

WU TSANG



Portrait of Wu Tsang, detail from production still of *A Day in the Life of Bliss*, 2013. Photo by Jesus Torres. Courtesy the artist.

WU TSANG. *Green Room*, 2012, mixed-media installation with two-channel HD video, installed at the Whitney Biennial, New York, 2012. Courtesy the artist and Clifton Benevento, New York.

Invisible Boundaries

BY MING LIN

Wu Tsang’s name—both gender ambiguous and nondescript—suits this androgynous, protean artist, who is comfortable assuming the roles of both provocateur and provocatress. Through filmmaking and performance, Tsang probes those static definitions of personhood that he himself eludes, addressing the social and geographic fragmentations that occur in a globalized society. The latter themes reflect his own relatively nomadic lifestyle and, fittingly, Tsang enters our dialogue remotely, checking in via Skype from Stockholm, where he has just completed a residency with international exchange program Iaspis.

Tsang has always been on the move. Born in New England to one of the few interracial families in the area—his father is Chinese and his mother American of Swedish descent—a yearning for more diverse surroundings was felt early. “When I was old enough, I left,” he says matter-of-factly. “It was not because of my transgender identity necessarily, but more about being brown, and being queer.” Pale and freckled, with disarming blue-green eyes and a mane of black hair that is swept up into an impressive knot on top of his head, “brown” isn’t exactly the first description that comes to mind upon meeting the 32-year-old. But for Tsang, identifying as a person of color is less about skin tone than about acknowledging those invisible boundaries that define it. As a person whose gender resists conventional categorization, counting himself among the minority is a stance that has informed much of his work.

It was a personal relationship that first brought Tsang to Los Angeles, where he has been based since 2005. The city’s dynamic sociogeographic borders would subsequently inspire his first feature-length film, the documentary *Wildness* (2012). At a friend’s suggestion, he visited the Silver Platter, an unassuming nightclub in Westlake, the seat of the city’s Latin-American community. Opening its doors revealed a microcosm: for decades the Silver Platter has served as a recreational space and refuge for transgender men and women, many of them immigrants from Latin America seeking a safe space. For Tsang, it was love at first sight: “I’ll never forget the first time I walked in,” he says in the film, which takes both the bar and its clientele as its subject. “I never wanted to leave.”

First shown at the 2012 Whitney Biennial, *Wildness* chronicles the rapid changes taking place in Westlake through the eyes of two interlocutors, Tsang and the Silver Platter itself (personified by the sultry voice of actress Mariana Marroquin), representing

respectively the new blood infiltrating the scene and its original inhabitants. Following in the footsteps of artists such as seminal drag performer and party host Vaginal Davis—an early advocate of the transgressive potential of clubbing—Tsang adopted the venue as a home away from home, hosting a weekly club, *Wildness*, on its premises with a band of artists and musicians. It was lauded as some of LA’s most exciting nightlife, where members of various social backgrounds mingled in front of acts culled from the city’s experimental music scene. Spurred by its success, and true to their initial vision, the group then expanded operations to include a legal clinic in an adjacent storefront that catered specifically to the needs of the transgender community.

But as the party and its surrounding activities gained momentum, its organizers worried about the impact that their presence might have on the existing ecology at Silver Platter, summoning the age-old question of whether art has a place in social movements. With the increasing exposure, Tsang feared that the club would cease to be a safe location for its regulars. “It got into real life issues,” he recalls, “something that art doesn’t always do. When art happens in a gallery, people don’t always question ‘why is this happening on this block?’” Eventually, the death of club owner Gonzalo Ramirez, and ensuing custody battles over the business, brought the event to a close. Though bittersweet, Tsang’s film channels a message of determination, emphasizing the importance of representation. “The only thing anyone can do is show up and refuse to go away,” professes the all-knowing Silver Platter in the final scenes of the film.

Currently, Tsang has moved away from documentary filmmaking, a medium he feels can be somewhat contrived. “After *Wildness*, I felt a little burnt out with the documentary form. I think I realized how manipulative I had to be in order to tell a story.” *Mishima in Mexico* (2012), co-created with performance artist Alexandro Segade, is a tale of forbidden love, adapted from a novel by Yukio Mishima about 1940s Japan. The action is transposed to present-day Mexico City, where Tsang and Segade traveled to write and shoot the film—the story centers as much on their personal and creative relationship as it does on the characters. It also draws on China Miéville’s novel *The City & the City* (2009), which tells of two municipalities that are geographically imposed upon one another but whose citizens cannot see one another. “You can be in a city and there are these worlds in which people

don’t see each other because seeing depends on your economic class, your access, your connections,” says Tsang. “You can literally be in two different cities in the same city.” Geographically unmoored, contemporary artists are similarly caught between worlds, beholden to multiple allegiances. How can one present a cohesive identity, branding oneself, while maintaining autonomy and agency? On screen, Tsang and Segade assume each other’s character intermittently, donning exaggerated makeup, and then resume being themselves again, exemplifying a mutable personhood.

The collapsing of identities recurs in Tsang’s work, and is related to his technique of “full body quotation,” which hints at performativity yet has its essence in action. A small device plays a script into a performer’s ear, allowing him or her to orate aloud; this conversion of word to speech creates a mimetic effect. Tsang likens it to a form of drag: “In drag, the performer channels a persona, appropriating different references. It’s a quotation. This is the same, only with just the voice and nothing else.” The resulting immediacy—scripted words collide with the original speaker’s affectations—allows the performer the nearest possible embodiment of the character they seek to portray.

This investigation of self-construction can be traced back to Tsang’s early work, *The Shape of a Right Statement* (2008), a homage to autism-rights advocate Amanda Baggs. In an uncanny replication of Baggs’ computer-generated voice, Tsang, using full body quotation, recites from her 2007 YouTube video *In My Language*: “There are people being tortured, people dying because they are considered nonpersons because their kind of thought is so unusual as to not be considered thought at all.” For Tsang, “People are always performing,” yet a hierarchy in modes of feeling and communicating validates the actions of some over others. Performing the work in front of small audiences helped Tsang to find an ethical voice, a space between “what the body gives versus how we construct our ideas of who we are.”

Tsang professes a level of amusement when it comes to misconceptions about his gender and race. While such discussions range from inappropriate to offensive, ultimately, he says, people will see what they want to see, so confounding this image is perhaps the greatest form of empowerment. Tsang is a master of disguise and, through his manipulations, he reveals to the eye something that was already there.