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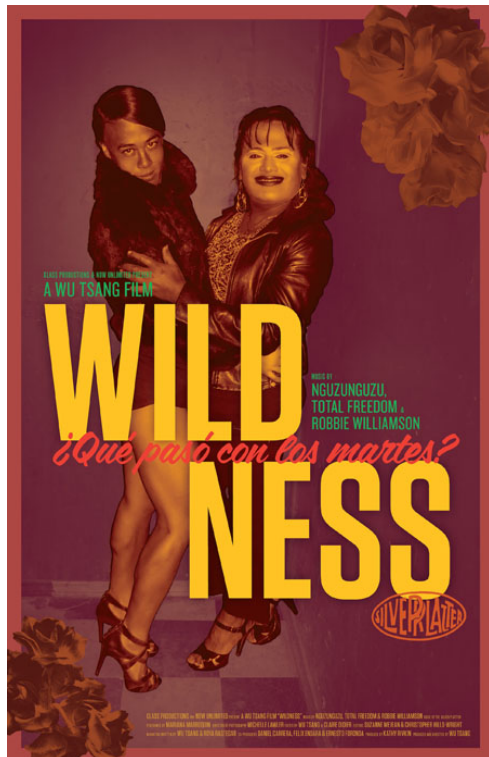
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frieze

Focus: Wu Tsang

FOCUS

Community organizing and AIDS activism; 'Full Body Quotation' and party hosting



Wildness, 2012

Wu Tsang lives and works in Los Angeles, USA. In 2011, he had a solo show at Clifton Benevento, New York, USA; participated in Performa 11, New York; and did a residency at the New Museum, New York. He is currently included in the Whitney Biennial 2012 and the 2nd New Museum Triennial, and his work will be part of 'First Among Equals', which opens at the ICA Philadelphia, USA, on 14 March.

In the MacArthur Park area of Los Angeles there is a small bar called the Silver Platter. For almost 50 years, it has been a meeting place for several generations of transgender women – often immigrants and political refugees – from across Central America.

In 2008, Wu Tsang started co-hosting a weekly party and performance night there. It was, as Tsang described it in conversation with Mary Kelly, a professor at UCLA from where he received an MFA in 2010, 'a fun party that evolved into a more explicitly political platform'. The locals were bemused by the new crowd that descended every Tuesday, but the party, which was called Wildness, flourished. Tsang and the other organizers – DJ/production duo Nguzunguzu and DJ Total Freedom – began to worry that they had unintentionally compromised the safe space that the Silver Platter provided for its long-time patrons.

Tsang has a variety of roles – artist, performer, filmmaker, grassroots activist – though all of his activities are concerned with the difficulties of adequately representing a community. When I visited his studio late last summer, our conversation circled around a single line: Craig Owens' insistence that 'representation is not – nor can it be – neutral; it is an act – indeed, the founding act – of power in our culture'.

Towards the end of 2008, a shopfront became available next door to the Silver Platter. As Tsang wrote in a catalogue essay for this year's Whitney Biennial, in which he is participating: 'I had a fantasy of building a drop-in centre *inside* the party, where you could drink and dance and also access legal services, under-the-counter hormones, body movement workshops, art projects, a radical library and free Internet.' (The average life expectancy of transgender people worldwide is, as Tsang notes later in the same essay, just 23.) A month or two later, he co-founded a free legal clinic there called Imprenta. It dealt with immigration papers and name-changes for the Silver Platter's regulars, sometimes operating as a base for a GLBTQ organization offering HIV testing. But Tsang again became concerned: 'What trade-offs had I made between community accountability and so-called community organization in my own project?' What did being 'by and for' the community mean when a marginalized group was being catered for by university-educated artists, students and lawyers?





Full Body Quotation, 201, performance documentation, New Museum, New York

As part of the Whitney Biennial's film programme, Tsang is showing his feature-length film about the weekly party and the clinic. Though it includes documentary elements, such as interviews with the bar's patrons and owners, *Wildness* (2012) is a whimsically fictionalized account, narrated by both Tsang and (in Spanish) by the Silver Platter itself. As Tsang noted in an interview last year: 'The more subjective I could be in telling my own experience of the situation, the more ethical I could be to my subjects and collaborators.' At the Whitney he will also be presenting an installation titled *Green Room* (2012), a functioning green room for the artists in the biennial's performance programme. Tsang's work often dwells on the camaraderie and vulnerability displayed in rehearsal spaces, immediately before the performance; in a more socially engaged way, the Imprenta project attempts to make provision for what happens afterwards, when (as Tsang once put it) 'the lights come on and the music fades away'.

At a solo show at Clifton Benevento in New York last summer, Tsang presented a neon sign he had made for Imprenta's window, which reads 'The Fist is Still Up'. The work's stridency and form recalls the campaigns of New York-based activist collectives of the 1980s, such as ACT UP and affiliated artists including Gregg Bordowitz (who taught Tsang at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago) and Gran Fury's Donald Moffett. While the Imprenta sign inevitably evokes ACT UP's important poster/neon work, *SILENCE = DEATH* (1987), it chimes more with the feeling of frustration voiced in later pieces – like Moffett's 1990/2001 lightbox piece ('Call the White House – Tell Bush We're Not All Dead Yet') – that were realized at a time when the AIDS crisis was slipping from public debate.

Last year, Tsang did a month-long residency at the New Museum in New York as a prelude to its second triennial, 'The Ungovernables'. Part of this comprised a series of events which fed into the development of 'Full Body Quotation', his ongoing film and performance project. This technique involves performers, equipped with hidden ear-pieces, lip-synching to dialogue from the canon of trans cinema. The earliest of these pieces was filmed at the Silver Platter: titled *The Shape of a Right Statement I* (2008), it restages a manifesto-like YouTube video by autism rights activist Amanda Baggs. Tsang 're-speaks' Baggs' monologue, which she generated using a Speech Generation Device – 'The thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language' – as he stares into the camera, eyes welling with tears. It has an uncanny effect, not of speaking for the subject but of being spoken *through*. As part of Performa 11 in New York, Tsang presented another iteration of 'Full Body Quotation'. At a party-like event at the New Museum, four performers were locked together on the floor, limbs intertwined. 'We're going to be channelling some voices from *Paris is Burning*,' Tsang announced, referring to Jennie Livingston's documentary about drag balls in Harlem. The film was severely criticized when it was released in 1990: Judith Butler charged it with the 'simultaneous production and subjugation of its subjects'. Exposure too easily tips over into exploitation, but Tsang's version readdresses this issue, trying to find – as so often with his work – a way around the indignity of speaking for others.

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