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ARTFORUM

Wu Tsang

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Wu Tsang, *Duilian*, 2016, HD video, color, sound, 30 minutes. Installation view, Spring Workshop, Hong Kong, 2016. Photo: MC

*Wu Tsang's installations, performances, sculptures, and videos move fluidly among documentary, activism, and fiction. Her 2012 film *Wildness* premiered at the Museum of Modern Art, and her work was also featured in the 2012 Whitney Biennial and in "The Ungovernables," the second New Museum Triennial. Here the Los Angeles-based artist discusses her latest video installation, *Duilian*. This installation forms the focal point of her current exhibition at Spring Workshop in Hong Kong, which runs through May 22, 2016.*

DUILIAN IS INSPIRED by the Chinese poet Qiu Jin, a famous revolutionary martyr from the turn of the twentieth century. I came across her story when I first went to China ten years ago to discover my roots. I gravitated toward Qiu and her relationship with another woman, Wu Zhiying, who was a calligrapher and publisher. Their unofficial love story stuck with me because, despite it being undefinable in modern terms, it was clearly transformative for both women—in a way that powerfully communicates across time. I've been researching Qiu Jin and the community of women that surrounded her after she left her husband and went to Japan in 1906.

If you go to the Museum of the Chinese Communist Party in Shanghai, she's one of the official

heroes and the only woman there. Qiu Jin was executed in 1907 for treason during a failed uprising against the Qing dynasty; she never lived to see her dream come true of overthrowing the government. At the time of her death, she wasn't a hero; she was a convicted felon, who no one dared to mourn openly, even her family. It was Wu who wrote her initial history and brought her to light as a national figure. Qiu Jin was buried nine different times, most recently in 1981, because those in power kept digging her up and reburying her. Her body symbolized China's ideal of democracy, and it became a reflection of the tumultuous century.

In *Duilian* I play Wu Zhiying, and my collaborator boychild plays Qiu Jin. I worked with some *Wushu*-trained young women in Shanghai and that's woven into the film, and I had them come up with their own choreography in response to Qiu's poems. The style of *Wushu* we were working with is called *duilian*, which is more dance than it is fighting. In the beginning I joked that I wanted to make a lesbian kung fu film—it was a joke because there's no such genre—but in the end we kind of did.

We shot most of the film on a boat, which I envisioned as a floating theater. We filmed between Hong Kong and mainland China and set it in the present, but brought in period elements from Qiu's life. Qiu dressed in men's clothing and she always carried a sword. For me she's a trans figure because she was inventing a way of being in a world where there were no models. I wrote the script based on my research. I was interested not in having a proper translation of events, but in having a community dialogue with queer people and other artists about how they might translate her poetry. Qiu Jin's poetry has inspired me to think of translation in general as a parallel process to queer desire. Translation becomes a process through which we discover what we want to see in others, or want to say about ourselves. It happens when you want to understand something and you can't fully—when you're working with language that's not your own. But that's what happens in general with queer people trying to find their history—it will always be an approximation.

Queer people rarely exist in official history. We've always had to decode the past to find it. We don't know who Qiu Jin was exactly, but it's an interesting premise through which to talk about what we're looking for. There's been a lot of discussion about how Hong Kong is changing in relation to mainland China. People in Hong Kong have a lot of anxiety about losing their autonomy, their way of life, their freedom of speech. I read that the Chinese government recently announced that it is illegal to "distort" history. I became fascinated by that idea, because, to me, history is by definition a distortion.

Performance provides a ground for my films. I was inspired by Charles Atlas's 1987 film *Hail the New Puritan* with Michael Clark. Atlas really created a language to document and capture Clark's spirit. I'm also interested in the tension between documentary and narrative fiction, and this idea that one is more truthful while the other is a construction. Once you introduce a camera it all becomes a construction, because then people are performing. I think if we make it really obvious that we're performing, then the real self can emerge anyway, because we're not pretending to be ourselves anymore.

— As told to Paige K. Bradley