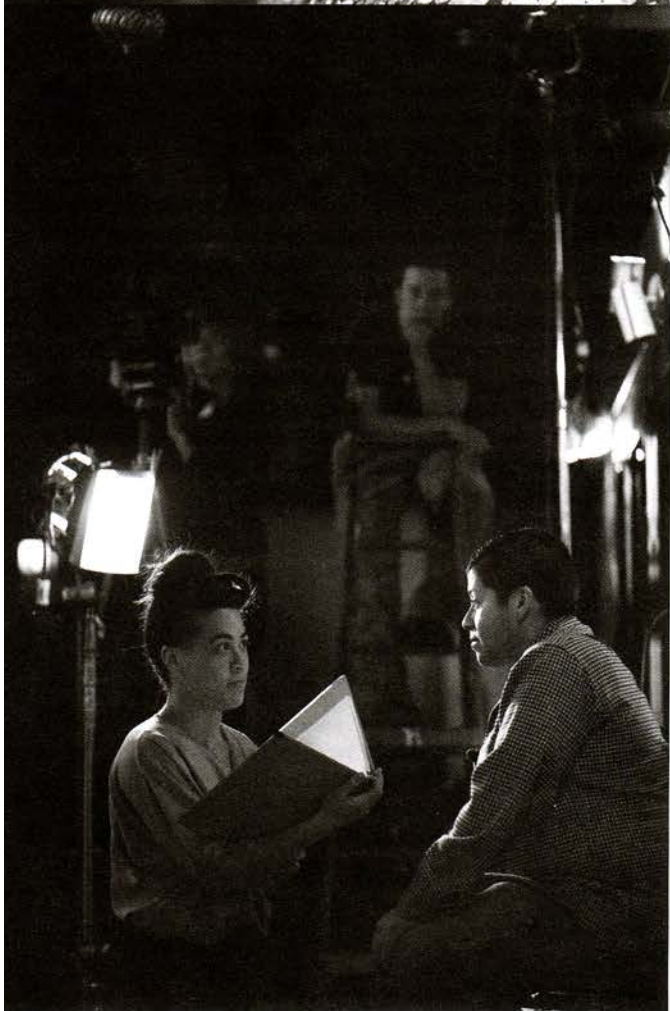
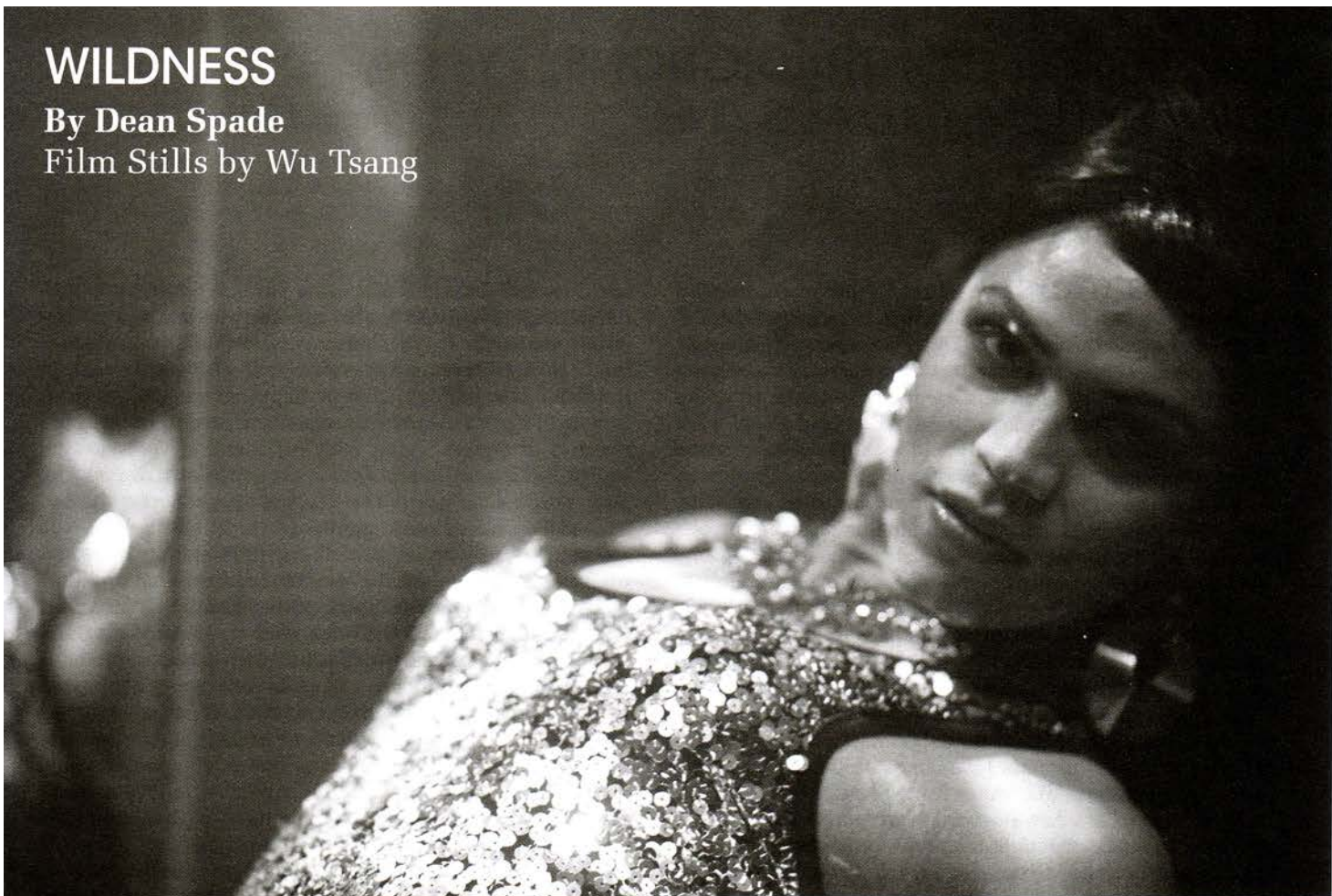


WILDNESS

By Dean Spade

Film Stills by Wu Tsang



On a recent trip to L.A. I had the opportunity to watch a rough cut of Wu Tsang's new film, *Wildness*.¹ Gathered with trans activists and artists in Tsang's living room, I was pulled into a complex story about the Silver Platter, a Los Angeles Latino gay/trans/drag bar, and the events that unfolded when a multiracial group of queer performance artists brought a party called Wildness to the bar. I typically avoid documentaries, including autobiographical ones, about trans experience. They tend to be sensationalist, individualizing, depoliticizing redemption narratives about how trans people are "human," "normal," or otherwise sympathetic characters struggling to fit in. They rarely move beyond those paradigms to ask harder questions or to question the project of representing trans life. The rough cut of *Wildness* demonstrates that more is possible.

Wildness depicts not one but several stories, none of them simple. It tells the story of a bar that, when it opened in the 1960s, refused to serve trans and drag-wearing patrons, but later became a haven for those gender benders, a gathering place for Latin@ performers and their admirers. It explores the lives of the women who make their home and sometimes their living at the Silver Platter. These women describe their lives and identities not in the one-dimensional frames that are typical of trans documentaries, but instead in ways that reveal complexity and contradiction. Their stories of migration, their struggles for survival, their pleasures in finding connection as well as their disagreements and tensions are cut with footage of their performances and the social life of the Silver Platter. The global conditions of U.S. imperialism and capitalism that produce gendered and racialized realities of migration and lead Latin@ queer and trans people to L.A. are a part of these stories—so important given the erasure of those realities in the whitewashed, corporate-funded gay and lesbian politics most visible today. The depiction of the Silver Platter patrons, of the struggles and resilience of Latin@ queer and trans people outside of limited frames of victimhood or fabulousness, not produced for a trans-fascinated audience allure by the freak show,

1. Formerly titled *Damelo Todo*.

not creating narratives of overcoming that suggest some generalizable experience of a desire to assimilate into straight/white/American life alone make *Wildness* an important intervention into the world of trans films. The Silver Platter patrons interviewed in the film face police violence, poverty, immigration enforcement, and criminalization, and also have a good time with friends at a bar that is important to them, and they have differing thoughts and opinions and experiences within those shared realities.

The love and respect that Tsang feels for the Silver Platter and its patrons is palpable in this depiction—the film is for them, not just about them—and sets the stage for the themes of appropriation, class difference, gentrification, and displacement that the film examines by exploring the events that occurred when the Wildness party (cocreated and hosted by Tsang) came to the Silver Platter. Tsang again refuses to provide a simplistic or one-dimensional narrative for viewers. The film shows a range of reactions to the changes that Wildness brought to the Silver Platter: the welcomed business, the enjoyment of creative collaboration and overlap between Wildness performers and spectators and Silver Platter regulars, the displacement and alienation of some Silver Platter regulars (one of whom described Wildness attendees as “college kids”), the significance of racial difference between the Latin@ clientele of the Silver Platter and the Wildness crowd, which often had a significant white presence.

The depiction of this complex relationship comes to a climax when we learn that Wildness received some high-profile publicity in 2008 when *L.A. Weekly* journalist Sam Slovick published a review of the night in the *Weekly*'s “Best Of” issue despite the pleadings of Wildness organizers for him not to do so. Slovick's racist, transphobic coverage depicted Silver Platter regulars as lascivious, predatory, and completely disposable, reproducing

harmful stereotypes of trans women of color, sex workers, and Latin@s. The film shows the complexities of solidarity and difference being navigated by the Wildness organizers, who were horrified that their event had produced the coverage and the potential increase in displacement that it might generate. Slovick's review positioned the Wildness organizers firmly as “outsiders” to the Silver Platter scene—a group of “art-damaged students”—which speaks to the tensions about gentrification and displacement the film grapples with, but doesn't quite capture the complexity of Wildness's demographic. Some Wildness organizers and performers also responded to Slovick's writing as trans people and/or people of color, also marginalized in (gay and straight) mainstream culture and also vulnerable to the violences produced by the kind of rhetoric Slovick used. I won't spoil what happened when the filmmakers confronted Slovick on tape, but needless to say the portrayal of the creation of Wildness and its impact on the Silver Platter engage a complexity and self-reflectiveness that is rarely represented in film and yet is a constant companion of activists, artists, and organizers.

The film refuses the structures of documentary that I've become accustomed to avoiding—it refuses to tell just one story, to obscure the role of the filmmaker, to pretend to present objective truth, to ignore the politics of representation. This engagement affects the viewing experience in ways that I imagine will make some audiences encourage Tsang to reduce the complexity, to tell fewer stories, to produce neat conclusions. I hope he retains the sense of unfolding, self-critical, imperfect process guided by love and a desire for connection that I think is palpable both in the stories the film tells and in the ways it is crafted. It is something we (trans people, people fighting white supremacy and capitalism, organizers and activists, artists and advocates) all desperately need to see right now.

