"Wu Ingrid Tsang in Conversation with Mary Kelly", Andrea Geyer / Sharon Hayes (eds.), Switzerland, 2010

IN CONVERSATION WITH
MARY KELLY & WU INGRID TSANG

SHARON HAYES AND ANDREA GEYER: It seems like the four of us, in addition to addressing various political concerns, also have a particular interest in social and political movements (feminism, gay liberation, the current trans movement, etc.) and the ways in which political desires are articulated as collective actions or activities. Is this an accurate or productive way to talk about your interests as artists?

MARY KELLY: Rather than jumping right into the work, I'd like to talk about how these shared concerns came about, historically speaking. When I started making work in the '70s, the prevailing definition of art concerned "medium," as Rosalind Krauss defined it, not just a physical support, but also a set of rules or procedures that were inherent to it, form as content you could say. Well, I wanted to argue that the physical support could be something like an oppositional movement, a community, or a discourse—psychoanalysis, ethnography, for example—and that the rules this generated, the procedures, would have to be different, less self-referential, more context driven. This shift seemed to be prompted by the emergence of issues like identity, less consciously at first, but it really took off in the '80s, producing the aesthetic strategy now known as "post-medium." So, the look of work as well as the kind of options you have for what you can address has changed. If we considered the trajectory of our practices over three decades in terms of *procedures*, then I'd be interested in asking what continuities you see there.

WU INGRID TSANG: Listening to you all makes me think about the first project I ever made, which—now looking back—I understand to be concerned with the question of social movements. It's a film called *Hospitality* (2005) that I made while studying with Alfredo Jaar at the Ratti Foundation in Italy. Prior to that, I had organized an event in Chicago around queer feminism called *Pilot Television,* but I was really struggling to define my art practice. *Pilot* had grand ambitions. It was inspired by that scene in *Born in Flames* (directed by Lizzie Borden) where the women take over the TV station—and we actually intended to get our videos on television. In reality it was a totally bombastic, ephemeral thing, although several of the videos have lived on as artworks today. *Pilot* was definitely a social and aesthetic endeavor for me, but I didn't know what my questions were, nor did I understand my role as a maker. *Hospitality* was my first attempt at developing what Mary would call a true project. While I was working on this film in Italy, I had a phone conversation with Emily Roysdon, who was studying with you at the time, Mary. I remember we got into a debate about the meaning of *political*. She said, "I was crossing the street with Mary yesterday, and I was trying to stop her from getting hit by cars when she gave a really precise definition of *political*, which I kind of forgot because I was so worried about the cars." And I was like, "Oh! Please find out for me!" I was dying to know. And she forwarded me your definition in an email: it involved Jacques Rancière's concept of *disidentification,* from his essay "The Cause of the Other."[1]

MK: About becoming a political subject . . .

WIT: I remember what really struck me was that you said in order for a movement to be *political,* it must have concrete demands. This idea actually became the genesis of *Hospitality,* which is based on a series of interviews with queer feminist-identified people, and it is about searching for a demand. I didn't use a set of questions in the interviews. Instead I let the conversations develop to see how people articulated what they wanted. The resulting film is a kind of palimpsest of voices, which are incoherent as a movement yet are precise in a way that creates a different kind of politics. Looking back, I think my initial question about the relationship between art and social movements was like a seed planted by Mary Kelly.

MK: From a personal point of view, it's obvious that the women's movement created a completely different imperative for me as an artist. I was involved as an activist initially and it wasn't until later that I realized it was the basis for my project—that conceptualism's "interrogation of the interrogation" had become, for me, the question of subject formation. There was logic to the questions that followed, too, which came from what I began to call the "discursive site," and it determined how I would actually carry on developing a practice informed by feminism. But not just any feminism, it was the tendency that emphasized the construction of difference rather than gender—called "anti-essentialist" in the '80s, remember? Because it

was based on the discourse of psychoanalysis, our notion of sexuality was linked to its uncertain status in the unconscious and I think this allowed other things to be thought through in a similar way: ethnicities, race, object choice. I feel this is the legacy all of you continue, but more importantly, I see you transform and advance it in your work, especially in Wu's documentation of the Silver Platter.

AG: Many times, as a student, I was "accused" of being a sociologist because of the methods and ideas I was working with in my studio. When I arrived in New York, I found a community of like-minded people, became part of a reading group, and started to think about post-colonial theory and psychoanalysis as sites that could become part of my art practice. Listening to Wu and Mary, it's interesting to me how formative this connection between community, a theoretical discourse and art seems for all of us, it enables our practices as artists.

Mary Kelly, *Post-Partum Document: Introduction,* 1973.
Detail, 1 of 4 units, 20 x 25.5 cm each. Collection Peter Norton Family Foundation, Santa Monica.

MK: Referring to my earlier comments about medium, perhaps, I would say that community is the physical support and, within it, the particular discourse you share is where the rules come from, what makes it possible to have a method of interrogation. Art then is defined by the medium, but without being prescriptive, without trying to make "art" per se. Andrea, you were saying how they called you a "sociologist," well, when I first exhibited *Post-Partum Document* at the ICA in London in 1976, they called me everything, from "raving lunatic" to "the nappy lady"— referring to the stained diaper liners in Documentation I. The tabloid press had a field day. I said, "It's art because I say so," and this was quoted everywhere. There were cartoons. I remember people arguing about my work and actually starting to fight over it.

At that time, *PPD* was problematic. It looked like conceptual art, but there was a visceral materiality, which seemed incongruous in some way. Something was disrupted each way you looked at it. Some viewers could identify with the mother's experience, but had a problem with the Lacanian diagrams. Others, mostly men, liked the idea of theory, but had a hard time with the memorabilia or "stuff." I do think it's easier now to make work that doesn't look like "art." Do you think this way of working has become a known style and, consequently, poses other problems for you, or don't you even think about your work in those terms?

WIT: I think I'm still figuring it out. The question of whether a work, the film I'm working on, *La Bienvenida* [working title] for example, will ultimately function in art contexts or social or political contexts isn't that urgent to me right now. I imagine that it could operate in multiple contexts and I don't feel that I have to fight to prove that. Such possibilities are already a given, something I inherited from the work done before me. I can focus my energy elsewhere.

SH: Mary, you are absolutely right that it's easier now to have an art practice that doesn't look like "art." There's a wide and diverse set of possibilities to work in at the moment, whether discursive, exhibition-based, or event-based, and there are multiple ways in which to engage one's practice around an interrogation or a set of procedures. What that does for me is it asks for another kind of responsibility vis-á-vis other discursive and disciplinary procedures. This is where I see a relationship to the moment in which you were first working, Mary, when many of these possibilities were opened up.

MK: Yes, yes, Sharon, absolutely. There's a difference between the formal interventions of the two moments. Now that diverse strategies are accepted, they may also have become somewhat meaningless because there isn't a common project connecting the work to a specific site or historical moment. What you're calling responsibility is exactly that—a project; it's as if you're bearing witness to something and want to be responsible or faithful to that experience and the process it initiated. Maybe that's what gives our different practices certain continuity.

AG: I find this question of the responsibility towards not only form but mode of production very important in the current moment, in which the "everything goes" seems at times to suggest a certain superficiality in the meaning of such choices. Yet no meaning exists without a form. As a gesture, formal decisions might be considered and at times used as meaningless, but as you both say truly they are as meaningful and allow us to build relationships across disciplines in all their complexity and references. I think the difference today is that it might take a different effort to make that visible to an audience in the work and this "making visible," I think, is part of this responsibly you are describing.

MK: Do you think that something transformative—the "event" as Alain Badiou defines it—has to happen to you before you feel impelled to act, or "follow the consequences of the event" as he would say?[2] But, perhaps, this doesn't happen for everyone.

Wu Ingrid Tsang, top and bottom: *La Bienvenida* (2008, work in progress). Feature film, HD video, video stills.

WIT: I've heard you say before, Mary, that the possibility of having a project requires being at the intersection of a historical moment that impels you. I guess I identify with that because I often feel there is simply work that needs to be done. Not that it's easy, or that I know how it's going to turn out, but at times it seems my creative decisions are determined by the conditions. The more I work, the greater the imperative to be clear, almost to the point of being literal as a strategy. For example, if the tangle of activities I'm involved with right now center around questions of sexual difference, there is already so much to do just to parse it out—through my individual and collaborative works, such as the nightclub (Wildness), and IMPRENTA (the project space), which is developing social services for low-income trans people of color. We are even working on a program to administer free hormones—which is like my fantasy, that being trans is not only something you survive at, but something that is embraced and simply available. Working this way, in between these different nodes of production, can become quite illegible as an art practice, and I feel like there is so much to do, just making meaning of all the connections.

SH: What's interesting to me, reflecting on the work you did, Mary, in relation to the feminist movement, is that one's historical moment is often overwhelming and impossible to see from within. Not everyone can identify their own project *at the time it's forming*. There is something necessary, for me, about working through ideas and discourses in the space of one's practice that is about constructing the project as you are practicing it.

MK: Can you say a bit about some of your early performance pieces? What made you want to remake events from the past? There's something about re-enacting that is very specific to your generation.

SH: It has a lot to do with the specific historical connection I have to the moment of the late '60s, early '70s. I was born in 1970, and I came to New York in 1991,

Mary Kelly, *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, 2001. Installation 206 feet overall, detail: 1 of 196 units, compressed lint.

at the height of the AIDS crisis and ACT UP. I think these generational specificities are different from both yours and from Wu's. The year 1970 marks a kind of primary trauma for me. The set of events that happened in those years had a deep impact on me but in ways that I couldn't possibly understand. This generational specificity has shaped my formation as a political subject and defined one of the most significant aspects of my practice, which is an investment in the ways that events mark themselves psychically and socially into our collective imaginations.

MK: Can I go into this a little more? I see two different things here. I don't think that the notion of a transformative event as we were discussing it earlier, that is, something that instigates a truth procedure, is the same thing as the traumatic event you're describing, Sharon, which concerns the question of origins. In psychoanalytic terms, it would be the primal scene that prompts the child's question: Where did I come from? So, perhaps, we could consider the mystery of conception in a socio-political as well as sexual sense and call it the political primal scene. I've talked about this in relation to *Love Songs*, haven't I? I think it's about the way you decode parental desire, not just what *is* said, but also, what is *not* said. It's what you *think* you know about the past. Of course, it's always about failure, which supports Walter Benjamin's idea that the secret agreement between generations is about a missed opportunity and the possibility of redeeming it. I think this is what comes up in your work, Andrea. But the idea of event as something that you might call, let's say, epistemological, rather than traumatic, that is, about knowledge, even if it's more intuitive, concerns a distinct experience. I feel it palpably when I talk to Wu, that there's something that happened that's life-changing and you're not necessarily sure why, but you go with it, you feel you have to respond to it, that you are impelled to find out more. The two types of event don't necessarily coincide.

Mary Kelly, *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi*, 2001. Video still, opening performance, Santa Monica Museum of Art. Courtesy Michael Nyman.
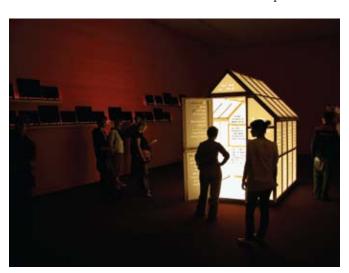
AG: I just completed a new project based on the trial of Adolph Eichmann that took place in Jerusalem in 1961. Wu is the only performer in this work. He performs all six characters in a constructed trial scene that is based on a heavily edited script of the existing trial transcripts and Hannah Arendt's writing about it. It's a re-enactment not of the event but of the document of the event, as well as of what I would call *memory*. Memory as it exists within each of us is a combination of the memory of events we experienced ourselves, the memory that is transferred to us through older generations, and the memory we learn through the cultures we were raised within. By living your life, all these elements become your own memory. I don't think you can ever take them apart. Having grown up in Germany and having lived in the United States for the last 14 years, I feel I have two formative cultural histories as part of my own memory. This awareness has guided my work in recent years in which I look at history through an actual body, through a person (not a biographical but a singular person). The work I am doing on the trial of Adolf Eichmann is a visualisation of how a historic moment, and the memory of this moment, is processed through a singular body: Wu. As himself, as one person, he embodies all positions within the trial. For me to treat the event of the Eichmann trial this way becomes a metaphorical space of re-enactment that occurs within ourselves. It reflects the relationship of an event and memory.

MK: And of the body "as language"?

AG: Yes.

MK: So there's the written and spoken language and there's the language of the unconscious, all those dimensions of what is visible and invisible on a sliding scale. But I've always wondered about the form that takes in your work, how language materialises in the work through an actor with a visible body and speaking voice. I have, for the most part, worked around the absence of the body or, with its "presentified absence," you could say, in the form of residue. Even when I use a representational image, as I did in the film loop for the *Love Songs* installation, it's minimal, barely visible. I feel like I'm working with my eyes closed, with the residue of something, what's left after the perceptual experience, I mean, the "affect." Although I identify with the way you work, conceptually, I realize that your installations have always taken a very different form from mine and that intrigues me.

AG: Interestingly, I recognise the investment in the body, but as you say, the politics of the representation of that body are different. I think that speaks to time. Perhaps Sharon could speak about the love addresses she has recently spoken in public spaces, that are personal, abstract and general at the same time. I feel that even at the high time of what is called "relational aesthetics," nobody wanted to address the complexity or maybe the discomfort of a concrete, singular (non-biographical) body that exists and operates within the social and the political sphere. I try to address the unsolvable presence of it, as part of my work. In the work on the Eichmann trial we find: Hannah Arendt, Adolf Eichmann, Gideon Hausner (Prosecutor), Dr. Servatius (Defense), Mose Landau (one of three judges), and the audience. All are invested heavily in justice for their own ends, they argue, convince, fail, as well as law itself fails them at times, while the case itself focuses on the question of individual responsibility within politics. We experience their struggles and discomfort of the constant shifting around these questions. To show the complex struggles around the concept of truth and justice rather than essentializing them is a very important strategy for me to understand history, to understand memory.

Mary Kelly and Ray Barrie,, *Multi-Story House*, 2007. Top: installation, documenta 12, Kassel. Bottom: detail, wood frame, cast acrylic, fluorescent light, 244 x 183 x 244 cm. Photos by David Familian.

SH: I wonder, Andrea, if this strategy is also a response to the openness that we were talking about at the beginning of the conversation, that multiple discourses, multiple objects of interrogation are available to us. Something else that is common to Andrea's and my work is that we both make iterative work—work that deals with this idea that there is a moment in which a body and a text and a time and a place coalesce but that is one moment among many. This isn't a valorization of relationality by any means, but, perhaps, a strategy to deal with overactive and multiplicitous social, political, economic times. This thing that Andrea calls singularity is something that she and I and Ashley Hunt, David Thorne, and Katya Sander talked a lot about in relation to our collaborative project *9 Scripts from a Nation at War*. In that piece, we were interested in positing various speech acts in which what was made material was not just the words and not just the person who spoke those words, but also the presence of a text that was both script and transcript—a text that functions as a document of something that had happened but also as something that could project itself into the future, another moment

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when it could be read or could be spoken again.

MK: Those fragments of conversation, or what you call the singularity of real bodies . . . you could also think of that as a kind of oral history. It means you can leave the analysis to the viewer. I use this in my work as well. I structure the speech events so that they're intelligible, but still open to interpretation. This way of organizing or materializing evidence is central for all of us, I think, but for you, the voice, the actual physical voice, seems to be necessary. For me, it's the writing, the physical imprint, the physical trace, which matters most. Those are significant differences in the visual field; I mean, how does the trace act on a viewer differently from the voice?

Sharon, you've tried to show how the voice registers the unconscious dimension of language by calling attention to the contingency of the moment and the specific subject within the moment of the utterance. I always hear certain people speaking when I write, but when you read my text silently, do you hear them? Or is it always filtered through your own voice? I got such a shock when the score Michael Nyman wrote for my installation *The Ballad of Kastriot Rexhepi,* was performed because I was letting someone else into the process. When I heard

Sarah Leonard sing, it was radically different from the voice I imagined. I mean, the separation was interesting because it prevented a hysterical identification with the subject, which you could say is true for most of my work that isn't sung or spoken. But when you use an actor you always have to deal with that idea of difference and I think that is, or can be, in a way, more ethical.

AG: What I hear is this introduction of a third person into a work: You have the artist and the audience, and there is a third person introduced and through an actor, or the singer in your work. I can also identify it in Sharon's and Wu's work through themselves enacting characters that are not themselves, it is not the author/artist speaking, but it is a figure that they are creating, through speaking and re-speaking. I visualise somehow a line-up of the author, this third person, and the audience and we're all standing looking at the work. For me this third position seems to open up something in an experience of a work. The more we talk about it, the presence of the body in your work like *The Ballad*, seems at the end as present as it is in my work or Sharon's work or Wu's work, yet the methodology to manifest this body is different.

Wu Ingrid Tsang, Zackary Drucker, Mariana Marroquin, *P.I.G.* (2009), REDCAT, Aug. 6-8, 2009, documentation of live performance.

SH: What happens to me as a viewer in the space of *The Ballad* is that I become a vehicle of the narration. Because the space of the installation narratives my viewing. For me in the space of *The Ballad* it's my body as a reader that I am called to be present to or made aware of, not so much the body of a character, or the body of the child in the story.

MK: Yes, I do that very self-consciously by making people walk through it—*The Ballad* is like a 360-degree pan. *Multi-Story House,* of course, was made to go into; people walk inside the house and I really like that photograph that you took, Andrea, of *Sisterhood is POW* . . . where the two girls look like they could be holding the placards. The phenomenological presence of your own body is certainly different from that of the actor you're watching, but the psychological space between them is permeable, could you say that?

WIT: The film I'm making now about the Silver Platter *(La Bienvenida)* also

involves questions of singularity and memory. The Silver Platter is a fierce, historical Latin trans bar that I became involved with through organizing Wildness with Ashland Mines and Daniel Pineda. Wildness is a weekly club that derives its energy and politics in response to the history of the bar. It's basically a really fun party that evolved into a more explicitly political platform when I started renting the adjacent storefront, IMPRENTA, with Michelle Dizon, Camilo Ontiveros and Nicolau Vergueiro. *La Bienvenida* kind of synthesizes my experiences: the pleasures and problematics that result from these activities. I consider "my perspective" in the film to be not so much a personal one but as a position at the intersection of historical circumstances that could be shared, or in any case is more reflective of conditions than of biography. This shift in thinking about authorship or narrative is very important to me. So in fact when I'm trying to develop discourse around the site of the bar, I always need to return to my memory, to my initial excitement of the encounter, and feelings of subjective investment.

SH: Wu, I don't know if you actually experience this but I feel that there is a possibility that is available to you that you said yes to that has something to do with movement-building, or with a gathering up of collectivity, that was not exactly available to me. Not that I haven't been involved in activism and collective politics but I feel that there is something distinct for you or maybe for you generationally that allows for a different set of possibilities. There is something different about the way in which a collective voice is available to you that I didn't experience as available to me in that same way.

Wu Ingrid Tsang, *STILL* (Life chances), 2009, digital c-print, light-box, 36 x 48 x 5 inches.

MK: What's different perhaps is the moment in which it's possible to make a demand. I remember this in the movement—feeling that we were speaking for all women, when we said, everyone had a voice, you didn't speak for others. This is what was so unique about feminism in a way: it always refused in the end to force a truth as it were, and I think that radically undermined prevailing notions, including Rancière's, of the political subject. So for me there's a continuity with that past as a discursive site, that is, there's a logic to the questions that have emerged from that community as it ages, theoretically and physically, that keeps me connected with it, but it's not the same as being present in the moment when the demand is made. I think the trans movement is at a point now where you experience urgency, where a demand is possible. You couldn't have imagined earlier how the idea of trans-sexuality could change the whole field of feminist politics juridically as well as ideologically, but it has.

WIT: In thinking about what you just said, I see a way in which Sharon's and Andrea's work could be seen as an interval between Mary's and mine. For instance, I have come to understand the semiotics of protest primarily through your works, Sharon and Andrea. It has enabled me to take a really different approach as an organizer. When we first started IMPRENTA, we were having conversations around the idea of "quiet" resistance. Now the space also now operates as a non-hierarchical, collective-run, free trans legal clinic. Our work is all about, for example, strategizing ways to alleviate poverty and decriminalize trans folks. It has nothing to do with getting people into the street; it has to do with quietly dismantling the non-profit industrial complex. Getting together and talking about re-distributing wealth,

formalizing decision-making processes—it's not the same kind of image as a fist to power, although it feels like the work that needs to be done.

MK: Can you say something about your (joint) project in St.Gallen? How this conversation figures in this project?

AG: When Sharon and I were invited to do a collaborative museum show in St.Gallen, it was a great opportunity to show our collaborative work and also to show our individual work in dialogue with each other. In my work process I share a lot of ideas and questions with Sharon as my colleague and friend, even if I work individually. It has always been interesting to me how we have been invested in related ideas, mobilizing related questions but with very different methodologies and starting from very different backgrounds. For this book as a continuation of the show, Sharon and I were both interested in showing how our dialogue with each other expands far beyond the two of us, because of course it is not just her and me but you, Mary and Wu, and Yvonne and Ashley and Taisha and Renate and Pauline, etc. It is important to us to acknowledge these dialogues in which we work as artists. We don't exist in the singular as artist but in a wider network of conversations.

MK: Can we call that a discursive site?

SH: Yes!

1. Jacques Rancière, "The Cause of the Other," trans David Macey, *Parallax* 7 (April-June 1998): 25-34.
2. Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2006).