

Rooted in the tropical underground of Los Angeles nightlife, *WILDNESS* is a documentary portrait of the Silver Platter, a historic bar in the MacArthur Park area (of Los Angeles) that has been home for Latin/LGBT immigrant communities since 1963.

With a magical-realist flourish, the bar itself becomes a character, narrating what happens when a group of young artists create a weekly performance art/dance party (organized by director Wu Tsang and DJs NGUZUNGUZU & Total Freedom) called *Wildness*, which explodes into creativity and conflict.

Conversation between Wu Tsang and Roya Rastegar

Roya

The first question we've been getting about *Wildness* is "why does the bar have a voice? And why does Wu talk with the bar? Why do you have a voice?"

Wu

And why is the story of *Wildness*— a 2-year club night versus the 50+ year history of the Silver Platter— so prominent? I think these questions come from two far camps of different persuasions. The first wonder "why is the story so much about Wu and Wu's friends?" They are interested in more of an ethnographic documentary, and the presence and voice of the filmmaker so front and center of the film is an annoying intrusion for them. And then there's the activist camp that asks "why are you privileging your voice, when there are all these other voices that are more marginalized and generally not heard. Why are you taking up space in that context, as opposed to just letting them speak?"

Roya

These are different persuasions that are both invested in narratives of authenticity. The first just want to look at and think about the women, peer into their lives—their "real" lives—and not have to worry or think that all these images are run through your eyes, as the director. And this is a problem in more "classic documentary" filmmaking. The second camp, despite well-intentions of wanting to hear different, marginal perspectives, can become problematic if it relies on films to do this kind of work. In the first cut of *Wildness*, before we began our collaboration, there were a lot of different voices, there was no guiding perspective, but had a more observational structure, full of talking heads interviews. You weren't very prominent in it, just one of the "interviewees" along with many others. But while a filmmaker can try to circulate a multiplicity of voices within a film, the framework, the "agenda" or "message" is still, at the end of the day, yours. To purport multiple perspectives, when they are in service of your vision/message/agenda, is deeply problematic. You decide what parts of the interviews to highlight, what parts of the world to show, and then you stitch it together in the editing process with music that has emotional resonance for you. This is what it means to make any documentary— otherwise you would have a 300-hour film! Directors need to take responsibility for the limits of their perspective and what they can know from their position.

Wu

I've had that thought, in so many different ways. When I first began making *Wildness*, I thought I had a message that I could use all the voices to say. I was really influenced by critical ideas being circulated by economic justice projects such as the Audre Lorde Project, Fierce, TGI Justice Project, and in particular the writings of Sylvia Rivera Law Project founder Dean Spade, who was a personal friend. It was this kind of intersectional thinking around what it means to be a transgender immigrant, to have a kind of double invisibility around documentation and gender—and the ways in which the state excludes and polices you for that. And the extreme vulnerability in terms of economic disadvantages, violence, deprivation, and shortening of life chances. I thought the material that I was filming supported this analysis, and so I was like, ok, I'm going to make a "trans

What does “safe space” mean, and who needs it? And how does it differ among us? At the Silver Platter, the search for answers to these questions creates coalitions across generations.

—Description of the film *Wildness*, from the official website, www.wildnessmovie.com.

manifesto” film. And in that sense, I had an agenda and a message that I wanted to communicate. But I think this film would make sense if I was making it for the people with whom I shared that analysis. But, when making a film for broad circulation – like film festivals and wherever beyond – something else happens. That formulation, the idea that the woman of Silver Platter are so vulnerable, is a very activist point of view from being someone within the trans community trying to organize other trans and queers and LGBT community. So we say things like, “let’s not focus on gay marriage, let’s focus on prison abolition”. Within those circles, that analysis makes sense, but what happens when it gets lifted into a broader context is that the women of Silver Platter become victimized, or they become objects, fetishized. Vulnerability in that more fucked up way where it’s just activating people’s fantasies about other things... Do you know what I’m saying?

Roya

Totally. You’ve tackled these questions by approaching *Wildness* as a multidisciplinary project. Different possibilities arise from different artistic forms. Your project at the Whitney Biennial, for example, took a multi-screen format within a space designed to look like the Silver Platter where images were being positioned physically across and next to each other. But without you in the middle of it, narrating it as your story as we do in the film. Also, it’s important to recognize that different kinds of strategies are needed in different fields. So, in a legal context that Dean Spade and other legal activists works in, it is necessary to work together to protect the people in our communities who are the most vulnerable and subject to violence. Those interventions into the economic and political structures we live in are important. But working in the realm of culture requires a different strategy.

Wu

Sure, making the film required working within a framework of emotional and visual truths. It taught me different ways to communicate, but also changed my approach to activism. For example, we started a legal clinic at the storefront next door to Silver Platter called Imprenta. The clinic started to fall apart in predictable ways once we were putting our ideas into practice. It’s harder to maintain legal analysis when people are coming in the door with all the messiness of real life situations. Our sense of agency was according to a map of power that was about owning one’s privileges, like “I’m educated, I’m able-bodied, I’m middle class, I have this social safety net” or “I’m a lawyer vs. a community member” etc. So we were trying to superimpose this power analysis into our way of relating to each other and it was problematic. We couldn’t see each other, all we could see were these “labels.” But actually, in reality, not everything comes down to the power that you’re given by your social construct, because you’re sharing space. We were all sitting in a room, so we were also having human, like psychological dramas. The ways people don’t get along: someone’s aggressive, someone’s triggered, etc. I think a lot of that has to do with being human, and the film taught me different ways to work through this. I remember Dean Spade once told me something quite simple but it’s always stuck with me: that actually most people are perpetually figuring this stuff out for the first time, because that’s the nature of movement-building! One would hope that we could discover activism and try to adapt it to our personal experiences

— otherwise it loses its potential to be transformative across different social groups.

Roya

This goes back to the importance of recognizing the limit of one's perspective. We can put these labels on everything and expect them to actually capture us mathematically, but it is at the expense of this human dimension you're talking about! An overreliance on legal framework to recognize each other as human is dangerous. Separating ourselves along quantifiable lines, and imposing a legal context on a cultural framework, constricts the possibilities for the art to be socially and political transformative in an entirely different way.

Wu

I've also been thinking about how it's not that people don't want images of people of color in culture, they just want certain kinds of representations. Images that uphold a sense of the authenticity of that culture. Especially now, it's very in vogue to be brown and queer, trans or whatever... So, if you are of one of those subsets of people, or you have overlapping experiences in these categories, how do you make representations that are true to you and explore things that are a concern for you and in your world? As an artist then, you have to do a double move. Not only is it harder to get recognized for these representations, but also there's an easy way in which you could get appropriated. So, how do you not satisfy people's expectations? *Paris is Burning* is the perfect example. It's a film that everybody loves because it upholds the idea that this is an authentically stable community, with shared codes, and an inside and an outside. As long as that's reinforced, it doesn't threaten anybody. I think that the word "trans" has the potential to become normalizing in the same way that queer or LGBT can. I use "trans" and "queer" more than most words, but always with this huge caveat... What I'm actually talking about is a general non-conforming gender, something non-western, not white American, and not articulated in an LGBT framework. It's not about sexuality even. It's just about being and not having set ideals of masculinity or femininity. It's something that needs to keep shifting, because otherwise you get complacent and think you've won all these gains, but you haven't. It's the porousness of community and representation that threatens people, you know what I mean?

Roya

Yes! I think Wildness is trying to get at those pores! I don't think we wanted to make a positive or negative representation. That's a very limiting framework for making films. We need to change the dialogue. Remember when you were telling me about how great the screening at the Silver Platter was? I don't think they loved it because it was a positive representation, but more because it resonates with them, with how they remember the mess and process and beauty of the party.

Wu

Because what's at stake for each of us is different...

In 2008, writer and performer Raquel Gutiérrez wrote *Damelo Todo*, a short story about a 15 year-old Salvadorian civil war refugee named Teodulo Meja who arrives to Pico-Union and discovers the Silver Platter bar.

Gutiérrez writes, “The space is ghostly inside, the bar is without its tender and there is just a bright painter’s light on in the corner. Rubia is practicing her routine though it is unclear whether it’s a staged performance she is preparing for or an actual violent confrontation. She has a fan in one hand and a butterfly blade in the other, both fanning out.”

Roya

We had to work this out when we were conceptualizing the bar as a narrator. Remember that morning when we met at your studio, and I was like, “Hey, I had this really weird dream, about the bar, and it was speaking, and it was Vaginal Davis” and you totally went with it— talking about how perfect Vag would be, especially with her history at Bricktops, and what an influence that was for you artistically, creatively. And you also noted how problematic it would be to have a Spanish-speaking transgender voice as the bar.

Wu

Like it would play into the authenticity myth or something...

Roya

Totally. That was your initial instinct—so smart and I completely agreed. But when we read through the script with Vag, and then listened to it alongside the visuals, it just didn’t work. Vag’s voice needs to be embodied on screen by the doll herself.

Wu

This was a moment when I learned something about filmmaking. Sometimes you want to disrupt people, and sometimes you want to lull people in with the magic of a story. It would have been so disidentifying to have Vag’s voice there. It would have made the experience totally an intellectual one, because you would have had to listen with this major grain of salt, like, “Ok, this is really weird, I don’t believe this bar is talking at all, but let’s try to decipher what it’s saying and why it’s saying it in this really racialized accent?”

Roya

That’s right! She was doing her Cholita persona. Marianna as the voice allowed for something else to happen. It draws you into the story in unexpected ways. Remember we decided to distinguish you as a real person, from Wu the character? We wrote the bar’s lines and Wu, the character’s, lines together. But still something about the bar’s voice was perceived as objective.

Wu

Even though we decided that in some scenes the bar would actually literally take my lines...

Roya

And if you had been the one to say those lines, they wouldn’t have been perceived as objective. That was our discussion with James Benning at the CalArts screening Berenice Reynaud organized. He was telling us how much he appreciated the objectivity of the bar’s voice. And it’s clearly a trick—because obviously bars cannot speak—and what the Silver Platter is saying is from our creative collaborative work, a synthesis of the many interviews you did, and Marianna’s contributions—a big melting pot of brain. But the notion of the bar as objective fascinates me because, of course everyone knows the bar isn’t actually speaking. And if the character of Wu, for example, had said those exact same words, it would have not been received as objective, but something from your embodied, racialized, gendered, subject position. If Mariana had been seen on screen speaking those lines, then I don’t

This setting first serves as a source of intrigue for Meja, and soon after presents an opportunity for a new life among the transgender women of the Silver Platter: “the entrance and the exit—the past and the present with an eye towards tomorrow...”

think those words would be taken as objective. Because she’s a young, beautiful woman. But the disembodied element of the narration allows the audience to see in a different way because of who is speaking, it opens them to hear something they wouldn’t have been able to hear in another way... It’s a trick — a way to play with the limits of what you can see and do from an imaginary place, and also reveals the limits of what audiences can hear. So representation is not just from the filmmaker, but it’s also from a film’s reception, from the audience. You could do a different kind of project with this material that takes another approach — for example, to invite Vag to do a performance of the bar’s voice in the a theater with the film playing — like a live film.

Wu

Interesting! This is all tied to that decision of what we wanted the film to be. As soon as Marianna’s voice was there it was so much more magical, it was so much more like Ah! Relief! This is a journey I want to go on! Filmmaking is such a subjective process, and sometimes compromising what intellectually works as an idea, but physically, emotionally, sonically, visually, it just doesn’t work. The editing played such a role in the shaping of the story, because we would have these ideas on paper and then a lot of times it just didn’t work... It was almost like a math problem... The number of frames, and the sound... Filmmaking is like this combination of having an idea and a plan, and then executing the plan makes certain things impossible, but then sometimes you just have to figure out how to execute the plan until it serves the idea.

Roya

And it’s the journey that subverts those traditional narratives. Because we set up your character as a hero, and then subvert that whole traditional hero narrative about one person learning how to protect or conquer the demons of their community. Your character learns that actually you’re one of many, and the film is about figuring out how to connect across difference and also through commonality. It’s about that process, and it’s through your consciousness. Hence the dreaminess, driving at dusk, twinkling sounds. Because it’s from your perspective, I think you’re disrupting any expectation of authenticity while also recognizing how you hear and how you see.

Wu

And the film could have been about this whole other thing, but I feel like what we needed to do was create an experience that was really embodied, so that people there watching the film could actually sit and go on this journey and have this set of discoveries the way my character did. And so if it was all like, up here, with the ideas... I think that’s why it worked better to have Marianna’s voice, we wanted people to get out of their thinking brains, and be more in their self-discovery place...

Roya

What you do in *Wildness* is very generous, because you’re offering yourself up on two fronts — as the younger, naïve artist character of Wu, but also as this wiser, more thoughtful, questioning character of the Silver Platter. So people

Wu Tsang commissioned this text as a script for the short film *Damelo Todo* (*Give Me Everything*), 2010, which depicts a fictional tale of Teodulo Mejía's discovery of the Silver Platter.

Tsang shot the film in the bar, and later presented the work in various installation settings that included reproductions of actual objects from the Silver Platter, such as the counter, curtains, and the neon sign.

can find a way in through one of those points of identification hopefully. At the NY screening, I invited some of my white, male investment banking friends from my other life long ago – and I didn't expect this, but they said it gave them a chance to feel part of something that they hadn't even thought they were part of. And when we're dealing with questions of gentrification, it is so necessary for everyone to look at how they are implicated, and they can only do that if they see themselves as part of a larger world that we all share. It's like they understood the value of the place, and what it offered – even if they recognized it wasn't for them.

Wu

Wow that's interesting. Well I'm happy if that's true, that the film achieves some quality that is true to what the party was. I remember having a conversation with Ashland very early on, we are NOT the kind of people that would walk into a place like that and be like "this is a great place to have a parrrrty," you know? Like just looking at the real estate. We were like "Oh my god, we feel so good, all we want to do is like, we're so grateful to be invited and we'd like to invite other people"... That was always the intention. But some people had this presumption that we were kind of like...

Roya

...wanting to take it over?

Wu

Yeah.

Roya

But you were creating a party at the crossroads of these different communities.

Wu

Exactly. But it was about gentrification. It's not that we shouldn't be here and we don't belong here, it's just that we want to make sure that if we're here, then everybody that was here before us can stay. And that was always the hope with the party... What was interesting to me about Wildness was that it was not an activist project, it was actually a commercial project, a cultural enterprise, that was like, freewilling and like, there was motivation for each of us. We were gaining things... The Silver Platter was gaining things, they were making money, gaining cultural capital, and that's not, again, a better thing, but we all had an incentive to do it, and it's what kept us all together. As soon as that incentive fell apart, and we tried to do this other party at this other bar because we felt bad that Javier lost his job, but we were doing it out of obligation, and it was like a terrible party. That's a thing you can't fake. Sometimes people will ask "what's your involvement with the Silver Platter now that the film is done?" My simple answer is that it was not really in my control... I wanted to continue doing the party, but other people didn't want to, so if I'm only one person in a collective of people, I can't make everybody do what they don't want to do. Part of acknowledging that community, what constitutes the community, was acknowledging that everybody had a motivation and was gaining something out of it. And that people aren't motivated to do things out of a sense of guilt. Or if they do, then that community has a different quality...

Roya

I can completely see how your approach to filmmaking is connected with how you organized Wildness the party and create these spaces. Do you remember when we first started working together, there was that line that really struck me the wrong way: "All anyone can ever do is show up and refuse to go away". And for a while we had it out. You heard my arguments for why it shouldn't be there, but then it made its way back in anyway. That line has really twisted my head around. I had always thought about it in a very specific way – certain people just shouldn't take up space, while other people can. Depends on your category! But that's part of that dynamic we were talking about that is so damaging to activist and cultural work. So I wonder about these critiques the party got about "taking up too much space?" And I wonder "are there different ways of taking up space?"

Wu

It's a good question. That touches the hot button, stress question when you're told that you take up too much space. It's always been hard for me to think through that question.

Roya

Are some ways of taking up space destructive and other ways generative? What ways of taking up space close down possibilities? Which open up possibilities? You're a very compelling artist because your practice is to create and host spaces in a way that generates more space. You actually make space for other people because of the way you take up space. And that's very different than some guy who just wants to go in the middle of the room and who's talking so loud that no one else can talk, or dancing so big no one else can dance. You're a space maker.

Wu

Space make!