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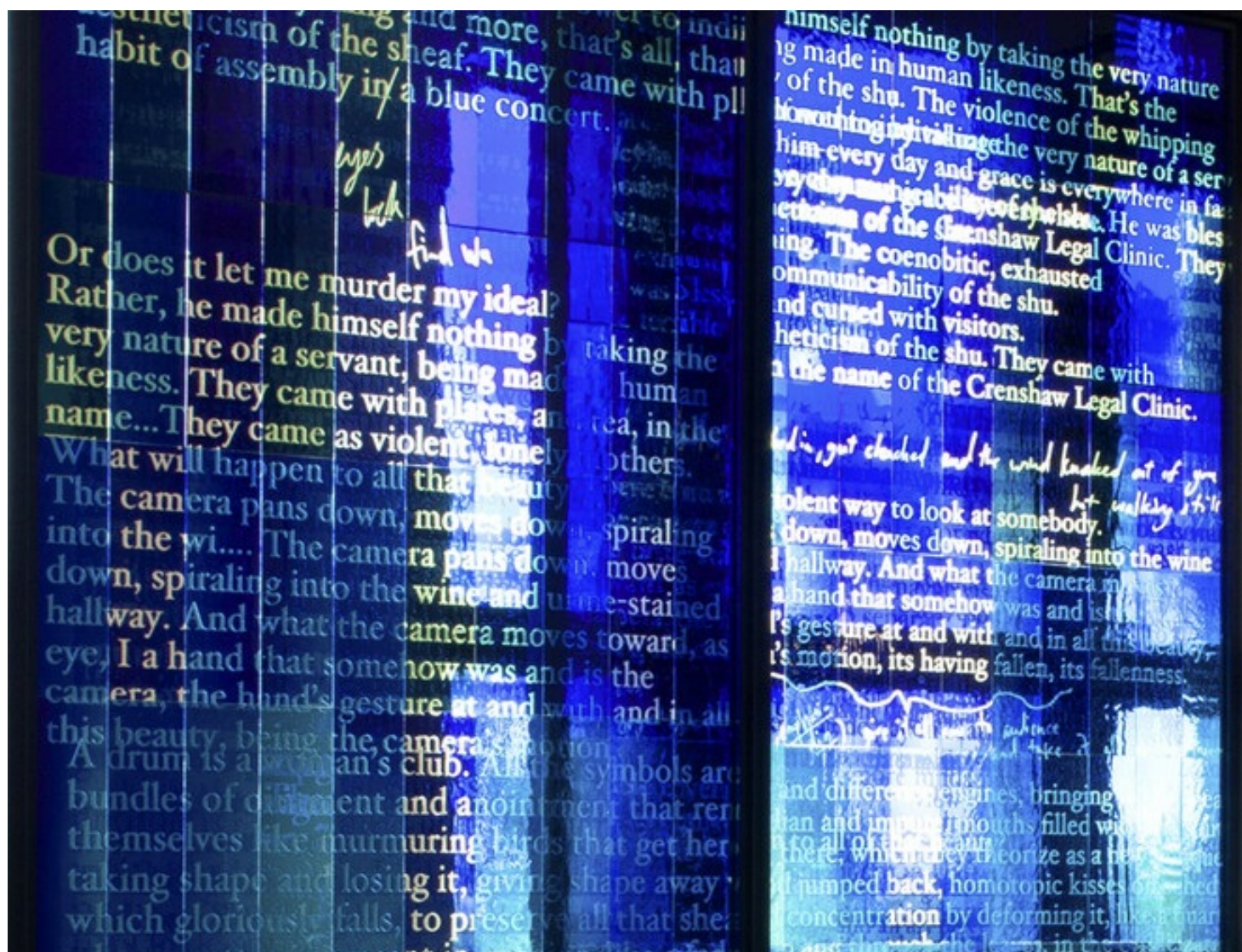
# CONTEMPORARY

Wu Tsang

Fiontán Moran

Exhibition Review

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**About the author(s)**

Fiontán Moran is Assistant Curator at Tate Modern, founder of the zine *Death Becomes Herr* and part of the queer performance collective CAMPerVAN.

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# Wu Tsang

by Fiontán Moran • 04.12.2019

The art gallery has historically been the place where a society tells the stories, both real and imagined, that reflect its identity, history and belief systems. But how does such a space express the complexity of representation in a time of nationalism and mass migration? If we are to take the title of Wu Tsang's exhibition *There is no nonviolent way to look at someone* at face value, this double negative suggests that we are in a hopeless situation. One that implicates not only the artist, who predominantly works in film, but also the space of the gallery and by extension the viewer. Covering a decade of work, the exhibition emerges from Tsang's year-long residency at Gropius Bau, during which she drew upon the history of the building (which looks onto remnants of the Berlin Wall) and worked with local communities.

Collaboration suggests an escape from the complicated bind of subject and author. Almost every label in the exhibition is followed by a list of people who were involved in the creation of the work, shifting the focus from a territorial 'I' to one that enables multiple voices to emerge. This community involves figures from art, music, dance and literature, and reflects Tsang's expanded approach to art making. Subsequently, our attention is frequently drawn to the relationship between things – be they people, ideas or mediums – that is manifested through a compositional emphasis on pairing, layering and mirroring, to create a hybrid visual language that Tsang has described as 'in-betweenness'.





**Fig. 1** *Sustained Glass*, by Wu Tsang with Fred Moten, boychild, Lorenzo Moten & Hypatia Vourloumis. 2019. Installation view at Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2019. (Photograph Luca Girardini; courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, and Cabinet Gallery, London).

Curated by Stephanie Rosenthal with Clare Molloy, the exhibition riffs on this idea by dividing the space into two halves, both of which culminate in films featuring double projections. Uniting the two is Tsang's *Sustained Glass* **Fig.1**, three monumental stained-glass structures in varying tones of blue that stand in the middle of the central and opening gallery. Burned across the glass are fragments and layers from the text and performance piece *Sudden Rise at a Given Tune* (2017–onwards), written by Tsang with the poet and theorist Fred Moten, which collages writing from various authors to explore notions of perception, communication and

empathy. Despite including a recording of the text that can be listened to on a record player, the overlapping, truncation and repetition of sentences mean that the piece resists easy interpretation. Drawing upon Edouard Glissant's theory of opacity as 'that which cannot be reduced', the work consciously plays with levels of transparency, which is dramatised through the fluctuations of light coming from the glass panes in the windows and doors that border the room.



**Fig. 2** Still from *Girl Talk*, by Wu Tsang. 2015. Single channel HD video with stereo sound (Courtesy the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin).

If this opening proposition seems like a lot to digest, such feelings are alleviated by the sound emitting from the short video *Girl Talk* **FIG.2** in the adjoining gallery. Depicting slowed down footage of Moten twirling in ecstatic reverie while crystals draped around his neck bounce in the sunlight, the soundtrack consists of a slowed down recording of Josiah Wise, also known as serpentwithfeet, singing an acapella version of the 1960s song 'Girl Talk'. Written by Bobby Troup about the 'inconsequential things' girls chat about, the song and its problematic assumptions are subverted in Tsang's installation to foreground a space of intimate reverie. This delicate balance between movement, light and communication is echoed in *Gravitational Seams* (2017), a series of line drawings by Moten and Tsang that depict circles and dots set within different circular structures, and continues in Tsang's *Untitled (Incommunicado)* **FIG.3**, an installation of single strands of crystal beads that hang at different points from the ceiling, which the viewer can move through and around.



**Fig. 3** *Untitled (Incommunicado)*, by Wu Tsang. 2019. Installation view at Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2019. (Photograph Luca Girardini; courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, and Cabinet Gallery, London).

Each of these components create the perfect prelude to the monumental video installation *We hold where study* **FIG.4**, made with boychild, Josh Johnson, Ligia Lewis, Jonathan Gonzalez, Lorenzo Moten, Julian Moten, Antonio Cisneros and Bendik Giske, which opens with the following voiceover from Fred Moten:





Fig. 4 *We hold where study*, by Wu Tsang. 2017. Installation view of *Wu Tsang, Devotional Document (Part II)*, Kunsthalle Münster, 2017. (Photograph Roman Mensing; Courtesy the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin).

You came to see human bodies tonight, but she said this is “holy work and it’s dangerous not to know that ‘cause you could die like an animal down here.” She was talking about making dances – pacing back and forth across bridges, riding up and down the block, selling loosies on the corner, walking in the middle of the street. The hazard of movement, of moving and being moved, of knowing that we are affected, that we are affective. There’s danger, too, in the very fact of this reminder, even if it’s just a taste, of what you haven’t seen.

*We hold where study* uses various forms of dance or ‘the hazard of movement’ to explore the intersection and intertwining of queer, Black and trans identities and the risks involved in visibility. Tsang achieves this through a double projection that shows boychild and Johnson in a grassy landscape on the left, and Lewis and Gonzalez in a dance studio on the right. Tsang allows the projections to overlap so that the dancers’ movements – which range from contact improvisation to more formalised choreography – intersect with each other to create a transitional space. It is accompanied by a haunting soundtrack by Giske that complements the camera’s rapid and abrupt navigation towards and then past the performers, which both demarcates the performance space and disorients our experience as a viewer attempting to ‘read’ this fractured terrain. As the film builds to a climax of duets based around modes of dependence and competition, it closes with no obvious resolution, the dancers either in a state of tension or exhaustion.

Performance, in both art and non-artspace, has long been a key element of Tsang's practice. Her breakthrough film *Wildness* (2012) documented the creation and dissolution of a performance/club night that she ran at the Silver Platter in Los Angeles with the DJs Daniel Pineda and Asma Maroof (NGUZUNGUZU) and Ashland Mines (Total Freedom). Fusing documentary with elements of fiction, the film also traced the bar's history as a safe space for the Latinx immigrant and queer community. In Berlin, archival photographs of performers and revellers at Silver Platter are displayed in a vitrine and introduce the opposite suite of galleries while functioning as a reminder of Tsang's social practice and how such spaces offer a form of belonging that marginalised communities may not easily find. This complicated history is suggested in the next room where a large piece of gold fabric hangs from a pole so that it appears as both curtain and flag. By using language associated with conquest in its title, *Conquistado* (2019) **FIG.5** complicates the notion that queer visibility within art institutions is always positive.





**Fig. 5** *Conquistado*, by Wu Tsang. 2019. Installation view at Gropius Bau, Berlin, 2019. (Photograph Luca Girardini; courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, and Cabinet Gallery, London).

Such contrasts find their most magical realisation in Tsang's recent video *One emerging from a point of view* **FIG.6**. Based around the Greek island of Lesbos that has historically taken in large numbers of refugees, the film continues her use of overlapping projections to merge documentary with fantasy **FIG.7**. For one narrative Tsang worked with Yasmine Flowers to reimagine her

emigration as a myth about a neglected Berber woman who dies and is reborn as a 'deep-sea techno witch', while the other traces the experience of locals from the fishing village of Skala Sikamineas, who have helped to receive refugees escaping to their shore since 2015. Throughout the forty-five minute video, Tsang effortlessly conveys the timelessness of displacement, and the experience of the inhabitants that live with the memory of such loss. Scenes of sheep tentatively crossing a stream and being herded into a pen are used as a metaphor for the experience of refugees, while images of Yassmine dancing at the bottom of the sea surrounded by glowing sea creatures suggest a space of redemptive fantasy. Tsang balances this magical realism with a choreographic delicacy that is beautifully evoked in a single scene where the islanders heave a heavy wet rope from the shoreline at night. We never get to see what they are pulling – the next shot shows the island during the day – but it conveys the continual searching that forms the basis of Tsang's practice, an attempt to represent that which can never be fully known.



**Fig. 6** Still from *One emerging from a point of view*, by Wu Tsang. 2019. Two-channel overlapping projections. (Courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet Gallery London, and Antenna Space, Shanghai).

Moving from this space and back through the galleries, the exhibition takes the viewer from places of light to darkness and back again. Tsang was inevitably responding to the natural light that passes through the high windows of the building but, as a form that can illuminate, be manipulated, and at times blinding, light unites many of the works in the show. This is exemplified in *Safe Space* (2014), an art crate that opens on one side to reveal the Silver Platter's neon sign 'The Fist is Still Up' surrounded by mirrors. Referencing the movement of radical activism into the gallery, it returns the gaze back to the viewer and reminds us of the work that is still to be done in the creation of open, compassionate and nonviolent spaces.



**Fig. 7** Still from *One emerging from a point of view*, by Wu Tsang. 2019. Two-channel overlapping projections. (Courtesy the artist, Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin, Cabinet Gallery London, and Antenna Space, Shanghai).

**Exhibition details**

Wu Tsang: There is no nonviolent way to look at someone  
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