

Wu Tsang

Devotional Document (Part 2)

In collaboration with Fred Moten

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Kunsthalle Münster

Wu Tsang (1982, USA), who currently resides in Berlin, is one of the most respected artists of her generation. For her first institutional solo exhibition in Germany Tsang has created an architectural structure in the Kunsthalle Münster, a series of four rooms through which visitors experience a number of films, a new series of prints, and the large performative sculpture “Gravitational Feel” in a specific sequence.

Altogether Tsang’s interrelated complex of performance-based films, drawings, and sculptures ponders the process of defining a personal identity while questioning what this means both as an individual and as a member of a community—conveying a sense of social and cultural belonging as the essence of the human condition. Reflected through the thorny considerations of gender, race, and culture, these works confront the viewer with disruptive, and often contradictory, images of the self within the norms of a societal context, ultimately evoking the impossibility of constructing a steadfast, unequivocal representation of self-identification.

An attempt to question and disarm the traditional categorizations that define an individual in the framework of society, Tsang’s work has been described as “a repeated, perhaps ritualistic, refusal ... of representation.” The ways in which gender and race are represented, for example, and how those who identify as transgender or queer and how people of color see themselves are seen to pose irreconcilable differences. Confronting this disconnect artistically has led the artist to employ the techniques of filmmaking in a performative context to facilitate a sensation of constant fluidity as a sensual antidote to the problematic presuppositions inherent to traditional image making. The exhibition title, “Devotional Document (Part2),” refers to this practice of filmmaking as an ongoing collaborative exploration of the body, sound, and language to convey personal narratives within societal contexts.

Tsang’s art opens up avenues for reflecting possible new, unpredictable, and even misleading or erroneous avenues of understanding and empathy. Many of the works in this exhibition have evolved out of an intense dialogue with scholars and artists involved with theoretical ideas and artistic methods dealing with postcolonial, feminist, gender, and racial issues. “These devotional practices (of filmmaking) seek passage to our sociality through impossible or unavailable images,” writes Fred Moten. A scholar and artist who has developed ideas about emancipation that consider subversive and performative strategies, Moten is one of Tsang’s closest collaborators, and his ideas have greatly influenced her recent work. He has coauthored and performed in most of the pieces shown at Kunsthalle Münster.

The film “Girl Talk” (2015) was conceived as a performance for the camera. It captures Moten in a verdant garden donning an ornate velvet cape and jewelry of prismatic crystals, what is generally coded as decidedly feminine attire. His large body spins slowly, finally filling the picture frame with its mesmerizing continuous motion. A sparkling ambient light encompasses him, at times diffusing his image to a rotating blur. Is Moten reveling in or struggling with a personified drag identity? He lip-syncs a jazz rendition of the title song, “Girl Talk,” sung originally by Tony Bennett, a darling of middle-class white culture in the 1960s. This scenario invokes the questions: Does a “girl talk” exist? If so, by whom can it be performed? And to whom does it speak? In dealing with the complexity and impossibility of belonging, Tsang’s film generates an emotional ambiguity around these questions.

The newest film, “We hold where study” (2017), is a two-channel projection conceived for a large screen and accompanied by an all-encompassing composition for saxophone with sound elements created by Bendik Giske. As in previous works, this film evolved in collaboration with numerous performers. Alternating between double and single screens, it switches occasionally from two duos performing in different places to a single pair moving through a landscape. In one scene an improvised double duet, executed by performers Boychild with Josh Johnson and Ligia Lewis with Jonathan Gonzalez, takes place in a grassy, uncultivated plot of land within the urban area of Los Angeles. The four move together, then apart, sometimes in repose yet continually intertwined in a constant dialogue of motion. A similarly oscillating emotional sense of hope and despair permeates the atmosphere, eerily illuminated by changing sunlight. Moments of intimate contact erupt into struggles to separate that end in near exhaustion. In an apparent effort to differentiate their voices, both as individuals and as pairs, these open-ended dynamic relationships are played out artificially under the open sky.

One scenario shows a pair of dancers, a male and a female, attired in leotards performing in a barren, windowless room, isolated from the outside world. They execute a strenuous, even brutal pas de deux that vacillates between elegant and awkward. The nearly heroic support of a partner evolves into a position of submission, and the dancers end the sequence in a state of depletion. The films portray interpersonal relationships played out as unresolved struggles; these social entanglements are expressed through an emotionally charged, inexorable body language. Like an unceasing kaleidoscope of visual impressions, the artwork offers no conclusions; instead it presents undefined forms of emancipation that articulate the emotional possibility, or impossibility, of navigating personal and cultural differences.

“We hold where study” documents the activity of the performers while taking on a disconcerting subjective viewpoint. The sporadic jumps, waving, and jiggling of the recording process inspire a questioning of the film’s documentary function. Is this seemingly self-motivated camera activity a simulation of the inquisitive eye of the viewer? In this case the filming process becomes a vicarious gaze through which the virtual reality of the film and the real activity of looking are inseparable, leaving behind an ambiguous spectrum of visual perception. For Tsang the process of filming itself entails a continuous questioning of definitions, generating multiple and often confusing perspectives along the way.

The two-channel video “Miss Communication and Mr:Re” (2014) shows, on two frameless monitors, the faces of Moten and Tsang respectively, looking directly at the camera with deadpan expressions. On occasion Tsang, donning a penciled mustache, and Moten, lips covered in smeared red lipstick, thus affecting reversed gender roles, smirk at the viewer. Messages that the two have left for each other on telephone answering machines over a two-week period are narrated in voice-over. The content ranges from Moten’s reflections on societal norms and human relations expressed in poetic language to Tsang’s informal small talk. The disjointed messages are posed as if a conversation, begging the question: What is the connection? Indeed what is the message? Finally the act of letting go and just listening fosters a curious respect for the voice of the other; each expresses what he or she desires while remaining entwined in the conversation by mutual consent. Here Tsang touches upon the potential for alternative forms of communication that accept contradiction, and even miscommunication, as meaningful factors.

Tsang’s sculptural “Gravitation Feel,” another collaboration with Moten, is installed together with “Miss Communication and Mr:Re” in the last room of the specially constructed spaces. The work was created as a tactile structure for a performance employing a medley of sensual and interactive elements executed by Tsang and Moten together with an audience. Nine columnlike structures are formed from countless knotted silk cords on rotating disks, the colored threads brushing the floor like sparkling tendrils. The different patterns of the cords are arranged in successive spiral and geometric formations mirrored in three prints hung in the corridor near the entrance to the room displaying “We hold where study.” The sculpture fills the exhibition space visually but is physically open for passage. The dangling ropes entangle passing visitors, groping like fingers to create an intense physical sensation. As Moten explains, “In this way ‘Gravitational Feel’ is an engine for intensifying the differentiation of our entanglement, continually programming itself through incalculable combinations of disruption and convergence. Your movements, which are neither destructive nor curatorial, are both deconstruction and cure.” Instructions to the visitor: “Wu and Fred kindly request your steadfastly refraining from any attempt to be still.”

The works in the show “Devotional Document (Part 2)” address the viewer—both individually and in dialogue with one another—through the use of acoustic, haptic, and visual languages, producing sensations of immediacy and alienation, uncertainty and assurance all at once. The exhibition comprises a subversive environment wherein any expectations regarding personal identity or communal belonging are continually shaken up and shuffled together until they are blurred almost beyond recognition. This act of continual “dis-identification” denies any form of subjugation in order to find alternative voices that express what we mean in a pluralistic society. It is just such liberating possibilities that Wu Tsang’s artworks bring to light.

Gail Kirkpatrick