

Kenneth Tam

*two*

Curated by Claire Shiyong Li

18/01 - 15/02/2025

Opening Saturday 18 January 2 – 6 PM

ZÉRUÏ, London

ZÉRUÏ is pleased to announce the opening of a special project “*two*”, organized by independent curator Claire Shiyong Li. “*two*” features a pair of seminal performance videos by American artist Kenneth Tam, marking the artist’s first solo presentation in London.

Made in the 2010’s, the two videos in the exhibition pre-date the ubiquity of dating apps like Tinder and Grindr, and point to a moment when websites like Craigslist were more frequently used to facilitate platonic or casual encounters. Intentionally lo-fi, anonymous, and lacking accountability, Craigslist was a space for free expression and unmediated exchanges between strangers that literally and metaphorically broke down social divisions. It is within this context that Tam’s early video works persistently tested ideas about vulnerability, masculinity, performativity, and emotional boundaries.

These early videos utilize simple setups - a fixed camera, a designated location, and some domestic props. Often, posts were made on Craigslist inviting strangers to participate in Tam’s social experiments as paid gigs. Sometimes these were one-off events, other times they required a repeat commitment. The activities on camera were unscripted and unrehearsed, only based on the artist’s loose instructions or sometimes completely improvised by the participants.

*The compression is not subservient to the explosion; it gives it increased force* (2011) is an 11-minute-long video of Tam negotiating with a stranger who is inside a cardboard box. While the stranger’s face is hidden, we can see him extending his arms out of the box, straining to touch the artist’s body. We hear Tam’s guarded but playful reactions with the man in the box as the latter insistently attempts to soften and ultimately transgress the boundary between them.

In *sump* (2015), Tam explored the fraught space of the father/son relationship. Employing a similar mise-en-scène as in the Craigslist videos, the artist this time invited his father to appear on camera with him in various rooms of the basement of his childhood home. We watch the two men interact with each other as if they were replaying childhood games from memory, yet to far more ambiguous ends. They can be seen doodling on their bellies with black ink, sticking breakfast cereal to each others’ faces, and standing under a running shower head together while under a plastic cover, among other tasks. Despite consenting to these pre-arranged activities, Tam’s father appears awkward and vulnerable, dutifully bound by parental obligation to participate in a situation that he may not fully comprehend.

Re-staging these innocent rituals as an adult, Tam complicates the definition of masculinity within the dynamics of an immigrant household, highlighting the parent-child relationship and the ways in which intimacy cannot always be communicated but is still felt and understood. What constitutes a grown-up man? Tam links this contention to both the Freudian psychological analysis and the care-taker responsibility for aging parents. The video further questions whether vulnerability itself is gender-specific, by Tam deploying similar tactics that were famously used by female performance artists such as Marina Abramovic, VALIE EXPORT and Patty Chang.

Whether staging intimacies with one's parents or complete strangers, Tam's early work remains committed to foregrounding the awkwardness that comes with human encounters. He also commits to documenting all the fears around race, gender, class, cultural lineages and at last the aspirational desires of an artist. Perhaps ten years after its making, with a queer framework, these early videos from Tam appear ostensibly poetic and tender. Tam's camera monitored some minor transient tensions, as well as unspoken contrarian bonds that form our late-capitalistic atomic society and the traditional family structure. The latter perhaps are slowly disintegrating into derivatives of love and reallocated labor of care, further blurring the lines between one's home and stranger's home, awaiting a two-way street of independence and dependence in the near future.

*Kenneth Tam is an interdisciplinary artist who works across video, sculpture, installation and photography. His work examines the performance of masculinity, private rituals and expressions of intimacy within groups. He has had solo exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Art; MIT List Center for Visual Arts; the Visual Arts Center at UT Austin, Queens Museum, NY and at the ICA LA. Tam has participated in group shows at the Hammer Museum, LA; SculptureCenter, Queens and The Shed, NY. He has participated in residencies including Artist Lab at 18th Street Arts Center; LMCC Workspace; The Core Residency Program at The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; Pioneer Works; and at The Kitchen. Tam is a Lecturer at Princeton University and was a Visiting Lecturer at Harvard University this past fall. Tam received his BFA from the Cooper Union and is based in Queens, NY.*