

# Tactics of Virtual Memory and Trans Inscrutability in the Works of Wu Tsang

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## ABSTRACT

In her art and research, the artist Wu Tsang poses the question: “Whose voices are heard, whose are silenced?” By incorporating her own perspective as a trans person into her works, Tsang utilizes virtual media to reveal alternative interpretations of the past, and in turn, create new trajectories for the future. Her film *Duilian* specifically rewrites the story of Qiu Jin—a renowned Chinese feminist poet and revolutionary hero of the Qing dynasty—as a trans narrative. Set in a world that blurs global, temporal, and linguistic boundaries, the film merges historical research with imaginative thinking to uncover the trans stories that have been lost or hidden through time. Through an in-depth analysis of *Duilian*, this article will situate the film within Tsang’s larger oeuvre to demonstrate how the artist embodies Homay King’s concept of “virtual memory” and Vivian L. Huang’s notion of “inscrutability” to traverse the past, present, and future, continually implementing trans tactics as a means of re-historicization, safety, and survival.

## INTRODUCTION

Wu Tsang is an artist whose worldbuilding projects uncover the latent trans narratives that have been made illegible through time. Adopting a methodology that centers collaborative performance as a queer of color critique,<sup>1</sup> Tsang complicates limited perceptions of sociality and identitarian legibility, particularly in relation to gender, sexuality, and race. As the artist states, “My practice is very collaborative and really about trying to create the circumstances for things to be possible and then let them unfold.”<sup>2</sup> Through her work, Tsang invents new virtual worlds that allow her to embody an oppositional politics of belonging.

While the virtual has often been discussed in binary terms, portrayed as either the future hope or demise of humanity, or conversely, as an immaterial counterpart to reality, Homay King presents a more nuanced understanding of its possibilities. In her seminal text *Virtual Memory*, she asserts that the virtual is in fact a “new reality”<sup>3</sup> that is intrinsically tied to the present moment and its embodied experiences. Describing the virtual as a process of becoming, King counters limited understandings that perceive it as an unreal, atemporal alternative to the physical world; rather, she stresses the ways in which the virtual is time-bound, allowing the present to unfold in relation to the past and future as a means of temporal distortion. King expands upon this point, writing, “The

virtual, in this view, is a potential treasure chest full of images that perform and elicit memory, intuition, and speculation, all while retaining an underlying continuity with what is here in the present moment.”<sup>4</sup>

Through an analysis of Tsang’s practice, this article reassesses King’s theory of virtual memory through a trans lens. In many of her works, Tsang adopts the virtual’s adaptable nature, playing with the mutability of language and space to create new models of trans safety and sociality. While queer and trans theory has taken an anti-social turn over the last several years,<sup>5</sup> Vivian L. Huang reorients these feelings of loss, invisibility, and negativity, what she refers to as “inscrutability,” as methods of resistance. Through her research, Huang poses the question: “What if inscrutable modes make certain worlds more livable and even proliferate social possibilities?”<sup>6</sup> This article will conduct an in-depth analysis of Tsang’s 2016 film *Duilian*, situating it within the artist’s expansive oeuvre to articulate the ways in which her practice has continually developed new virtual worlds that imagine the social possibilities of trans inscrutability.

## A TRANS HISTORY OF QIU JIN IN *DUILIAN*



***Figure 1. Still from Wu Tsang, Duilian, 2016. Single channel HD video with Dolby 5.1 Surround Sound, 26:16 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.***

Throughout Tsang’s body of work, time and space are constantly undergoing processes of transformation, a tactic that is perhaps best represented in *Duilian*, which rewrites the story of Qiu Jin (1875-1907)—a renowned Chinese feminist poet and revolutionary hero—as a trans narrative.<sup>7</sup> In contrast to most historical accounts, which primarily focus on her poetic and political

achievements,<sup>8</sup> *Duilian* tells the story of a developing love affair and subsequent tragedy between Qiu Jin (played by the performance artist Tosh Basco, formerly known as boychild) and her romantic counterpart Wu Zhiying (played by Tsang herself).<sup>9</sup> In *Duilian*, Tsang looks backwards in time to create a new virtual world for her protagonist, exploring unknown and speculative trans histories as active sites of revolutionary dissent. However, *Duilian*'s ending, filled with tragic death and loss, also acknowledges the ongoing history of violence against trans communities. Therefore, she does not aim to create a utopian virtual environment for her trans characters, where they are free from danger. Rather, by adopting the virtual as a site of becoming, she uses performance to embody the past, present, and future, continually forming new modes of trans relationality that exist outside the bounds of oppressive and limiting structures.

Tsang incorporates several historical facts in the film's narrative but repurposes them towards a trans retelling of Qiu Jin's biography. Born in 1875 to a family of high regard, Qiu Jin practiced a range of educational interests, reading voraciously, writing poetry, and even wielding a sword from an early age. However, while she was allowed to pursue several unconventional avocations for a woman of her status, she was eventually forced to marry Wang Tingjun, a son of a wealthy merchant. She was highly dissatisfied with the pairing, writing that "the marriage was my father's wish, not mine."<sup>10</sup> After several years of unhappiness and discontent, the couple relocated to Beijing, where Qiu Jin was able to exercise greater independence from her husband, and she quickly developed a special, intimate bond with the calligrapher and poet Wu Zhiying. *Duilian* ignores, or perhaps even erases, the history of Qiu Jin's marriage from its narrative, and instead highlights her relationship with Wu Zhiying and its erotic undertones. By adding imagined details to historically confirmed accounts, the artist accentuates intimate moments of sexual longing and desire that they shared, magnifying the possibility for latent queer histories throughout China's past and present. Through this process, virtual reenactment becomes a productive means for historical recovery. After knowing each other for a little less than a year, Qiu Jin sought to solidify their relationship by performing a ritual of sworn sisterhood called *shuang chieh-pai*, where the two would become "mutually tied by oath."<sup>11</sup> According to Hu Ying, "This offer at once gave dramatic expression to her deeply felt regard for Wu Zhiying and was intended as a gesture to push their friendship to a higher level of mutual commitment, a bond that was to transcend ordinary non-familial relations and even time itself."<sup>12</sup>

In *Duilian*'s fantasized narrative, Tsang provides a virtual refuge for Qiu Jin and Wu Zhiying, readapting memory towards a queer and trans interpretation. This sentiment is perhaps best emulated in a key scene that shows Qiu Jin having a photograph taken of herself. As the camera pans down to show Qiu Jin standing in front of a folding backdrop, a voiceover rhetorically asks, "Who could this person be, looking so sternly ahead?" She stares into the camera with her face partly obfuscated by a Western flat cap, a style that was popularized among Japanese men during the Meiji period. The perspective of the scene then begins to shift, redirecting our attention towards the camera that shows an inverted reflection of two sitters in its viewfinder. Although Qiu Jin appeared to be alone at first for this staged photograph, the camera reveals that Wu Zhiying, her loving companion, sits by her side dressed in a high-collared gown. As they look into the camera, waiting for it to click, the disembodied voice ends its stanza, stating, "The physical form that I now inhabit is but a phantom. But in a life yet to emerge, I trust it will be more real."

This dialogue is adapted from a poetic inscription that Qiu Jin wrote on the back of one of her photographic portraits, which was taken in 1906 after she abandoned her family to study overseas in Tokyo, Japan. While abroad, she became increasingly dedicated to political causes, prioritizing direct action over her poetic interests. She helped found a political group that advocated for women's education and edited a journal that promoted revolutionary ideology. During these years, she also began wearing men's clothing on a regular basis. Freed from familial constraints and cultural expectations, she used clothing to embody a newly transformed self of trans identification. Judith Butler describes gender variances that are expressed through dress or action as performative subversions that seek to disrupt the notion of "stable identities."<sup>13</sup> While her work has been criticized by some transgender studies scholars for her emphasis on the performativity of gender,<sup>14</sup> Susan Stryker finds value in Butler's call to denaturalize identities as stable or fixed. She writes, "'Gender' as it is lived, embodied, experienced, performed, and encountered, is more complex and varied than can be accounted for by the currently dominant binary sex/gender ideology of Eurocentric modernity."<sup>15</sup> She continues this point, writing, "The field of transgender studies is concerned with anything that disrupts, denaturalizes, rearticulates, and makes visible the normative linkages we generally assume to exist."<sup>16</sup> By reenacting this staged portrait, in which Qiu Jin refused to maintain the "normative linkages" between her body and its gendered signs of femininity, Tsang highlights her contributions to trans history, a perspective that has been overlooked by most canonical readings of her biography.

Looking back to the original 1906 portrait, its inscription provides additional context to Qiu Jin's personal reflections on these notions of gender performativity. In the image, she can be seen wearing a long robe (*changshan*) layered with a straight-collared, waist-length jacket (*magua*), an outfit that was typically associated with Chinese male officials. She looks stoically into the camera's lens, yet the accompanying text expresses a more emotional response that reads as follows:

Who could this person be, looking so sternly ahead?  
The martial bones I bring from a former existence  
Regret the flesh that covers them.  
I was born into the wrong sex  
And the physical form that I now inhabit is but a phantom,  
But in a life yet to emerge, I trust it will be more real.<sup>17</sup>

The idea of being "born into the wrong sex" has been used to perpetuate the notion that the trans experience is one of bodily imprisonment, in which an unwanted, pre-transition body precludes one from fully expressing their inner being. However, in his text "Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time," Julian Carter complicates this assumption, describing transition not as a linear means of transforming from the "wrong" to the "right" body, but as a condition of possibility, in which the body moves and enfolds towards a space of becoming.<sup>18</sup> Through this process, linear time becomes transitional. In its readaptation of the original text, *Duilian* strategically edits out the line that she was born into the wrong body, and instead, highlights her state as a transitory "phantom," who will "emerge" as time continues to unfold. Qiu Jin is also not alone in this revolutionary act, but is joined by Wu Zhiying, transforming the setting from a space of isolation to one of trans sociality.

As Vivian L. Huang argues, “Minoritarian performance of inscrutability is a mode of creating and inhabiting other worlds with one’s body in relation to other bodies, if for the most fleeting of moments . . . The performing body can be said to experience, index, and ask after something through its movement as living form.”<sup>19</sup> By acting as bodily surrogates that embody Qiu Jin and Wu Zhiying in their performances, Tsang and Basco use virtual reenactment to collapse the past into experiences of the present, enabling new transtemporal approaches to virtual relationality. On the one hand, they form new methods of connection that bring Qiu Jin’s imagined elsewhere into view; on the other hand, they remain inscrutable through the adoption of bodies that exist in another world.



***Figure 2. Still from Wu Tsang, Duilian, 2016. Single channel HD video with Dolby 5.1 Surround Sound, 26:16 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.***

Although *Duilian*’s plot largely revolves around the protagonists’ relationship, the film reaches its climax when Qiu Jin expresses her desires for political reform. She decides to take up the sword with a troop of warriors to prepare for political revolution, despite Wu Zhiying’s desperate pleas. These moments of the film reflect Qiu Jin’s progressive ambitions for social liberation. After studying in Japan for two years, she returned to China with a fierce determination to advance gender equity by toppling the Qing government, an imperialistic rule that was waning in its power and stability by the early twentieth century.<sup>20</sup> Qiu Jin joined anti-imperialist organizations, like the Restoration Society (*Guangfuhui*) and the Chinese Revolutionary Alliance (*Tongmenghui*), that sought to topple the Qing government. She eventually became a prominent leader in the movement and was involved in a planned uprising. Yet in the end, Qiu Jin’s role in the plan was discovered, and as a result, she was captured, interrogated, tortured, and eventually executed at the age of thirty-one.

Tsang does not include this violent scene of execution in *Duilian*, allowing it instead to take place off-screen. The audience hears sounds of clashing swords as Qiu Jin's body is shown floating motionlessly in the harbor. Her eyes are closed, and her chest is half exposed as undulating waves of water wash over her carcass. A crossfade then gently dissolves her body, transitioning the scene into a shot of a vast, empty sea. The logic of martyrdom demonstrated in this scene subscribes to Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics," which describes the biopolitical powers that mark some for death and others for life. To escape the confines of terror that are experienced under these conditions, a martyr might willingly sacrifice their body in hopes for an emancipatory future that is yet to come. As Mbembe writes, "Under the conditions of necropower, the lines between resistance and suicide, sacrifice and redemption, martyrdom and freedom are blurred."<sup>21</sup>

While Mbembe addresses the racial and colonialist ramifications of necropolitics, C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn examine its effects on the lives and afterlives of trans people of color. In their essay "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," they articulate the ways in which the deaths of trans people of color have been mobilized towards transnormative projects.<sup>22</sup> This was evident when Tsang visited Qiu Jin's former residence, which has since been converted into a museum dedicated to preserving the memory of her poetic and revolutionary achievements. Although the exhibition provided a plethora of information on Qiu Jin's legacy, it overlooked all trans interpretations of her biography and recontextualized her death in the service of Chinese nationalism. As Snorton and Haritaworn conclude, "Immobilized in life, . . . it is in death that they suddenly come to matter."<sup>23</sup>

When describing her intentions with *Duilian*, Tsang states, "I wanted the film to feel like an exquisite corpse, to destabilize identities and narratives."<sup>24</sup> When considering this description in relation to the conditions of trans necropolitics, Tsang's interlacing of beauty and death might seem like a reductive romanticization of trans violence and trauma. However, her work in actuality presents the complexities of trans experiences, which encompass "all terror and all beauty" to use Fred Moten's description.<sup>25</sup> Tsang expands upon this point, stating,

I hope I'm not reducing it to something simplistic like "our pain is beautiful," but it does make me think of ways I want to challenge critical practices that try to separate these things . . . I think art should be challenging and make people uncomfortable, and there is a certain safety or even, let's say, problem with focusing only on the struggle. Only people who have not actually struggled would see others as downtrodden.<sup>26</sup>

*Duilian* refuses to present a simplistic representation of Qiu Jin's biography, depicting both the love and beauty, as well as the violence and terror, that she experienced throughout her lifetime. Through this approach, the film embodies the complexities of a trans historicization.

According to documented records, Wu Zhiying was greatly affected by the death of her "close friend." In the aftermath of Qiu Jin's execution, Wu Zhiying wrote several essays criticizing the Qing government and its unjust actions. She also took possession of Qiu Jin's memorial stele, installing it in her home so that she could continue to make and distribute its rubbings in commemoration of Qiu Jin's legacy.<sup>27</sup> *Duilian* tragically depicts Wu Zhiying's heartbreak, showing her falling over and crying out in anguish upon hearing the news of her lover's death. She lies face down on the floor and huddled into a fetal position, unable to suppress her sorrow and inner

torment. In the film's final scene, Wu Zhiying then uses her tears to grind her inkstick and complete a calligraphic writing, as the narrator reads, "Here by my offering, I testify to our bond. I care not justify what is called my crime." As she looks up, staring blankly ahead, the ghost of her departed lover makes her final appearance.

History has habitually dismissed trans interpretations of the past as subjective, self-reflexive readings, making it easy to discount Tsang's historical retelling as biased or idiosyncratic. However, these reductionist attitudes that withhold trans historical readings overlook the fact that the field is inherently dependent on subjective interpretations. Only certain explanations are acknowledged as facts due to their conformity to the accepted historical narrative. Therefore, by disciplining itself to abide by the field's preestablished standards, history has refused to acknowledge the validity of trans analyses that are reliant on experience, perception, or conjecture. To overcome the limitations of the discipline, Rictor Norton contends that "fiction can be invaluable for articulating details of the intimate life and identity."<sup>28</sup> Therefore, trans subjectivity and speculative interpretation are necessary tools for uncovering those histories that fail to meet the demands of canonization.

## TACTICS OF RELATIONALITY, INSCRUTABILITY, AND TRANSFORMATION

In her work, Tsang imagines new virtual worlds that embrace flexibility as a defining factor, refusing to adhere to the limitations of binary structures. Throughout her practice, she specifically explores how transformative approaches to language and space can allow for new modes of trans relationality and inscrutability. By comparing Tsang's treatment of language and space in *Duilian* with other seminal works within her oeuvre, viewers can chart her developments as an artist and the ways in which she continually developed new strategies to promote community building, safety, and obfuscation within her trans worldbuilding projects.

Reflecting on the critical role that language plays in her practice, Tsang states, "Language is always present in my work . . . The experiences of gender nonconforming people and people of color have a lot to do with language and how personhood is defined."<sup>29</sup> Throughout her practice, she plays with the manipulative qualities of translation to consider how reinvented languages can create new methods of connection across time and space. In *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media*, micha cárdenas emphasizes the significance of translation in a "trans of color poetics," writing, "In creating digital media, many choices are made about what elements to include, how to combine those elements, what relationships the elements will create together, what relationship the work will have with the audience, and what networks will be created or activated. Algorithmic poetics use the performativity of digital code to bring multiple layers of meaning to life in networks of signification."<sup>30</sup> cárdenas goes on to assert that artists can utilize these operations to map out strategies of safety and survival for trans people of color "by interrupting colonial control of embodiment, modulating perceptibility, fostering transformation, and building solidarity."<sup>31</sup>

In one of Tsang's earlier works *The Shape of a Right Statement* (2008), the artist utilizes embodied performance as a means of poetic translation, forming interdependent connections between virtual memory and the physical body. The five-minute video shows the artist wearing a wig cap in front of a shimmering silver curtain. She stares blankly ahead towards the camera as she mechanically recites, "The thinking of people like me is only taken seriously if we learn your language, no matter



how we previously thought or interacted.” Throughout the performance, she speaks in a punctuated, robotic voice that mimics the intonations of a speech generating device. *The Shape of a Right Statement*’s script is appropriated from Mel Baggs’s viral video “In My Language,” which responds to ableist barriers that the autism and disability rights activist often experienced.



***Figure 3. Still from Wu Tsang, The Shape of a Right Statement, 2008. Single channel HD video with stereo sound, 5:15 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.***

By reperforming excerpts of Baggs’s soliloquy, Tsang allows the words to take on a multitude of meanings through what she calls a “full body quotation.” Through this process, she adopts the words of another to examine the ways in which language can become not only a form of embodiment, but a trans method of relationality. As Summer Kim Lee writes, “Full body quotation is rooted in the desire to learn about one’s relation with others and how it must not be assumed, but forged. Full body quotation brings our attention to how one cannot give an account of oneself without giving an account of another.”<sup>32</sup> In this performance, Tsang is not attempting to become a stand-in who must “speak” for Baggs; instead, “Tsang makes room in her body for others, as the host who works at the task of being simultaneous and proximal.”<sup>33</sup> Through this tactic, she demonstrates her indebtedness to those around her (whether physically or virtually), connecting the self to the other through a process of embodied translation. Not only does this approach represent the possibilities of trans relationality, in which connections are formed between and within bodies, but it also enhances both the referent’s and host’s abilities to remain inscrutable.

In *Duilian*, Tsang and Basco similarly incorporate the method of full body quotation in their performances as Wu Zhiying and Qiu Jin. Much of the film’s dialogue originates from Qiu Jin’s writings, some of which had not yet been translated out of their classical Chinese. Tsang took an active role in their interpretations by inviting artists and members of Hong Kong’s queer community to conduct a “quick and dirty translation,”<sup>34</sup> as she explained it. She then worked with



Basco to rewrite the poems, accentuating their queer undertones. Through these deliberately error-prone readings, which were funneled through multiple mediators, Tsang reveals how history itself provides only one interpretation of a person or event. Reflecting on the potential of mistranslation, Tsang states, “Translation becomes a process through which we discover what we want to see in others or want to say about ourselves. It happens when you want to understand something, and you can’t fully—when you’re working with language that’s not your own. But that’s what happens in general with queer people trying to find their history—it will always be an approximation.”<sup>35</sup> By adopting, embodying, and translating the language of her subject through various means, Tsang allows her interpretations to become mutable and adaptive, moving through multiple bodies and voices. Translation thus becomes a means of transformative connection. These linguistic efforts are further complicated by *Duilian*’s use of layered languages, in which English, Cantonese, Tagalog, Ilocano, and Malay are often spoken concurrently, overlapping each other and merging into a babble of dialects. In the cacophony of words and texts, much of what is said and written becomes unintelligible. Vivian L. Huang argues that the language of inscrutability does not limit one’s accessibility to meaning; rather, it serves as a method of “reparative knowing,”<sup>36</sup> writing, “An analytic of inscrutability can be understood as a kind of reparative surface reading, one that is attuned to the productive force of what can be sensed, including sensory negations in racial and queer forms.”<sup>37</sup> By reinterpreting the poems’ contents through a trans lens, Tsang exemplifies the subdued guesswork that is involved in uncovering trans histories from the past, while also highlighting the ways in which the language of inscrutability can offer alternative sources of knowledge production.



***Figure 4. Still from Wu Tsang, WILDNESS, 2012. Single channel HD video with stereo sound, 74 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.***

Throughout her practice, Tsang also uses flexible interpretations of space, specifically “safe spaces” for trans people, to create inscrutable worlds that center trans sociality. For example, one of her most well-known works is her first feature film *WILDNESS*, a 2012 documentary that captures the spirit of the Silver Platter, a nightclub that became a haven for the Latinx trans community in Los Angeles. The club opened in 1963 near MacArthur Park, and its regulars largely consisted of transgender Latina immigrants, one of the most targeted and vulnerable communities in the area. Inspired by the space and the thriving trans community it had fostered, Tsang decided to make a film that documented and promoted its subculture. *WILDNESS* represents the diverse experiences of the club’s regulars through multiple interviews and mutual exchanges. As a part of the project, Tsang also launched weekly live performances at the nightclub, which introduced a new crowd of queer, college-educated artists to the space.

However, throughout the film, Tsang comes to realize the contentious reality of safe spaces, which are always open to contradiction and change. Her programming brought more public attention to the Silver Platter when writer Sam Slovick named it the best “tranny” bar in *LA Weekly*.<sup>38</sup> The offensive article sensationalized the club, lasciviously describing its visitors as sexual deviants. As a result, Tsang and her collaborators received hate mail for exposing the club to unwanted attention, and the Silver Platter was vandalized, with the word “occupied” spray painted onto its façade. Tsang does not shy away from self-criticism and accepts the partial failures of the project, concluding the film by saying, “*WILDNESS* was about trying to create a movement. I didn’t realize until after it was over that we were already a part of one. It just didn’t fit with the stories that I had been told about what we’re fighting for.” While she attempted to document the Silver Platter as a safe space, celebrating its trans community through her own programs and interventions, she unintentionally disrupted it, opening the once insular community to invasive scrutiny.

Incorporating the lessons that she had learned from her previous project, *Duilian* embraces tactics of inscrutability to reformulate what safety can look like within a trans community. In the film, Tsang allows multiple timelines to fold into each other, forming a new trans reality that emphasizes the material nature and manipulative possibilities of virtuality. Although Qiu Jin was raised in Shaoxing, a city located in mainland China, Tsang chose to film *Duilian* in Hong Kong, allowing historical inaccuracies to enter her narrativization of Qiu Jin’s biography. The film does not try to mask the specificity of its locale by only shooting at placeless, unrecognizable sites, but rather, it purposefully highlights Victoria Harbor, one of the port city’s most notable landmarks. One scene in particular shows Qiu Jin standing at the bow of a ferry boat, which is transporting a small group of local commuters across the harbor. Her patterned shirt and billowing pants, while not entirely historically accurate, allude to an imagined past, which stands in contrast to the other passengers, who are clearly placed within the present. For Tsang, *Duilian* floats somewhere “between space-time and geography.”<sup>39</sup> By collapsing various locations and times into a single scene, the artist blurs the line between the real and the fictive in an attempt to obfuscate her characters from targeting and violence.

Despite Tsang’s attempts to create a wholly trans virtual environment, Qiu Jin’s tragic demise ultimately reveals *Duilian*’s inability to protect its characters from outside dangers. Trans “safe spaces” have been displaced, targeted, policed, and violently attacked throughout history, a reality

that was demonstrated by the unintentional outcome of *WILDNESS*. When considering the plethora of assaults on trans spaces, the question must be raised: can a “safe space” ever be truly free from danger? According to Cece McDonald, “With the height of trans visibility has also come the height of trans violence and murder. And so, it’s very important for people to acknowledge that yes, it is important to see these figures in the spotlight, but it is also necessary to recognize that this ‘trans tipping point’ is bringing an unsettling rate of violence.”<sup>40</sup> Some scholars have criticized the concept of a safe space, not only for its privileged perspective that assumes that safety is equally accessible to all, but for instilling an unrealistic binary between safe and unsafe.<sup>41</sup> Catherine Fox advocates for an alternative understanding of trans safety that allows for flexibility and adaptability, suggesting that “safer” provides a more productive strategy for trans communities. Strategically emphasizing the “r” in safer, she argues that it “calls attention to the tensions inherent in any discussion and action aimed to counteract terror and violence . . . And it calls attention to the ways that spaces have been conceived of as fixed in time and place, rather than relational and fluid.”<sup>42</sup>

Playing upon the fluid relationality of safer spaces, Tsang and Basco often incorporate improvisational dances into their performances to reflect the complex, interdependent relationship between the body and its surrounding space. Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin describe the power of improvisation, writing, “It exists outside everyday life, creating its own time-space boundaries, seeking only its own inherent profit and goal. In ordinary life we learn to distinguish the real from the unreal; in play and improv we acknowledge all realities. Make-believe is as real as gravity and equally, or more, potent.”<sup>43</sup> As a performer, Basco fuses club-inspired dances with avant-garde elements that she invents in the moment, allowing her body to move subconsciously in and around the bounds of space. Through this process, her setting becomes a transformative space that continually moves around the improvised motions of the dancing body.

One scene from *Duilian* highlights the significance of improvisational movements by showing the two partially nude characters standing back-to-back. As one slowly moves towards the ground, falling forward in a prostrate bow, the other fills the empty space that separates their bodies, gently sinking into a deep backbend. Through this simple movement, their bodies work together, refusing to break their physical connection. Unlike many of the other scenes throughout the film, there are no signs, like a setting or costuming, to indicate the time period that is being represented in this moment. As a result, the separation between the artists and their characters is collapsed beyond distinction; they are simultaneously Qiu Jin/Tosh Basco and Wu Zhiying/Wu Tsang, residing both in and out of the present. When experiencing the virtual, Homa King argues, “We must connect past and future images to the now, maintaining their continuity and metonymic proximity with the present moment and the world.”<sup>44</sup> Through this performance, their bodies become anchors that connect multiple temporal trajectories, allowing them to converge and fold into each other. Yet, the improvisational approach also allows them to constantly shift, avoiding detection or capture.

Julian Carter discusses how bodily movement can provide an analytic framework for understanding transness, correlating transitions within choreography to transitions between genders. He particularly stresses the ways in which corporeal connections allow time and space to continually form new pleats, writing, “This magical temporality, where many layers of anticipation, experience, loss, and memory fold into one another, takes physical shape as an extraordinarily delicate intimacy between the dancers.”<sup>45</sup> *Duilian* demonstrates the ways in which virtuality is dependent on embodied experiences of time. The performers’ bodies bend intuitively into each other, allowing

the space between and around them to similarly meld with their movements. Through this gesture, the setting shifts between here and there, past and present, making it more difficult to pin down or define. Their relational movements thus mobilize *Duilian* towards a fluid realm of transformative possibility, where time is both social and transitional, constantly forming but never fully fixed.



***Figure 5. Still from Wu Tsang, A day in the life of bliss, 2014. Two channel HD video installation, surround sound, projection screens, mirror, two-way mirror, seating. Dimensions variable, 20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Galerie Isabella Bortolozzi, Berlin.***

In 2014, Tsang collaborated with Basco on another project that heavily relied on the performance artist's improvisational movements. *A day in the life of bliss* is a science-fiction multi-channel film that takes place in a not-so-distant future, where digital avatars, known as the Looks, surveil citizens through a pervasive social media platform called PRSM. Set in this dystopian world, the film follows Blis (played by Basco), a pop star performer who is hounded by celebrity-obsessed fans during the day. However, as night falls, she finds a way to evade society's panoptic conditions by performing at an underground club. While one channel of the film pushes its narrative forward, the other channel primarily focuses on Basco's dancing. In one extended scene, the club is obfuscated by purple lights, strobing flashes, and fog machines that fill the room with a smoggy, luminescent haze, making it impossible to see the other figures in the audience. For approximately nine minutes, she writhes and thrashes her body on stage, moving fluidly between erratic and hypnotic movements that play upon the repetitive glitches of the cyborg. In the film, dance becomes a means of non-verbal communication, a hidden language accessible to only those who understand its coding. As Tsang states, "I think that there are so many ways in which underground scenes form and create atmospheres of support for people who need it, and it's so much about knowing the codes, knowing what to look for . . . and that's everything to do with language, that's everything to do with how we communicate with each other."<sup>46</sup>

By examining the trajectory of Tsang's practice, one can observe the ways in which the artist continually implements alternative means of communication that work to create safer spaces that prioritize trans relationality and inscrutability. While *WILDNESS* emphasizes the significance of physical spaces, like the Silver Platter, her more recent projects imagine how virtual memory can reformulate how to build safer spaces for trans communities. Reflecting on her practice, Tsang states, "I think the big shift for me, post-*WILDNESS*, was contemplating this question about underground spaces, and if they can be said to exist anymore. [The Silver Platter] was a space where people would just go—a physical convening . . . I think the idea of having a community in one fixed location where we know we can always find each other has shifted to something that's more migratory."<sup>47</sup> While virtual realities have been used as a means of surveilling its users, Tsang utilizes the shifting, transformative nature of virtuality to create trans environments of sociality that resist visibility through a tactics of inscrutability.

## CONCLUSION

For Tsang, utilizing virtual memory means accepting and remaining open to the unknowable tensions of safer spaces, which are constantly evolving and susceptible to change. By experimenting with language as a practice of "full body quotation" and the body's relationship to its surrounding environment, the artist presents a newly transformed representation of "safer spaces" that rethinks the static conception of "safe spaces." Her virtual representations of reality are constantly fluctuating between categories but are never fully stabilized. In a world that does not prioritize or support the safety of trans communities, Tsang employs virtuality's inscrutability and adaptability to imagine her own worlds of trans liberation.

In a published roundtable discussion on the topic "Models of Futurity," artists, scholars, and activists similarly reflected on these issues by posing the following prompt: "Beyond strategies of intervention, reparation, and reform to combat anti-trans discrimination and violence, how can we imagine a radical break? What constitutes a prefigurative politics of trans liberation?" In response to these critical queries, Kai Lumumba Barrow stated, "I think that our dissent must include disruptions designed to direct the oppressor's actions as well as transformative theories and practices that center experimentation, flexibility, and improvisation. A tactics of transformation allows us to move (and keep moving) like a spiral, outside of the lines—even the lines that we create for ourselves."<sup>48</sup> By applying a tactics of transformation in her films' enactments of time, space, and language, Tsang re-envisions trans histories that are folded and continually reworked towards strategies of inscrutability, survival, and freedom.

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## ENDNOTES

1. According to Roderick A. Ferguson, a queer of color critique “interrogates social formation as the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, with particular interest in how those formations correspond with and diverge from nationalist ideals and practices.” See Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 149.
2. Ashton Cooper, “Wu Tsang and the Search for Open-Ended Identity,” *Cultured Mag*, April 8, 2019, <https://www.culturedmag.com/article/2019/04/08/wu-tsang>.
3. Homay King, *Virtual Memory: Time-Based Art and the Dream of Digitality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 13.
4. King, *Virtual Memory*, 13.
5. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995); Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).
6. Vivian L. Huang, *Surface Relations: Queer Forms of Asian American Inscrutability* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 10.
7. The use of terms like “trans” and “transgender” in relation to Qing dynasty China is highly anachronistic and fails to adhere to the specific historical and cultural context of Qiu Jin’s biography. While gender variance was not completely unheard of during this time in Chinese history, evidence of such identities is scarce and any equivalent language for contemporary terms would not have existed during this period. However, the focus of this article will primarily remain on Wu Tsang’s fictional portrayal of Qiu Jin in *Duilian*, as opposed to the historical period that it portrays. Therefore, in analyzing Wu Tsang’s exploration of trans histories from the Qing dynasty, contemporary terminology will be utilized to describe the depiction of this figure.
8. Although this article discusses how Wu Tsang represents Qiu Jin as a trans person in her work *Duilian*, the artist still ascribes she/her/hers pronouns when referring to both the character within the film and the historical figure. Therefore, this article will similarly refer to Qiu Jin using these pronouns. See Wu Tsang and Jade Barget, “Interview with Wu Tsang,” *The White Review*, June 2022, <https://www.thewhitereview.org/feature/interview-with-wu-tsang/>.
9. It is important to note that Wu Tsang and Tosh Basco are also romantic partners in real life.
10. Guo Yanli, *Qiu Jin Nianpu (A Chronicle of Qiu Jin’s Life)* (Jinan, China: Qi Lu Shu She, 1983), 25.
11. Marjorie Topley, “Marriage Resistance in Rural Kwangtung,” in *Studies in Chinese Society*, ed. Arthur P. Wolf (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1978), 256.
12. Hu Ying, “Qiu Jin: Sworn Sister,” in *Burying Autumn: Poetry, Friendship, and Loss* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), 124.
13. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1990), 138.
14. Jay Prosser, *Second Skins: The Body Narratives of Transsexuality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Henry Rubin, “Phenomenology as Method in Trans Studies,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4, no. 2 (1998): 263-281.
15. Susan Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges: An Introduction to Transgender Studies,” in *The Transgender Studies Reader*, ed. Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle (New York, NY: Routledge, 2006), 3.
16. Stryker, “(De)Subjugated Knowledges,” 3.
17. Translation from Wilt Idema and Beata Grant, *The Red Brush: Writing Women of Imperial China* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2004), 795.



18. Julian Carter, "Embracing Transition, or Dancing in the Folds of Time," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, ed. Susan Stryker and Aren Z. Aizura (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013).
19. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 15-16.
20. In 1895, the Qing dynasty lost the First Sino-Japanese War, a conflict over who would claim sovereignty over Joseon (now Korea). In 1898, the Qing emperor Guangxu initiated an attempt to modernize the empire's cultural, political, and educational systems, a reform that ultimately ended in failure. In 1899, a secret organization of Chinese rebellions, called the Society of Righteous and Harmonious Fists, led an uprising against the spread of foreign influence. This movement, now known as the Boxer Rebellion, was brutally suppressed by foreign troops, who then required the Qing government to pay 450 million taels of silver to the eight nations involved, an astronomical amount for the weakening empire. These series of detrimental defeats made the time ripe for revolutionary reform.
21. Achille Mbembe, "Necropolitics," *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (2003): 40.
22. C. Riley Snorton and Jin Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics: A Transnational Reflection on Violence, Death, and the Trans of Color Afterlife," in *The Transgender Studies Reader 2*, 66-76.
23. Snorton and Haritaworn, "Trans Necropolitics," 74.
24. Wu Tsang in conversation with Fred Moten, "All Terror, All Beauty," in *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, ed. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 340.
25. Tsang and Moten, "All Terror," 342.
26. Tsang and Moten, "All Terror," 345.
27. Gail Hershatter, *Women and China's Revolutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019), 77-83.
28. Rictor Norton, *The Myth of the Modern Homosexual: Queer History and the Search for Cultural Unity* (London, UK: Cassell, 1997), 152.
29. Joseph Akel, "An Artist's Monograph That Tests the Limits of Language," *The New York Times*, January 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/25/t-magazine/art/wu-tsang-artist-monograph.html>.
30. micha cárdenas, *Poetic Operations: Trans of Color Art in Digital Media* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022), 28.
31. cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 4.
32. Summer Kim Lee, "Borrowed Speech: Giving an Account of Another with Wu Tsang's Full Body Quotation," *ASAP Journal* 6, no. 3 (2021): 681.
33. Lee, "Borrowed Speech," 689.
34. Ariela Gittlen, "In Her New Film, Wu Tsang Unveils the Queer History of One of China's Most Famous Poets," *Artsy*, March 21, 2016, [www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-wu-tsang-unveils-the-queer-history-of-one-of-china-s-most-famous-poets](http://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-wu-tsang-unveils-the-queer-history-of-one-of-china-s-most-famous-poets).
35. Paige K. Bradley, "500 Words: Wu Tsang," *Artforum*, March 23, 2016, [www.artforum.com/words/id=58841](http://www.artforum.com/words/id=58841).
36. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 149.
37. Huang, *Surface Relations*, 15.
38. Sam Slovick, "Best Tranny Bar: The Silver Platter," *LA Weekly*, October 2008.
39. Tsang and Moten, "All Terror," 340.
40. Cece McDonald in conversation with Miss Major Griffin-Gracy and Toshio Meronek, "Cautious Living: Black Trans Women and the Politics of Documentation," in *Trap Door*, 26.



41. Barclay Barrios, "Of Flags: Online Queer Identities, Writing Classrooms, and Action Horizons," *Computers and Composition* 21 (2004): 341-361; Jonathan Alexander and William Banks, "Sexualities, Technologies, and the Teaching of Writing: A Critical Overview," *Computers and Composition* 21 (2004): 273-293.
42. Catherine Fox, "From Transaction to Transformation: (En)Countering White Heteronormativity in 'Safe Spaces,'" *College English* 69, no. 5 (May 2007): 506-507.
43. Lynne Anne Blom and L. Tarin Chaplin, *The Intimate Act of Choreography* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1982), xi.
44. King, *Virtual Memory*, 69.
45. Carter, "Embracing Transition," 136.
46. Holly Connolly, "Wu Tsang on Communicating Underground Spaces in the Age of Social Media," *The Vinyl Factory*, November 27, 2018, <https://thevinylfactory.com/features/wu-tsang-the-looks-interview>.
47. Connolly, "Wu Tsang on Communicating."
48. Kai Lumumba Barrow in conversation with Yve Laris Cohen and Kalaniopua Young, "Models of Futurity," in *Trap Door*, 326.

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