

Wu Tsang at Clifton Benevento

I. I could write a letter to my best friend and tell her to hold off on doing anything drastic just yet. I could call my father and tell him I'm coming home. I could knock on my upstairs neighbor's door and ask to borrow an egg. I could text the last person I slept with and ask them to meet me in the park. Instead, I'll lay in bed listening to Depeche Mode's "Personal Jesus."

Feeling unknown and you're all alone

Flesh and bone by the telephone

Pick up the receiver

I'll make you a believer

II. Are you looking for your interlocutor?

III. A few months ago, I went to see Wu Tsang's show at Clifton Benevento in Soho, which consists of this video, *Miss Communication and Mr:Re* a second, entitled *Girl Talk*, plus a set of sculptures. I was most captivated by Tsang's collaboration with the poet Fred Moten, *Miss Communication and Mr:Re*, a two channel video with subtitles projected in a different corner of the gallery. The fact that neither return messages turns them into a blank screen onto which we can project our fantasies. In one of the videos, Tsang stares fixedly at the camera, unsmiling, occasionally lowering her gaze.; a fresh faced Tsang alternates with Tsang in lipstick and a painted on mustache. In the other, the poet Moten looks into the camera, and similarly, the shot alternates between Moten wearing glasses and Moten wearing lipstick and yellow face paint. Drawing on the larger theme of drag—which I'll address more extensively later—this

serves to denaturalize gendered accessorizing, equating, as it does, Moten's glasses and his makeup. That is, the alternation between a shot of Moten wearing makeup and a shot of Moten wearing glasses implies that the two are simply different options for how one might adorn a face: rather than understanding the glasses as a neutral accessory, and makeup as artificial, this gesture puts both accessories on the same plane. In a patriarchal matrix of power relations, "neutral" is often a synonym for "masculine." Seeing Moten's face first with glasses and no makeup, and then with makeup and no glasses, disrupts this understanding of masculinity as neutral.

The audio element of the installation consists of excerpts of voicemail messages that Tsang and Moten left for each other over the course of a two week period. But rather than play them intact, so that the listener might follow the thread of the conversation, Tsang has edited the messages so that the two voices overlap, resulting in play on the level of language, which destabilizes any conception of language as a transparent mechanism of delivering meaning. The audio emanates from speakers adjacent to the two monitors, while a transcript of the edited voicemails is projected on a screen which leans, casually, against another corner of the gallery, constituting a triangle of speech, image, and text. The default viewing position is to watch the silent Tsang and Moten while listening to their voicemails, flurries of words that constitute more of a sonic landscape than anything decipherable. This impenetrability affected my relationship to Tsang and Moten's intimacy: I did not feel allowed into their relationship, but rather like a privileged voyeur. And, in order to follow along with the subtitles, I had to turn my back on Tsang and Moten.

The upper half of the third screen displays the transcript of Moten's voicemails, while the lower half displays Tsang's. My tactic was to listen once while reading the upper half, and once while reading the lower half. Though I'd often trip up, when, for example, Moten would go silent for a while and I'd start following Tsang's voice, and then have to reorient when Tsang began speaking again.

Miss Communication and Mr:Re constitutes a resistance to speech mastery, an embrace of everyday speech: the erotics of the space between what Tsang and Moten are saying and what Tsang and Moten are trying to say. The viewer is given the mess of speech: ums and uhs, lines of inquiry taken up and then abandoned. At one point, Tsang says—in reference to an event entirely unknown to the listener—“realizing my body could fail me was kind of scary.” And then: “actually, it was really scary.” And then: “actually, it was so scary that it wasn't scary at all.” The listener gets to hear Tsang think, to hear her working out what it is she really wants to say. At another point, both Tsang and Moten make nonsense sounds: Tsang hums, while Moten sings *doo dee doo* over and over.

IV. Is a voicemail message always a misfire? A voicemail means you've missed something; you've failed to come when called. You're speaking to someone but you're not having a conversation.

V. At the moment, I'm temping as a receptionist at an office in Chinatown. I say *who's calling, please?* I say *sure, let me transfer you.* I say *he's in a meeting, can I take a message?* I write

down messages on my missed calls pad. Crossed wires. Wrong numbers. Improper addressees. I make my voice compliant, do the bidding of whoever's on the other end of the line. Sometimes, there's a moment when the caller breaks the fourth wall and asks me who I am, depriving me of my role as a transparent, neutral mechanism of delivering information.

VI. Might *Miss Communication and Mr:Re* present us with an erotics of friendship? In Avital Ronell's 1989 book *The Telephone Book: Technology, Schizophrenia, Electric Speech*, which traces the ontological significance of the telephone through Heidegger, Derrida, and others, she writes "consider the telephone as phantom genital...as transmitter of a forbidden Word, a place of placeless trespass." (68) Telephone conversations operate in a libidinal economy: "my messages were meant for your messages," says Moten at one point. "You were meant for me." Later, Tsang says, in a voicemail message ostensibly left upon waking, "The only person I talk to so early in the morning is my lover. It's weird to talk to someone I don't really know." Tsang and Moten's dialogue negotiates this libidinal economy by manifesting a kind of interlocution in which erotics can be embedded in platonic exchange.

Earlier in *The Telephone Book*, Ronell writes,

"the phone phones, shading in a differential register of inauthenticity, establishing the phony, the shady Other, like the moon, whose identity and therefore also ours is held in suspension. 'Hello, may I speak to—?' 'You are.' So the voice that comes from me and from beyond me can be a phony one, it can miss the point, performing and inducing fraud, putting a metaphysics of identity on hold." (45)

The telephone calls into question stable notions of identity, opening up possibilities of deception and masquerade, that is, a kind of drag.

Drag figures in the show in a few different ways, starting with the gender play in *Miss Communication and Mr:Re*. At one point, Moten riffs on this word: “drag talk, drag time, dragged town, dragged down, every kind of drag, somebody pulling my coat,” he says.

Miss Communication and Mr:Re alternates with another video, *Girl Talk*. *Girl Talk* starts with a shot of glowing red velvet, which reveals itself to be draped over the figure of Moten. Filmed in slow motion and soundtracked by the titular jazz standard, it depicts Moten twirling around a sunlit garden, swathed in the velvet and multicolored crystals. Here, drag is constituted as a euphoric, sumptuous style.

VII. *You hang up first.*

No you.