtain (the film was shot inside the Silver Platter). For the duration of the film, Tsang recites the Baggs's manifesto, a treatise on how her personal methods of communicating differ from what mainstream society finds acceptable. The film shows Tsang using his "Full Body Quotation" method, creating performance where he recites and performs dialogue as it is piped into his ear from an invisible earpiece. The technique, which Tsang first began developing from training in opera, creates a richly syncopated dissonance in the performer's voice and physical gestures. "With Bel Canto you create a cavity with your body for air to move," says Tsang. "From there, I started thinking about bodies as playback devices, to be used to channel for sound and voices. It opposes the idea of authenticity." Having investigated the idea of the performer as vessel, Tsang is creating a container for performers at the Whitney Biennial. *Green Room* will mirror the glamorous, sparkling, lights-camera-action aesthetic of the Silver Platter. Tsang laughs, "When I met with the curators, they said, 'The acoustics are best in the green room on the fourth floor, but we could move the green room and you can do your installation there.' And I was like, 'Oh wait a minute, a "green room"—that's perfect.'" Tsang's work will be open during museum hours, and will only close when performers need it. "It really fits with all the things I'm excited about, as someone who hosts parties and organizes events. It's that whole confluence of the energy of getting ready, and supporting performers—a 'changing room' in all ways."