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"I Dislike the Word Visibility": Wu Tsang on Sexuality, Creativity, and Conquering New York's Museums



Photo by Liu Jun

Artist Wu Tsang

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A production still from Tsang's "WILDNESS," 2012/© Wu Tsang, courtesy the Artist

Los Angeles-based filmmaker and performer **Wu Tsang** is queering the **Whitney Museum**. Installed on the fourth floor of the arrow-straight, stone-faced Breuer building, Tsang's camp glam-rock environment, titled "Green Room," is tricked out in red vinyl banquettes, mirrors, pink dayglo lights, and a two-channel video of L.A.'s Latina LGBT bar, The Silver Platter. "Green Room" is dual-purpose, acting as an installation and as a functional backstage area for Biennial performers. Like much of Tsang's work, this liminal space takes as its starting point the social interaction between people and the possibility of community.

Exploring gender, sexuality, race, and class, Tsang's subjects range from the stigma of autism to the effect of gentrification on queer Latina communities. Tsang also happens to be the only artist

to have work in both of New York's current mega-surveys: the Biennial and the **New Museum's** concurrent Triennial. Via email, **ARTINFO** interviewed the rising art star about his work, activism, and the possibility of going Hollywood.

"Wildness," your film at the Whitney, chronicles the experimental parties you threw at the Silver Platter, a historic Latina LGBT-friendly bar in Los Angeles. What motivated you to make this film?

"Wildness" grew out of (and is named after) a live ephemeral event that I co-organized with DJ Total Freedom (Ashland Mines) and NGUZUNGUZU (Daniel Pineda and Asma Maroof). In the beginning, I was documenting the shows as a peer/performer, and later I started conducting interviews because I was interested in oral histories of the bar. But the project became more politicized when our safe space was threatened by the party's growing popularity. I felt an urgent need to communicate, while still remaining true to the energy and spirit of the live thing. Around that time, I decided to make a feature film because it was an accessible/entertaining platform that would still enable me to dig into the issues. My contribution to the Biennial is actually three-part: "Wildness" the feature, a two-channel video installation called "Green Room," and an essay in the catalogue. These three works all deal with the same subject matter, but manifest as different forms and narratives, according to the intended audiences.

The New Museum is showing two of your videos, "Shape of a Right Statement" (2008) and "For How We Perceived a Life (Take 3)" (2012). Both films employ a technique you call "full body quotation." What is "full body quotation" and why do you do it?

Full body quotation is a performance technique I've been working on, but the name could change as it evolves. The performer has a hidden audio source and she re-speaks voices mimetically – not just the text but tone, breath, accent, idiom, etc. The idea is to question authenticity and intention of the speaker, and understand content differently, out of its original context. For the two films in the Triennial, I was working with really different source material, and at very different times. The earlier film "SRS" ["Shape of a Right Statement"] is quoting Amanda Baggs an autism rights activist, who at the time I was very interested in cross-identification between autism rights and trans/gay rights as being struggles to de-pathologize so-called "conditions" of being autistic, etc. This new film "FHWPALT3" ["For How We Perceived a Life (Take 3)"] is quoting various sources from research and field work about the making of Jennie Livingston's 1990 documentary, "Paris is Burning." In both instances, I chose material where the performers all had complicated relationships to the sources. The full body quotation technique is a way to perform our ambivalences.

You're currently shopping the film "Wildness" to mainstream distributors. How might the film change when taken out of the museum and put into a theater?

"Wildness" was actually made for theaters, not museums — so I was pleasantly ;) surprised when the Biennial curators expressed interest in showing it. But it made sense in a different way, because our conversations revolved around audience and form, etc. Engaging capitalism was always a fundamental part of this project, like reexamining what is art, who is it for, what are

autonomous creative spaces, and can they ever truly exist? Everything relies on money and resources circulating in one way or another. In this case, "Wildness" was sustained through the commercial enterprise of the Silver Platter bar — yet both were true community spaces. So what kept us all going was something more intangible yet connected to these economies. When "Wildness" ended and I fully switched gears into filmmaking, these questions kind of migrated over. For example, I grew frustrated with how the film market shaped representations of queer people of color. It seemed like every creative decision had economic consequence, in terms of making a successful (i.e. "marketable") film. Initially I was way put off by these confrontations, but I grew to appreciate their explicitness, in a way that I sometimes feel the art world is lacking — explicitness about the relationship between capitalism and creativity.

As a transgender artist, theorist, and activist who makes artwork about alternative spaces, what is it like to be suddenly embraced by the mainstream art world? Do you feel that transgender issues are gaining increased visibility?

I dislike the word visibility, maybe because for me it evokes the rhetoric of assimilation — as *IF* the goal of trans/LGBT/whatever movements were about being *seen* and gaining acceptance from society — I don't subscribe to that. I never placate myself by thinking that exhibition or press opportunities are about doing good by "my people," or being a representative or something weird like that. Success to me is more about privilege and motivation and power, and it can be used to create change, but it can also be a slippery slope. I'm interested in looking at all those factors and trying to make decisions that keep me accountable to the people I'm in dialog with and the ideas that I hope to share in order to impact consciousness.

I had a "Wildness" screening at MoMA the other day and in the Q&A afterwards, someone asked what had "possessed" me to take on two huge issues: immigrants and transgender people. To me the answer was so obvious: that they are interconnected, like so many things in life. But I was kind of touched to realize that his consciousness seemed to be ruptured, like he literally had NEVER thought about those things together before. So those are the kinds of small successes I hope for, and they are what drive me to try to take on whatever opportunity comes my way — at least to examine it and try to take it apart, for what it's worth.

What project are you working on now?

Lately I've just been in finishing mode with these exhibitions, and also discovering that finishing "Wildness" is just the beginning of a whole other set of labors, problems, questions, and exciting things (such as festivals, publicists, sales agents... distribution!) I'm also talking with a secret personal hero about making a short film, which would be a further exploration of the New Museum film, "For How We Perceived a Life (Take 3)," which is a performative investigation of "Paris is Burning." I hope to continue collaborating with my DJ friends TOTAL FREEDOM and NGUZUNGUZU and their extended family (Kingdom, Telfar, Fatima al Qadiri to name a few!) who continue to light up my universe of sound.