

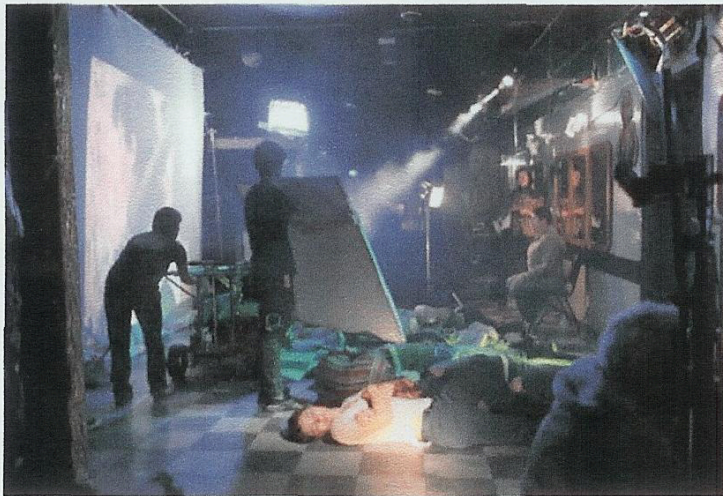
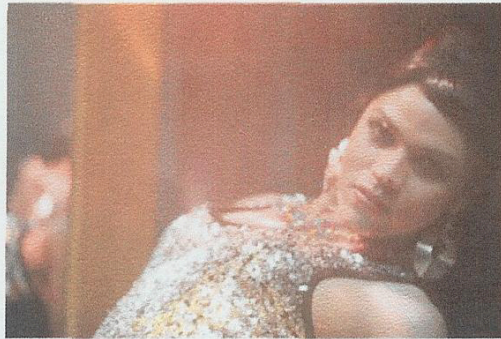
## Wu Tsang: body quotations, back-breaking sparkle and the dissemination of wildness

Wu Tsang

*interviewed by Kevin McGarry*

Party or performance, an uninterrupted line between life and art, investigating the concepts of hospitality and welcome.

Party o performance, una linea ininterrotta fra vita e arte che indaga i concetti di ospitalità e accoglienza.



From top-left, clockwise:  
- *Wildness*, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York  
- *Approximate Alter (Life Chances)*, 2011. Courtesy: the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York. Photo: Thomas Mueller  
- *DAMELO TODO (Give Me Everything)*, production still, 2010-2011. Courtesy: the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York  
- *DAMELO TODO (Give Me Everything)*, production still, 2010-2011. Courtesy: the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York

**Kevin McGarry** You had a busy summer in New York — a residency at the New Museum and a solo show at Clifton Benevento in Soho. Was this your first time creating an exhibition for a commercial gallery? It seems that situating your work for the gallery context would demand some kind of translation, and I'm curious if this is a challenge you're interested in exploring through your work.

**Wu Tsang** My practice is varied (I perform, make films, throw parties, do grassroots organizing, etc.), so there's no single "native" context. Translation becomes inherent to making meaning. I don't privilege the gallery context, but I don't disdain it either; I see it as another opportunity to reflect on complex social operations like: how is this being paid for? Who profits? What motivates the work? How does it generate a sense of who belongs in here and who doesn't? — and how can I intervene without being too reactionary? Every kind of engagement reveals essential stuff about audience and context; and that determines the form the work takes. Given that I often work "outside" the art world (within specific communities, film-industry or nightlife worlds), I actually find gallery/white-wall/visual-art spaces to be "freeing" in a different way — as opposed to constrained or contained. However I do get the sense that "fine art" spaces are not as accessible or welcoming of some of the communities I'm involved with, which raises the question of whether it's exploitative to show certain content in a gallery. That's the hardest negotiation because representation is a core issue to me.

**KMG** "Event planning and community organizing" on the end of a spectrum that began with "performing and filmmaking", describing the various things you do. What are your thoughts on the notion of linking, or conversely, separating activities like these?

**WT** There are moments of fluidity and separateness, but performance is always the basis of my work — it's the mode I return to, in order to work through new ideas. It brought me to do the club *Wildness*, which became the source material for the feature film I'm finishing. My DJ friends Ashland Mines and Daniel Pineda wanted to do a sound night/dance party; I wanted to program performances and create a "rehearsal" space for sharing ideas. So we worked together to make that all possible as one event. And then of course it evolved into being its own thing... The more explicitly activist stuff I'm doing (such as LGL, the trans legal clinic) isn't intended for art audiences, but I take a lot of inspiration and discourse from those experiences. I guess my favorite thing is when all those activities melt together, but those moments are rare and special. "Event planning" is kind of a hysterical title; maybe it's more purposeful and less trophy than "host"?

**KMG** Do you mean that event planning suggests more of a top-down role, while hosting involves arranging an event from among its audience?

**WT** Unfortunately, nothing so philosophical — just that "event planning" sounds like you could book me for a wedding. The word "host" implies hospitality, which is a concept I've been obsessed with for a long time. Derrida wrote about "saying yes" to Others without knowing why. I think of it as the often blind presumptions we make about "sameness" when we band together as tribes, like "we're all queer" or "we're all X" or whatever. Actually the very first performance/video work I ever made was called *Hospitality* at the Ratti Foundation in Como; it explored this very proposition. In nightlife, the term "host" usually means the lady who greets you at the door — and I've played that role on occasion, for the right price. But in reality it takes a lot of preparation and physical endurance to "sparkle" all night long, especially while juggling a thousand other responsibilities as an organizer. Whatever you call it, I find it to be an exciting mode of performance.

**KMG** What's your take on re-creation as an increasingly utilized gesture in performance art? Your *Damelo Todo* video installation at Clifton Benevento was essentially a partial re-creation of the bar where it was shot.

**WT** Both *Wildness* (the film) and *Damelo Todo* (the installation) ask the question: is community defined more by the *place* or the *people*? The film is more about the people and the installation meditates on the place. There was something about the Silver Platter that made a certain kind of creativity and coalition possible, and I was always consumed by locating those qualities in physical characteristics of the bar. Was it the lighting? The checkered floor? The mylar proscenium? The lattice work? I wanted to stage *Damelo Todo* in a way that transformed these humble elements into a kind of political-historical dreamscape. So I guess I don't think of any of it as re-creation, although I could see why it might be confused as trying to reconstruct "community" inside a gallery — whereas my intentions are almost the opposite. In reducing and memorializing these elements, and I'm thinking about ways that people willfully invest objects with their social experiences.

**KMG** What are you working on next, for after *Wildness*?

**WT** Actually more on the subject of re-creation, I'm working on a new piece through a New Museum commission that will be shown during Performa and eventually their Triennial. This piece is in the vein of previous performance work (*Shape of a Right Statement* and *P.I.G.*) and is all about re-speaking dialog through this really obsessive technique I call "fill body quotation" — but that may be kind of a misnomer, because the effect is all from the neck up. The performer is hearing a hidden audio source in his ear, and re-quotting mimetically: not just the text but tone, breath, accent, idiom, etc. It produces a really strange alienation, as the eyes look inward and the body is paralyzed. It makes you question authenticity and intention of speech in general. With this series, I use the technique to re-embodiment historical material (mostly popu-

lar and obscure cinema) that resonate with the present in a conflicting way. For example, I'm particularly interested in regressive statements about race, like the kind our society is supposedly evolved from, but that still lurks in our daily unconscious.