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An Artist's Monograph That Tests the Limits of Language

By JOSEPH AKEL JAN. 25, 2016



An installation view of the artist, performer and filmmaker Wu Tsang's "DAMELO TODO / ODOT OLEMAD," which was on view last year at the Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zurich. Credit Stefan Alteburger/Courtesy of the artist, Clifton Benevento (New York), Michael Benevento (Los Angeles), Isabella Bortolozzi (Berlin)

"Language," notes the filmmaker and artist Wu Tsang, "is

always present in my work." And as his first monograph, "Not in My Language" (Walther König, \$50), makes clear, how we say things extends beyond simply the words we use. Intended as a companion to Tsang's 2015 solo exhibitions at the Kunsthalle Düsseldorf and the Migros Museum in Zurich, the publication surveys the artist's prodigious output and highlights themes recurrent throughout his work. Combining stills and reproduced screenplays from six of his films — including "DAMELO TODO," 2010, centering on the story of an El Salvadorian teenage refugee who finds sanctuary in L.A.'s transgender community, and his documentary "Wildness," 2012, which profiles the habitués of Silver Lake's legendary trans bar the Silver Platter and was included in the 2014 Whitney Biennial — "Not in My Language" foregrounds Tsang's interest in communities and subcultures often relegated to the margins of society.

Taking its title from the YouTube video "[In My Language](#)," posted by the autism-rights advocate and blogger Amanda Baggs, Tsang notes that all of his films acknowledge what he views as "the limits of language." Indeed, says Tsang, who self-identifies as trans, "finding and connecting with other queer people is not always done on the basis of verbal communication" — even given the ubiquity of hook-up

apps and chat rooms. On the flip side, Tsang continues, “the experiences of gender nonconforming people and people of color have a lot to do with language and how personhood is defined.” To that end, he views his films, and in particular the performances he documents, “as an attempt to challenge” and reinvent the ways in which we communicate with each other. (A relevant note: Tsang does not have a preferred set of pronouns by which he would rather be referred to, and instead allows writers to choose which to use.)



An installation view of a still from Tsang’s “THE LOOKS,” 2015, featuring the performer boychild, at Kunsthalle Düsseldorf.

Credit Achim Kukulies, Düsseldorf/ Courtesy of the artist, Clifton Benevento (New York), Michael Benevento (Los Angeles), Isabella Bortolozzi (Berlin)

Also included in the publication are stills from Tsang’s current, ongoing film, “A day in the life of bliss,” a sci-fi coming-of age story centering on an character named BLIS played by the performance artist Boychild, who elsewhere can be spotted walking runway shows for the avant-garde fashion label Hood by Air or posing in front of the camera for the likes of Catherine Opie and Hedi Slimane. “Our collaboration together,” Tsang says of Boychild, “reflects a strong investment in articulating our experiences outside of language.” In one still from the movie, Boychild can be seen covered in head-to-toe glitter, an image that is both captivating and oddly unsettling. Here, as with many of Tsang’s works, words can hardly do justice.