

# frieze

Contemporary Art and Culture

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'Immersion, entanglement, affectivity, sudden rupture and repeated breakdown'

HITO STEYERL

'I like work which carries within itself conflicts of interest that risk being self-defeating'

SETH PRICE

## Super-hybridity?

'Everything is spreading out, oxidizing, decaying; within all of this we have tricks that make us feel as though things are ordered'

EMILY WARDILL

'I want to see how much more I can cross: animal, mineral and vegetable – everything!'

MING WONG

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The artist posing in front of Mount Vesuvius, the location for the final scene of *Devo Partire. Domani* (I Must Go, Tomorrow) 2010

# The Volcano Lover

**Ming Wong's** homage to Pier Paolo Pasolini involved relocating the story of the Italian director's 1968 masterpiece, *Teorema*, from Milan to Naples. *Dominic Eichler* accompanied him on his journey south

Ming Wong borrows scenes and characters from films he loves in a way not so dissimilar from someone raiding a friend's wardrobe. His approach is inflected with a deadpan, camp bravado; he often purposefully miscasts actors (or himself) to replay roles. This results in all manner of mix-ups with respect to race, gender and sexual (dis)orientation. Talking about this he laughs, declaring: 'I want to see how much more I can cross: animal, mineral and vegetable – everything!'<sup>1</sup> For him, little in culture is sacred and reality is a dissonant, cut-and-paste job, hybridized many times over.

In 2009, Wong showed three video installations in the Singapore Pavilion for the 53rd Venice Biennale. These were: *Life of Imitation* (2009), which is based on a scene from Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life* (1959), and involves a heart-wrenching rejection by a mixed-race daughter of her elderly mother; the poised and po-faced *In Love for the Mood* (2009), in which a Caucasian actress plays all the roles in scenes based on Wong Kar-Wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000), doing her best to speak Cantonese, a language she hasn't mastered; and *Four Malay Stories* (2005), which comprises re-makes of scenes from Singaporean films made by Malay director and actor P. Ramlee between the 1950s and '70s. They often depict Muslim Malays in ways that, as Wong notes: 'would be taboo today – like smoking, drinking [...] women dancing on the beach in bikinis and that sort of thing'. Accordingly, they are no longer screened on television.

In Venice, Wong had originally planned to direct an homage to Pier Paolo Pasolini's film *Teorema* (Theorem, 1968), but it was blocked by the Singaporean funding body once it became clear what they were getting in to. Pasolini's film is about the dramatic sex-triggered effect that a charismatic

stranger has on the five members of a northern Italian upper-bourgeois family. The stranger sleeps with all of them, unleashing cataclysmic changes in their lives. Wong says that both his project and the legacy of Pasolini 'waved lots of red flags: it was queer, anti-establishment, communist and intellectual'.

After Venice, assorted chance encounters – as well as the support of the Singaporean curator Tang Fu Kuen and the Napoli Teatro Festival Italia (Naples Theatre Festival Italy) – enabled the project to be realized. The result is Wong's homage to *Teorema*: the five-channel installation *Devo Partire. Domani* (I Must Go. Tomorrow, 2010). (Next year, in an about-face by the funding body, it will be shown in the 3rd Singapore Biennale.) The work – designed to be screened in five adjoining rooms, each of which offers glimpses of the next and through which the soundtracks bleed – is augmented by a kind of mock cinema foyer, with displays of resource materials about Wong's remake and a marvellously distorted promotional canvas commissioned by Singapore's last surviving cinema billboard-painter, Neo Chon Teck. In Wong's wig-laden tour de force, the artist plays all of the roles from Pasolini's original film, aided by body-doubles and assorted male extras from a local theatre group. (Wong has a theatre background, and has written and produced a number of multi-lingual plays, often as purposefully miscast as his videos.) The artist's 'cover version' is both loyal and unfaithful, in that it involves minor and major divergences from *Teorema*. One of the biggest departures is that Wong shot *Devo Partire. Domani* not in Milan, where Pasolini's film is set, but in Naples, involving locations that also tell their own story. The artist and I revisited some of them, but first, we took a detour in honour of Pasolini.

**PASOLINI'S MEMORIALS**

We met in Rome, planning to visit the place near the mouth of the Tiber where, on the night of November 2, 1975, Pasolini was murdered in unclear circumstances. The official Pasolini memorial (one of three by eminent Italian artists) is not what it once was: installed on a patch of wasteland, it was for decades difficult to find, a vandalized and badly weathered abstract sculpture; the surrounding area has been recently sanitized, the original memorial replaced with a stone replica.

Thinking about what might constitute a fitting memorial, homage or simple response to Pasolini opens a can of worms. Take, for instance, Cerith Wyn Evans' elegiac film, *Firework Text (Pasolini)* (1998), in which a quote from Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex* (1967) explodes and then fades, or Nanni Moretti's *Dear Diary* (1995), in which the actor and director, after having been diagnosed with cancer, rides his scooter from Rome to the beach where Pasolini was murdered. Perhaps a film or a poem is closer to the mark than a sculpture, especially given the words that Pasolini puts into the mouth of the character of the family's son in *Teorema*, whose first experience of homosexual love turns him into a painter (in Wong's version, he becomes a video artist - a skewed self-portrait): 'We must try to invent new techniques - which are unrecognizable, [...] make our own world with no possible comparison.'

Our excursion was, however, foiled by a transport strike, forcing us to stay in Rome

longer than intended. In a café, I asked Wong if he felt that his Pasolini project was plagued. Wistfully, he said: 'No it's the opposite: it is blessed [...] things are meant to happen for a reason. There's a nationwide strike, maybe we won't even make it to Naples and tomorrow is its first Gay Pride march [...] maybe Pasolini is stirring up the winds.'

**Thinking about what might constitute a fitting memorial or simple response to Pasolini opens a can of worms.**

**THE VOICE OF THE OVENS**

We finally got to Naples in time for the parade. After marching for a day (and then taking another to recover), we headed for Bagnoli, a former steelworks that was closed in the 1990s. It dominates a bay and overlooks a juvenile prison and a peninsula which was once the location of one of the Roman Empire's main military ports. Twentieth-century industrial ruins, some topped with hawks' nests, dot two million square metres of de-toxed land which is currently being redeveloped into a convention centre, an aquarium and, possibly, some film studios. At its peak in the 1970s, the steelworks employed around 8,000 people; 40,000 others depended on it indirectly.



Left: The suburb of Scampia was built in the 1980s after a major earthquake necessitated new public housing. Scampia soon became the site of violent turf wars - the subject of Matteo Garrone's 2008 film *Gomorrah* 2010



Above: *Devo Partire. Domani* (I Must Go. Tomorrow) 2010 Production stills

From top: 1. The video artist son speaks for Pasolini 2. 'I feel so fucking small ...'

3. The father 4. The mother finds her cinematic sanctuary 5. Detox: the maid buried alive in the soil of Bagnoli 6. The miracle in Scampia

Wong transposed the role of the father from *Teorema* to this post-industrial landscape, not only to explore the character's sexuality in the aftermath of falling in love with the stranger but also – as in the original film – to abandon all worldly things, symbolically beginning with his clothes. In Wong's version the scene is extended, a digital effect multiplying the father-figure across the landscape. The site also became the new setting for the mother's seduction of street urchins and her rape (as in the original film), which is followed by an invented scene that evokes Pasolini's own death. The mother finally stumbles into a cinema in which *Teorema* is screening. It's an intriguing film-within-a-film in which the character realizes she is just that – a character. The weedy ground at Bagnoli echoes her description of herself as a garden that no one visits anymore. The same ground also serves as the spot where the maid, as in the original plot, is buried alive after a saintly transfiguration.

We sat down next to a beehive-shaped rusty shell of what was once the main furnace, in which a never-ending, high-temperature industrial storm once raged – even during strikes. Wong told me: 'Making this work was only the second time I've shot on location. In Italy a location is not just a backdrop, it's a character, a famous co-star even. The impact of the places in the video heightens the effect I want; everything looks right – apart from me, that is. I am the dressed-up stranger superimposed on real locations which, in this case, aren't really the right ones. A site like this makes you feel tiny; just look at this place, look at the sky [...] it takes over. It wasn't easy to run barefoot and naked here – in the video I'm walking gingerly.' Behind him, empty silos caught his words and echoed them, an effect that locals call 'the voice of the ovens'.

## 'In Italy a location is not just a backdrop, it's a character, a famous co-star even.' Ming Wong

### COMMUNITY THEATRE

Our not-exactly-postcard tour of Wong's locations in Naples took us next to the hardcore outer suburb of Scampia. This involved a drive past three dystopian tower blocks and then a walk in a park; a pond had been drained because a child had recently drowned there. The air smelled of baking concrete, jacaranda trees and wisteria. Scampia was built in the 1980s after a major earthquake necessitated new public housing; perhaps the intentions of the authorities were good, but their plans were executed in a manner discredited in plenty of urban centres elsewhere. This artificial community of relocated young families, many of them immigrants living in unfinished buildings, never gelled. Adding to their woes, Scampia soon became the headquarters of the Neapolitan mob's drug trade and the site of violent turf wars – the subject of Matteo Garrone's film *Gomorrah* (2008), which was based on Roberto Saviano's 2006 novel of the same name.

In Wong's film, Scampia is the location for a scene in which a maid meets a group of youths affected by what looks like a mysterious plague; to their great and infectious jubilation she heals them. She also appears hovering above the tower blocks. The actors in the scene came from the local community theatre group, *Punta Corsara*, which was established in 2007 to train theatre professionals; they have their hopes set on establishing a permanent company in Scampia's auditorium, which was never finished and is in a state of disrepair. The group's committed manager, Marina Dammacco, told us that 'any chance we have to represent Scampia in a different light is really appreciated' and that 'Ming's work was a chance to speak creatively about the neighbourhood'. In Wong's work, Scampia is a place where miracles can – and should be – allowed to happen.

### MOUNT VESUVIUS SPEAKS

Do people climb mountains to get an overview of their lives? In the final scenes of *Teorema* the father is transported to Sicily's Mount Etna – which, in Wong's version, becomes Mount Vesuvius; it towers over Naples like an impartial (but potentially explosive) observer and is a fitting place for the father's declaration of love to the young stranger. On the day of shooting, Vesuvius offered the spectacle of both snow and steaming hot rocks; appropriate symbols of a cataclysmic personal change – a patriarch's total meltdown.

Walking with Wong and our exuberant guide Dino Rossi (who works with the theatre festival) on the edge of the crater (which has been dormant since 1944), we noticed puffs of sulphurous smoke rising from fissures between the ornamental lava rocks. A butterfly settled at our feet. Like the Bagnoli steelworks, Vesuvius has a history of being dangerous but is now eerily tranquil. The hike to the summit tends to make breathless tourists – including us – lapse into silence. But suddenly, Dino, as if possessed by the spirit of the mountain, blurted out: 'I produce everything on my own. I don't need an artist to create. Do you want me to lie on your couch? Do you want to analyze Vesuvius?! Do you really want to know how a volcano feels?! You know I am an artist too – Pompeii was a good piece. I like making land art and sculptures. When people get on top of me they often go mad, undress, do strange things. I think it's because they feel the power that they don't have. People try to enter into communion with me, but I don't feel anything! I don't need a female, I don't need a male. I am the father, the mother, the son, the daughter and the maid!'

### A GODDESS AND HER MOPED

Wong's biggest departure from Pasolini's film involves the daughter of the household who, in *Teorema*, has a breakdown and is carted off. Wong wanted to save her – this happens in Naples' splendid National Archaeological Museum in front of the *Franese Hercules* (c.300 AD). Seemingly about to be overcome by the size and power of masculinity expressed in marble, another stranger – the Amazonian diva, Lia Zeta, playing herself, whom Wong met while sourcing oversized shoes – takes the daughter's hand and leads her out of the building. Tossing the original screenplay in

the air, this metaphorical liberation takes them out of the institution and, aided by a moped, out of the family and into the streets, away from the idea that a woman without a man is nothing but a nervous wreck. It's a scene that demonstrates how Wong's work, for all its twisted mimicry, is never simply pastiche; in his reinterpretations the authentic and the fake are superimposed on the present, but the emotional intensity of the source is never lost.

*Dominic Eichler is a contributing editor of frieze based in Berlin, Germany.*

1 All quotations are taken from interviews conducted on location in Naples by the author with the artist and people involved in the production of *Devo Partire. Domani* (I Must Go. Tomorrow, 2010)



Above:  
*Devo Partire. Domani*  
(I Must Go. Tomorrow)  
2010  
Production stills

From top:  
1. The mother

2. Snow on burning rocks: the stranger at the crater

3. The daughter encounters Hercules

4. The daughter escapes with Lia on the Vespa