

Wu Tsang & boychild

by Tess Altman

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Wu Tsang and boychild are world-makers. While Wu primarily works as a filmmaker and boychild as a performer, collaboratively they move across genre and medium. Wu's film and boychild's movement seem to hold each other, and in turn hold space for their audience, to feel queerer worlds. As a fan of their caring and playful practice, I took a trip out to Fire Island Pines to visit their current studio—the beach. I traveled the Long Island Rail Road on a rainy Tuesday morning and then hopped on a ferry filled with fluffy, well-maintained dogs. I met Wu Tsang and boychild on a foggy beach post-thunderstorm and we played with a fat pug. Later, we returned to the BOFFO residency house to drink some tea and to discuss the importance of gathering, their ongoing collaborative practice, and their upcoming performance-on-the-sand for the BOFFO Performance Festival.

Tess Altman I'm interested in the prompting of the BOFFO residency: to create work in conversation with the Fire Island Pines community. How have you two worked from that starting point to develop a project?

boychild We were really enticed by the possibility of performing outside, so we're taking a performance that we've been doing for the last three or four years and adapting it to this location. It'll be a dance with the sunset, a little bit. It's called *Moved by the Motion*, and at this point it's an ensemble, collective project, but we initiated it as the two of us. Depending on who's around, we do it in different configurations. In this instance, it's pared down to just the two of us. It's an improvisation structure: each time we have a different



Wu Tsang and boychild in *Moved by the Motion* performance at Martinskirche, Basel, Switzerland. Photograph by Inès Manai.

text that we ingest and work with, and then that gets translated into movement and staging.

Wu Tsang There's also a dialogue with film. I'm a filmmaker primarily, but a lot of my films are about performance. I'm interested in how to translate liveness into moving image, because it's something that is not immediate. A video of a live performance is not the same thing as experiencing it live, but I think you can find a language in cinema to capture the spirit of it. We want to subvert the traditional roles of director and performer. We're interested in the relationships between language and direction and movement—and how not to have those in a hierarchy, but in an interplay of relying upon each other.

b It's a subversion of language and medium, and the languages that



Wu Tsang and boychild in *Moved by the Motion* performance at Martinskirche, Basel, Switzerland. Photograph by Inès Manai.

have been built through medium. What happens when you insert the exact same performance on the beach with a sunset, one that would usually be in a black box theater, or in a white cube gallery, or on a film set? The spatial context totally changes the meaning, and we really enjoy adapting these things into different spaces, and playing with them. It's about communicability.

WT I like to think of it as a performance that's never finished—this ongoing thing that keeps taking different shapes. It's not about the finished project. It's about where we are in the process, what we're thinking about, what we want to talk about, and how we want to talk about it.

b It's kind of like our band. Wu had this idea that it was this exquisite corpse, that continues to fold onto the next, onto the next. So it's different than the previous pieces, but it is also not detached from them necessarily. "The band" is also just a great way to use performance as a means to collaborate with our friends. And in the last few years, Wu's been working with poet Fred Moten, which has

been super generative for our collaboration.

WT Yeah, Fred's in the band, too. His primary medium is writing, and so we work with texts that come out of our dialogues. In the project we're working on this week, we're working with some poetry that comes out of that collaboration.

TA I recently cruised through that published dialogue of entanglement, email, and voicemail that you and Moten published earlier this year, *Who Touched Me?*

WT It's a parallel process. It's a conversation that started there, and now we're having it between all of us, back and forth, and it blends and blurs with life. It's about communication. It's about the attempt at connection with others.

b And ways to do that outside of the ways that you're supposed to use something like language, and the ways that constrain everyone to a certain reality and to certain rules. It's not necessarily to be anti—as an oppositional force, but to dance in and out of it, while connecting to other forms of communication. Like using drag with film or with language, to dress it up and perform through it. Fred [Moten] and Stefano Harney's notion of haptics in *The Undercommons* has been super inspiring for me. It's like the question: *Who touched me?* Touch in the sense of gathering. For me, that is a source of power, one that I don't think people fully acknowledge: gathering, being next to somebody, sharing a space, sharing a moment. It's such a subtle, powerful thing.

WT It's about being ready to respond to the moment, and there's a lot of practice and repetition that goes into that, that's not necessarily the same thing as a rehearsal. It's about creating the conditions for a moment.

TA And that framing, or those conditions for improvisation, for you, starts with text?

WT Yeah. This time it's a text called *A Sudden Rise at a Given Tune* that came out of some other performances we did together

[also with Fred] earlier this year. We're interested in exploring the different ways it can be configured in live movement. BOFFO is a situation that's very much about the community. It's not a big budget, big scale thing, so we're really paring it down and thinking about what the simple elements are that constitute the performance. Voice and movement—those are our mediums that we always return to.

b This text *A Sudden Rise* was recently performed in a 12th-century church in Switzerland with three other collaborators and it was huge. It was a dream come true to be able to do that in so many ways, but it's important for us that the barebones can shine through also. It's a nice practice to open it up, to break free... you generally have conventions of three walls, or four walls, or the fourth wall, and you don't have any of those in an outdoor space. That's something new for us, to release the formal content in that way.

TA No off-stage to hide behind...

WT Yeah, there's nowhere to hide.

b I think of improvisation as this mode of survival. Like with the phrase "nowhere to hide." That exists for so many people. There's a trans experience of "passing," of being able to hide or move through a moment, and you have to use improvisation. I have to use improvisation when I'm in different places in the world, or on different streets, and that, for me, is a performative thing. And I think that's something that I bring onto the stage. The "stage" and the stages I walk on every single day have direct crossover in my life. It's kind of an unfinished thing, all of it. I just talked to A.L. Steiner and she was saying that about her work, too. It's the idea of queer becoming as opposed to a fixed identity. And I think that's something we connect to with Fred in his work as well.

TA Multiple and changing performances of self.

b Yeah. You can always reach for it, to the future, and you can go back and forth, and that's how the performance folds over. The process is infinite or continual.



Wu Tsang and boychild in *Moved by the Motion* performance at Martinskirche, Basel, Switzerland. Photograph by Inès Manai.

TA How has it felt bringing yourselves, and this iterative, continual work, to Fire Island?

b A script works through feeling that is tied to the text. It's about getting to a place where you give meanings to each part of the script, as you act it over and over again. That's what I mean about this specific performance *Moved by the Motion* folding in time, and how life folds in time. I don't believe that you can disconnect the things that happen before, as they are experiences that prepare you for whatever is next, and so in that sense, the future is an unfolding. So, in a way, I do know what the feeling will be. The success is being prepared for it and knowing that you can reach it and attain it because you are prepared.

TA It's almost like an exquisite corpse with yourself, in which you do that "reach" with your arm and then pass it off to yourself in the future, and then there's the next reaching: arms on top of arms.

TOSH BASCO

b Arms are a really nice visual, because I think that people think of touch as with the hands, like haptics, and iPhone technology is connected to that touch of the hands...but there's this sensation that you get [with the reach] that's just like a collaborative feeling, a closeness.

TA A stretching, a holding...

b Yeah, like the difference between us texting or emailing versus us sitting here. There's a shared sense of what this is now, for all of us, that we share now. And when you take this and transcribe it or shape it, you'll carry that with you, and that will come through in the text. Like the sense of "beach" or something... (*laughter*). And that's what's really special about being here—the space and the history that it has.

WT I think one of the things that really appealed to me [about working here] was the context of a queer community that has a queer history, and that it's not specifically an "art" audience, it's a mixed audience. Maybe some people will come to the city specifically for this festival, but there will also be a lot of people that are just wandering through, and I really like that kind of mix. We both come from queer nightlife as a starting point of being creative. That was always what drove me to want to be involved in creating nightlife—the mixed crowd that comes together when there's a space for queer people that's not specifically one kind of aesthetic or one kind of music or one kind of art.

b It's always an excuse to be with people.

WT Yeah, and to do something together. That's actually been a big part of being here, is that there's a nice kitchen and we've been cooking and sharing meals with a lot of people that are passing through, or meeting new people.

b We've been having a lot of big dinners.

WT A lesson I'm learning from Fred [Moten] is the practice of paying attention to the ways that we live as forms of resistance. It's not just

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the ways we are oppressed, or the ways that we overtly "fight," but actually that we live our lives and produce culture for each other, and that that's actually an important thing to focus energy on, especially now, not "more than ever," but it's important to remember that right now.

Moved by the Motion will be performed by Wu Tsang and boychild on Friday, August 18 in Fire Island Pines, as part of the BOFFO Fire Island Performance Festival, following their two-week residency from August 6-20 at BOFFO's Fire Island Art Camp.

Wu Tsang's films, installations, performances, and sculptures move fluidly between documentary, activism, and fiction. Her projects have been presented at museums and film festivals internationally, including MoMA (New York), Tate Modern (London), Stedelijk Museum (Amsterdam), MCA (Chicago), MOCA (Los Angeles), Berlinale Film Festival (Berlin), SANFIC (Santiago), Hot Docs Festival (Toronto), and South by Southwest Film Festival (Austin). Her first feature film WILDNESS (2012) premiered at MoMA's Documentary Fortnight, and her work was also featured in the 2012 Whitney Biennial and in "The Ungovernables" New Museum Triennial in New York. She has received grants from Creative Capital, the Warhol Foundation, and the Rockefeller and Guggenheim Foundations.

boychild is a movement-based performance artist whose work operates through improvisation as a mode of survival. Adamant about the visceral experience of live visual performance, boychild makes a case for how the movement of form can communicate what remains impenetrable in images, and through language. Her performances have been presented at MoMA PS1, the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, Kulturhuset, Stockholm, MOCA Los Angeles, MOMA Warsaw, the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, ICA London, Migros Museum für Gegenwartskunst, MACBA, ICA London, the Sydney Biennial and Berghain. boychild has toured with Mykki Blanco, and collaborated with Korakrit Arunanondchai, Wu Tsang, as well as the streetwear label Hood By Air.

Tess Altman is a fangirl based in Brooklyn, NY.