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# ArtReview Asia



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Venice Biennale. Oh Buoy

## Wu Tsang *Not in my language*

Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Zürich 22 November – 8 February

A blue neon nightclub sign declaring that ‘the fist is still up’ invites us into the first room. This sculpture is titled *Safe Space* (2014) and sets the tone for a show about safe spaces for trans, queer and immigrant communities – both imagined and real – that moves from the Salvadoran Civil War during the 1980s, to an underground nightclub in Los Angeles, to an autocratic, sci-fi future Berlin. Let’s begin with the latter.

*A day in the life of bliss* (2014) is a video installation starring androgynous performance artist boychild. On a stage in a club boychild vibrates, messily, her muscles smeared in paint. Mid-choreography she is marched away by riot police, but later completes her performance on her own in an apartment. The story suggests a path of resistance through dance, present in much of Tsang’s art. He is interested in the ways identity is constructed through imagination and performance, and in the spaces and communities that allow this to happen.

At the heart of his exhibition Tsang has constructed a louche setting for another theatrical film, *Damelo Todo // Odot Olemad* (2010/2014), which we watch reflected in three mirrors whilst slouched on red velvet sofas, as if backstage at the now-closed nightspot that this tale revolves around: the Silver Platter, a Los Angeles bar

frequented by the Latino LGBTQ scene. Passages from a short story about a fifteen-year-old refugee from El Salvador who has an adolescent sexual awakening at the Silver Platter are narrated to camera, interspersed with footage of a knife dance inside the club and performers chatting in their dressing room. A compelling mixture of documentary and fiction, the film is a magical realist portrait of a trans scene that itself celebrates fantasy as a form of escapism.

The subject of Tsang’s artistic responsibility is raised in his 16mm film *For how we perceived a life* (2012) in which five performers, himself included, act out lines from *Paris is Burning* (1990), Jennie Livingston’s cult documentary about ballroom culture in New York. At one point the five huddle together on the warehouse floor and talk about what they want (“I want my sex change”), at another they speak in choral unison (“That is everybody’s dream and ambition as a minority – to live and look as well as a white person is pictured as being in America”), but all the while they are only appropriating quotes from *Paris is Burning*, word for word. Though they might feel the same, are these their dreams to take? Is it even possible to make art about a safe space without somehow eroding its sanctity?

The Silver Platter was not only a meeting place for the Latino LGBTQ community that congregated there, it was also where Tsang, alongside DJs Nguzunguzu and Total Freedom, hosted the performance art parties that launched their careers. Nguzunguzu has since soundtracked an infinity of art and fashion parties, Total Freedom has an installation throughout the stairwell of the New Museum Triennial, and Tsang has his show in shiny Zurich. However, the local community with whom they were, in their own words, entwined in a ‘collaboration and tenuous coalition’, is unlikely to have flourished so much since the Silver Platter was shut down in 2010. While Tsang shares a lot of common interests with his subjects – a celebration of trans and queer culture, a love of performance – he is still an artist operating in a very different realm. By speaking in the voice of a historic New York documentary of which he was never a part, by building an installation evoking the architecture of a Los Angeles club that its regulars can no longer visit, he highlights the extent to which subcultures have been appropriated by artists in order to further themselves, and in so doing heightens our own self-doubt about how we consume the worlds of others. *Dean Kissick*



*DAMELO TODO // ODOT OLEMAD*, 2010/2014,  
single-channel video on rear projection foil, wood, mirrors, carpet, bench, 25 min.  
Courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, and Clifton Benevento, New York