

Wu Tsang: Show's Over

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“THE SHOW IS OVER THE AUDIENCE GET UP TO LEAVE THEIR SEATS
TIME TO COLLECT THEIR COATS AND GO HOME THEY TURN AROUND NO
MORE COATS AND NO MORE HOME” – text from an untitled 1991 painting by
Christopher Wool

Los Angeles filmmaker, artist and performer Wu Tsang's work draws on legacies of vocal performance, re-enactment, trans/queer representation, and anti-oppression activism to stage the complex relationships between individual and collective subjects and the charged dynamics of the body, identity, voice, and politics. Tsang's installation for TPW R&D features two key video works, *Shape of a Right Statement* (2008) and *MISHIMA IN MEXICO* (2013), which trace the development of his practice and concerns over the past five years. This period has seen Tsang move from primarily operating in dialogue with Los Angeles to taking on a more nomadic existence where context is always in flux.

Shape of a Right Statement features the artist speaking directly into the camera, a re-performance of a YouTube video called “In My Language” that was delivered through a Speech Generation Device by autism activist Amanda Baggs. The statement potently speaks to the relationship between language and power, and challenges the authority of text-based, symbolic language, describing instead the perpetual multi-sensory communication between individual and environment that typically characterizes experiences of autism. Like much of Tsang's work, the video considers the tensions between speaking as an individual and yet always having to speak on behalf of an identity or community as well. The work also links and de-pathologizes disability and trans/queer experience in its questioning of conventional understandings of autonomy, communication and personhood. (Tsang's practice contributes towards building a radical queer/trans politic for our contemporary moment; highlighting the oft-neglected intersections between trans/queer struggles and migration, poverty and disability, for example, are key aspects of his political work.)

Shape of a Right Statement was filmed at the Silver Platter bar in Los Angeles, home since 1963 to a primarily trans and queer Latin@ immigrant clientele. Tsang's feature-length non-fiction film *Wildness* (2012) traced the intricacies of the artist's experience staging a party there called Wildness with three of his friends. At its core, the film is about the politics of space and its occupation: “What is a ‘safe space’ and can it exist?” Tsang wrestles with the impact that Wildness had on the bar and its existing social ecosystem and vibe, and eventually decided on an ingenious formal strategy for his film: the bar takes on its own voice as narrator, challenging Tsang's point of view and authority over the narrative. *Wildness* was in many ways a crucible for Tsang's still-young art

practice, a rigorous test of his community organizing work, and how it intersected (or didn't) with his art practice and social identity as an artist. Tsang commented:

Filmmaking can be a kind of organizing – not only because you bring so many people together for production and collaboration, but because you create a *mise-en-scène* in the film that documents a living community. I believe 'community' actually only exists through representation, through the lens of what's caught on camera. But that transportable world/dialogue/space has the potential to generate other communities, as it becomes absorbed by different audiences over time.

Tsang is interested in performance as a hotbed for self-scrutiny and sociopolitical examination. The temporary, precarious – and therefore precious – suspension of disbelief offered by the artifice of "the show" transforms the performer, and with them the world that they will rejoin once the "show's over." (Sometimes the world changes to the point of being unrecognizable, as in the text from Wool's painting: "...NO MORE COATS AND NO MORE HOME.") The traces of the performance – the live witnessing of it, or its media documentation – diffuse through the world via the conduit of the spectators' experiences as well.

Shape of a Right Statement and a number of Tsang's other projects draw on pre-existing film or video material, cinematic forebears and YouTube treasures. Their re-enactment by Tsang or his collaborating performers are often created through an evolving performance practice that the artist calls Full Body Quotation (FBQ). Here someone re-performs audio documents (fed through an earpiece) mimetically – not just the text but the tone, breath, accent, and idiom of its delivery. As the performer focuses inward, "[w]e are forced to confront the performer's body and skin in relation to a voice, and ultimately their intention." Using performance as a form of research, this process reflects on questions of artifice and authenticity, and the relationship between content and context.

This practice received its most intensive elaboration during a multi-faceted residency entitled *We Remember Stories, Not Facts* that Tsang undertook at the New Museum in 2011, culminating in his participation in curator Eungie Joo's 2012 New Museum Triennial, *The Ungovernables*. In a number of public programs, Tsang opened up his work to its panoply of influences and collaborators, all through referencing and reworking some of the contested texts of trans/queer cinema. The primary film he worked with was Jennie Livingston's classic documentary about the Black and Latin@ drag ball scene in New York, *Paris Is Burning* (1990), which has become a kind of urtext for representations of trans/queer people of colour. *Paris Is Burning* is not merely a film but a veritable minefield, celebrated and reviled in equal measure. For example, the film arguably became the key cultural object for queer theory at the time, in large part due to Judith Butler's attention to it as an example of gender performativity. Simultaneously, there was vigorous debate about the roles of insider and outsider, and specifically whether Livingston as a white lesbian could provide an

adequate critical context for representing her subjects' marginalization by dominant society. While certain commentators bristled at the thought of white audiences delightedly consuming the precarious lives on-screen, at the same time, the film continues to be a beloved and empowering touchstone for many trans/queer people across race and class lines.

Regarding the artist's residency, the New Museum noted, "[i]n the tradition of drag realness, Tsang maintains a studied and irreverent relationship to the social 'realities' that produced the original [film]." During the residency, Tsang organized a panel featuring his mentor, *Paris Is Burning's* editor Jonathan Oppenheim, and a long-form, multi-participant DJ performance, among other events refracting out of Livingston's conflicted, canonical film. During this process, Tsang created a 16mm film installation for *The Ungovernables*, entitled *For How We Perceived a Life (Take 3)* (2012). In it, Tsang and four collaborating performers quote various sources from and around *Paris Is Burning* in a single-take, highly choreographed 9-minute recording, which reflected on agency, spectatorship, power, and the vocal and visual production and circulation of identity that takes place in any act of performance. About this film, Tsang claims, "I chose material where the performers all had complicated relationships to the sources. The FBQ technique is a way to perform our ambivalences."

Tsang's work inhabits traditions of media representation like documentary where the authoritative testimony of the "I" has historically been used to combat pervasive, harmful and oversimplifying stereotypes through self-representation. What makes the intervention of Tsang's "ambivalence" so potent is that it deconstructs the entire apparatus of "authenticity" with keen wit and feeling. Instead of attempting to create what were once called "positive representations," Tsang exposes how voices and bodies are always engaged in the play of power and desire as he works through all the psychic machinery behind the scenes: the performers' intentions, the economics of their labour, their libidinal investments. As he puts it, "by appropriating, re-embodiment and remixing these voices, FBQ explores self-representation and context as a performance in and of itself."

Tsang treats the field of trans/queer representation as a series of found objects, in a way, bringing a conceptualist's scrutiny to his forebears. In Tsang's most recent works, the artist grapples – analytically and affectively – with the Dionysian art of melodrama. *MISHIMA IN MEXICO* arguably grew out of the *We Remember Stories, Not Facts* residency, establishing a new stage in Tsang's work that concerns itself with the lives of artists by blurring the lines between off-stage and on-, performer and character. Inspired by notorious German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's beloved 1974 melodrama *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul*, *MISHIMA IN MEXICO* presents the artist and his collaborator Alexandro Segade (best known as a co-founding member of the Los Angeles performance art troupe My Barbarian) in a room in the Camino Real Polanco hotel in Mexico City, attempting to make a movie of Japanese novelist Yukio Mishima's *Thirst for Love* (1950). The plot: Etsuko, a widowed society woman, falls in love with her servant Saburo, a rural farm boy, but her desire drives them both to tragedy. Tsang and

Segade thoroughly deconstruct Mishima and his novel in the confines of their modernist hotel room, sparring with the book's philosophy of eros and experimenting with how to act out the turgid narrative. The duo slip in between reality and fiction, as well as in and out of character (Etusko and Saburo, writer and director); they even go so far as to exchange roles midway through. In a telling moment, Segade blithely notes, "it's so Japanese," to which Tsang replies in deadpan: "that's why we're in Mexico" – a sharp-tongued recognition that only an arbitrary context (not their home of the United States, not Mishima's Japan, not Fassbinder's Germany) can serve their critical purposes. In addition, both Fassbinder and Mishima are "bad" queer role models, whose tortured works portray love as perpetually doomed ("desire is so depressing..." Tsang sighs). In their work love is thwarted by strict lines of race and class – not to mention jealousy – and Tsang and Segade take up the artifice of costumes, makeup and melodrama to dramatize the fluidity of identification and how narratives like this are customized and circulated among audiences – trans/queer in particular.

Not dissimilar from *For How We Perceived a Life (Take 3)*, *MISHIMA IN MEXICO* positions itself within a fruitful filmic lineage that began with German emigré Douglas Sirk's 1955 Hollywood film *All That Heaven Allows* (melodrama + postwar humanism), about a well-to-do widow who falls for her young, handsome gardener and must navigate the social fallout of her close-minded family and friends. Twenty years later, Fassbinder essentially remade the film with his heartbreaking story of the relationship between an older white German woman and a Moroccan-born *Gastarbeiter* in *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (melodrama + Brechtian alienation), while Todd Haynes revisited it in his 2002 *Far from Heaven* (melodrama + queer postmodernism). Tsang's contribution simultaneously reaches backwards and forwards – proposing an alternate, Japanese origin for the narrative (with Mishima's novel predating Sirk's film by several years), and self-consciously analyzing the entire storytelling apparatus far more radically than his cinematic predecessors (melodrama + postcolonialism + conceptualism).

Following the production of *MISHIMA IN MEXICO*, Tsang and Segade teamed up again (joined by a further two performers) as part of a summer 2013 project entitled *Pride Goes Before a Fall / Beware of a Holy Whore: An Exhibition in Two Acts* for Artists Space in New York that was partly inspired by Fassbinder's favourite of his own films, *Beware of a Holy Whore* (1971), the dyspeptic behind-the-scenes view of a film shoot that is one of the director's masterpieces. The line between reality and fantasy, performer and character, dissolves even further in Tsang and Segade's ongoing collaboration, as they dramatize the experiences of artists in varying stages of their careers and levels of success as they navigate the international art world, with its various curators and other players jockeying for power within it.

Every time I watch *MISHIMA IN MEXICO*, I am struck by a scene where Tsang proclaims to Segade during their ruminations on desire: "The answer to 'I miss you' is always, 'I know, that's why I can't be around you.'" The line aptly captures the ethos of the duo's Japanese-German touchstones, describing the

always-nuanced *pas-de-deux* between desire and power, communion and deferral that doesn't just characterize but that generates and sustains any relationship. In Tsang's work, the performance of the self is articulated through a series of "missed" encounters with other individuals, cultural objects, communities, and potential ways of being. The result is an elaborate dance of shifting identifications and allegiances, where expectations meet their undoing.

Bio:

Wu Tsang (born 1982) is a Los Angeles-based filmmaker, artist and performer. His projects have been presented at the Tate Modern (London); the Whitney Museum, Museum of Modern Art and New Museum (New York); ICA Philadelphia; and the Museum of Contemporary Art and REDCAT (Los Angeles). In 2012, he participated in the Whitney Biennial and New Museum Triennial in New York, the Gwangju Biennial and the Liverpool Biennial. He was named one of *Filmmaker Magazine's* "25 New Faces of Independent Film" in 2012. His first feature *WILDNESS* won the Grand Jury Prize for Outstanding Documentary at Outfest 2012, and had its world premiere at MOMA's Documentary Fortnight before screening internationally. His work is represented by Clifton Benevento, New York. www.wutsang.com