

08.15.21 / Q&A Matt Siegle, Kenneth Tam

Cowboys

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*A little sensual, a little strong—in Kenneth Tam’s 2021 video *Silent Spikes*, the camera plunges into the trackless Summit Tunnel, where once the transcontinental Central Pacific Railroad made a long cut through solid rock. Or rather, where legions of unheralded Chinese railway workers blasted and carried the mountain away by the bucketful, and where once, for a precious few days in 1867, they lay down their tools in what was then the largest labor strike in US history. Tam explores the continuity and disjuncture of Western myth, Asian immigration, and the present day by guiding the roleplay of five actors, binding them together in an illuminating intimacy. He and artist Matt Siegle discussed the work in an exchange of text messages over a week in July. *Silent Spikes* is on view at the [ICA Los Angeles](#) until September 5.*



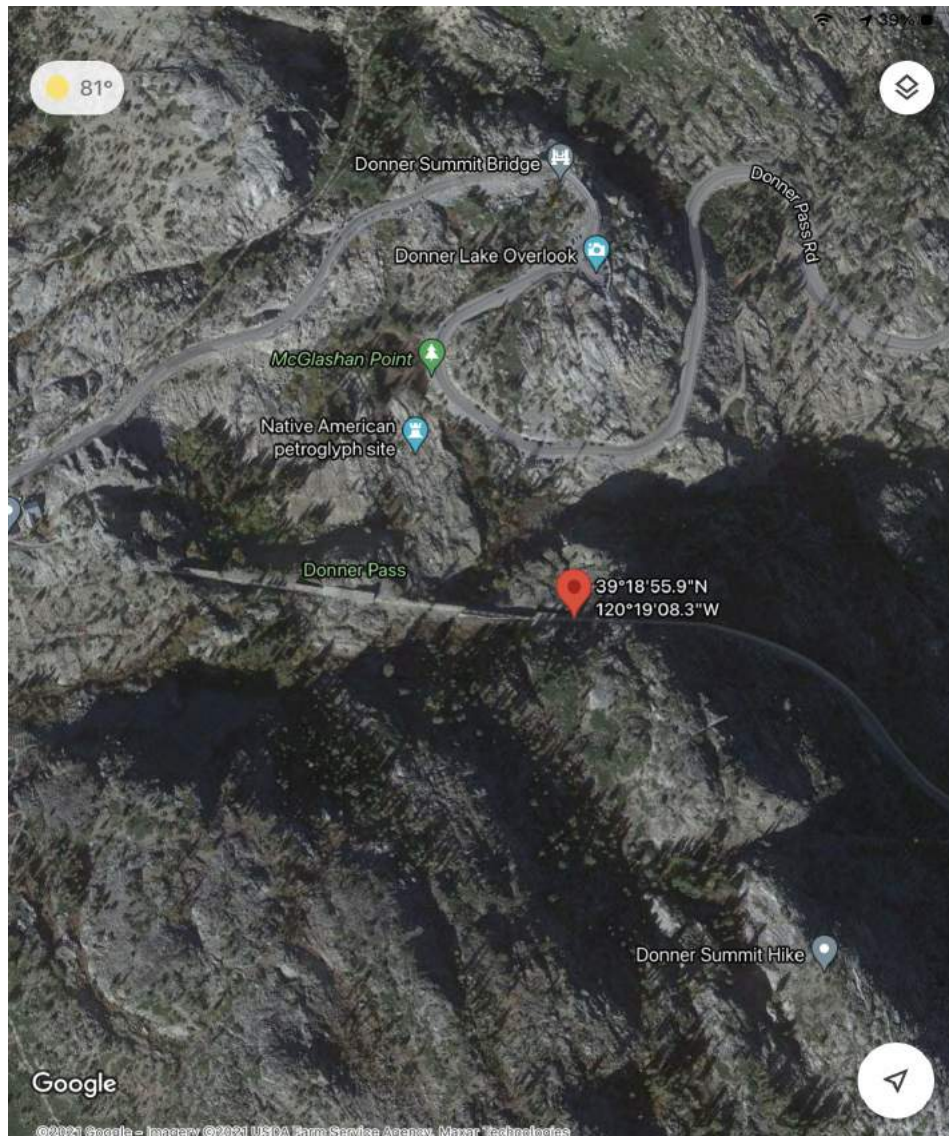
Kenneth Tam, *Silent Spikes* (2021). HD video, multiple channels, 3 min. Installation view, 11:57pm–12am, June 1–30, 2021, Midnight Moment by Times Square Arts, New York, NY. Courtesy of the artist, the Queens Museum, and Absolut Arts. Photo: Maria Baranova.

MATT SIEGLE: I happened to see *Silent Spikes* (2021) on June 24th, which is the 154th anniversary of the strike discussed by the narrator in the video. This is the first work of yours that I’ve seen that incorporates historical narrative. Does Gold Mountain, the location your narrator mentions, exist?

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tcrr-chinese-workers-strike/>

KENNETH TAM: Gold Mountain is just a generic term used to describe California, and to a certain extent, the US. But the specific location where the tunnel footage was shot is Donner Lake, near Tahoe. The strike took place along the entire line of construction, so that tunnel was just one site. The particular stretch I filmed in is probably a half mile long, and there are more modern sections that extend all the way through the Sierra Nevada.

<https://maps.app.goo.gl/S5V9qtcX1M8Z3uAQA>



MS: Amazing. A real legacy of hunger going on, between the Donner Party and the Chinese Railroad Strike. There's also a petroglyph site.



Is there anything in the area about the history of the mining strike?

KT: I don't think so. I didn't see any mention of it on the signage or other didactics. It's not something that is well known or written about.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/150-years-ago-chinese-railroad-workers-staged-era-s-largest-n774901>

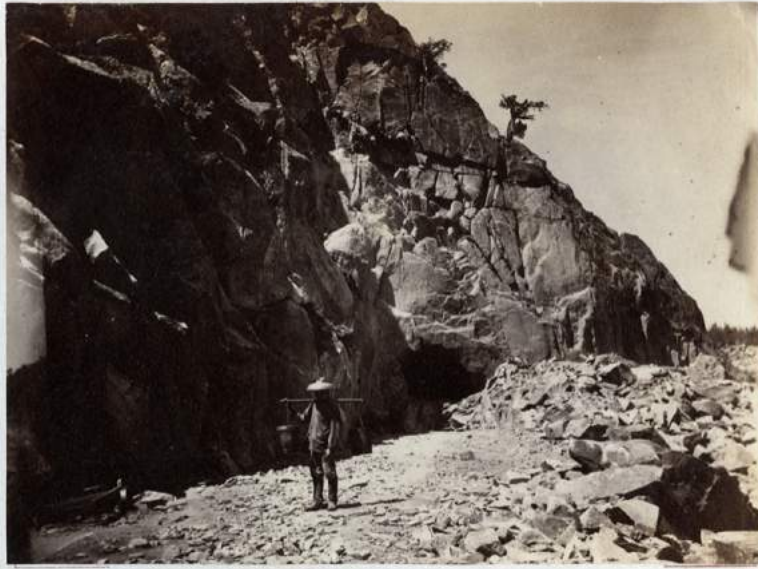
MS: Instead now you have this:

<https://www.donnerranch.com>

So this tunnel becomes a meeting point between two nineteenth century migratory pathways: traditional westward expansion by the descendants of the colonial settlers and an eastward "migration" by the Chinese on this same land. The juxtaposition begs the question if one is more "American" than the other.

KT: For me the tunnel acts more as a portal between different moments in time and even space. The more time I spent thinking about the footage, the more I wondered what this void could represent, particularly for those that spent the most time within it. It's certainly a physical index of capitalist manifest destiny ambitions, but it also speaks to erasure, a vacuum of history. I also thought a lot about the physical proximity of those that were there, working next to each other in near darkness, and the possible bodily affects between the men.

WESTERN SUMMIT.



204. Heading of East Portal, Tunnel No. 8,
from Donner Lake Railroad, Western Summit.

— Chinese laborers working on the Central Pacific Railroad.

Alfred A. Hart Photograph Collection / Courtesy of the Chinese Railroad Workers in North America Project at Stanford University

The tunnel I shot in is quite awe-inspiring when you think about how all this work was done without any machinery. The scale certainly dwarfs that of a person, and when you're inside you do feel consumed by all this negative space. It's perhaps too reductive to make a comparison to an earthwork like Heizer's *Double Negative* (1969). Being in the tunnel does evoke both physical and mental displacement, but there are also feelings of engulfment and even terror that no earthwork is capable of conveying.

MS: I am less familiar with Heizer's production process for *Double Negative*, but I know that Nancy Holt very much considered the engagement of labor as part of *Sun Tunnels* (1976)—there is also a scale relationship to the body, triangulated by this labor. I recently crawled through a drainage tunnel underneath the railroad tracks at Gaviota Beach, north of Santa Barbara, and there is a real terror that grows with every inch further into the darkness, witnessed only by the indifferent soil and rocks. That tunnel was short relative to what you were dealing with!

KT:



Kenneth Tam, *Void*, 2021. Archival inkjet print on Ilford Smooth Pearl paper, mounted on Dibond; black satin lacquer frame, 31 x 41 x 2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles.

MS: ♥



Video 1

X-TRA

00:14 |



Gaviota Beach tunnel. Video and photo: Matt Siegle.

KT: For the fictional narrator, even though there are an entrance and exit in the tunnel, his experience (and the audience's by extension) is that of a closed loop, and in his narration he speaks to a recursive moment where he visits his younger self, and that even when he is crossing the Pacific again, he's drawn back to the tunnel, which contrasts with how we typically understand the mythic West as a space for freedom and masculine fantasy/reinvigoration. The West as a space of possibility and expansiveness can also be seen in the use of movement and physical expression by my participants, yet it's constantly held in check by the tropes associated with that genre (the filmic space of the Western). A certain kind of white masculinity is allowed to run free in that space, but what happens to non-white characters?

MS: And the looping nature of the character's narrative is echoed formally by the seamless loop of the video: there is no beginning and end.

I'd also add women and queer people to your question.

KT: 👍

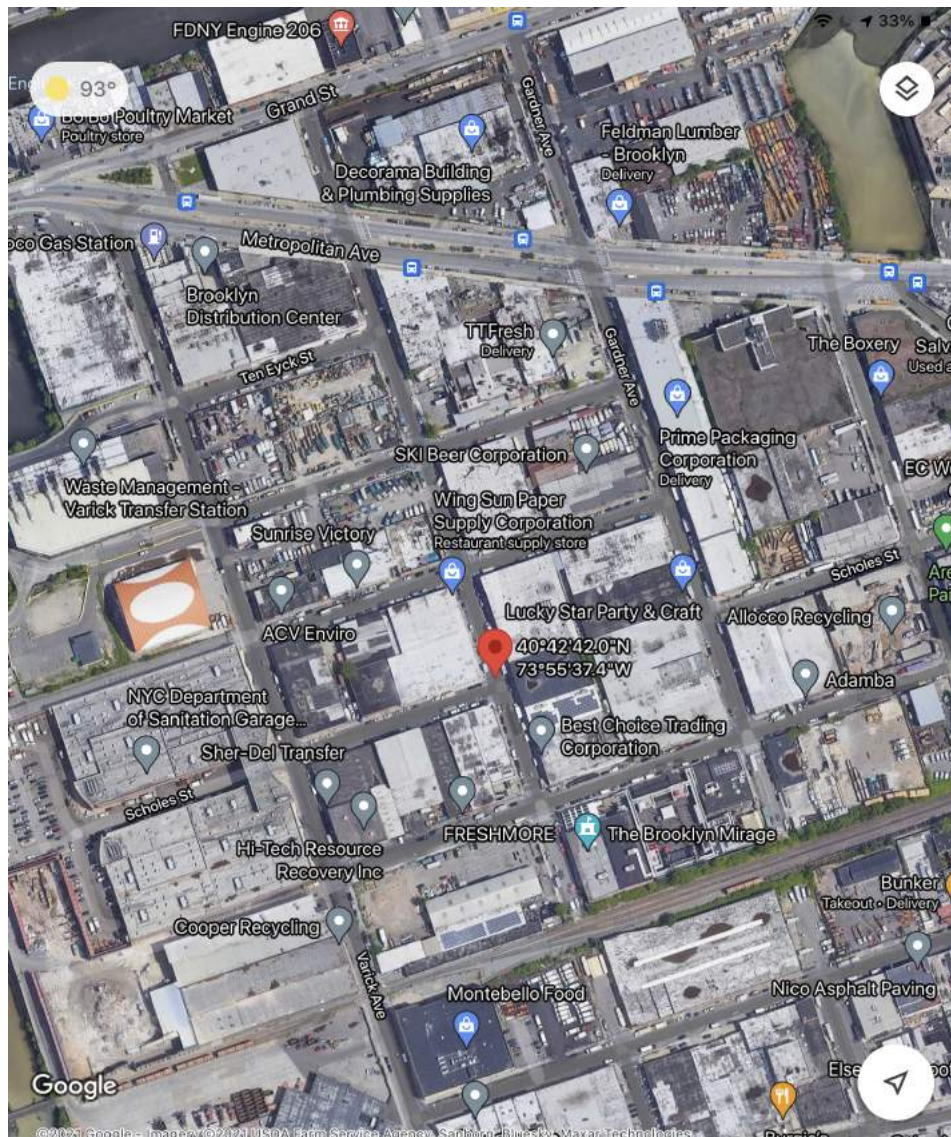
Right, and accompanying every fresh start is usually a violent erasure of what came before. But I want to stress that *Silent Spikes* isn't a proper research project. It certainly takes liberties with the historical record, and I'm much more interested using the past to highlight the way certain struggles exist on a continuum. There are few if any extant primary documents from the lives of individual railroad workers, and much of the historical record comes from the perspective of white overseers. So already it's anything but objectively derived and open to scrutiny.

MS: I'd like to move to the scenes with the dancer on the street of an urban industrial environment, I assume in New York because of the style of graffiti.

KT: Those scenes were shot in Bushwick. But that site isn't particularly significant. It was more about creating a spatial analog to the vanishing point of the tunnel, but in an urban setting. The original idea was to bring my participants to shoot in the tunnel itself, but the pandemic forced me to change my plans.

<https://maps.app.goo.gl/VGmpySyb6Ks3gk2p7>

MS: But that site *does* become significant, through its dislocation, especially in consideration of migratory pathways.



There's one particular shot in the Donner Pass tunnel where you really notice the graffiti on the rock, and so the graffiti becomes kind of a bridge that allows me to think of the dancer and the tunnel narrator in a dialectic, both in character and setting. The tunnel narrator has a scripted story, yet with the dancer we know almost nothing other than setting, body, and movement.

KT: I was interested in a representation of an Asian male body that used movement and sensuousness as a way to complicate the image of the railroad laborer, to suggest an alternative affect and mode of performance that is perhaps denied the latter. I wanted to ask how different kinds of physical movement (not exactly dance but certainly choreographed) that aren't tied to extractive capitalism has the potential to be liberatory and transformative. I wanted there to be strong shapes while also maintaining a lot of contact between the body and the ground—I was thinking about what kinds of movements might suggest a kind of protest while still appearing open and possibly sensual.



Kenneth Tam, *Silent Spikes*, 2021. Still. Two-channel HD video with sound, 20:29 min. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles.

MS: Sensual in what sense?

KT: In the sense that the body can act as a source of satisfaction or pleasure, and not strictly in a sexual way.

MS: Can you talk about that more specifically, in terms of the actual movements or instructives? And I'm curious about any reference points for what inspired your direction of the movement.

KT: I was looking at a number of different sources for ideas, but one thing I was responding to and inspired by were the BLM protests last summer, and the reoccurring use of dance by certain individuals on the front lines. The movements I was seeing were generally more flamboyant, almost antagonistic, but I was moved by that being the response on the street, particularly in the face of a potentially violent reaction by the police. The movements I ended up using are more abstract, angular, and sometimes simply about taking up space.

LAPD Got Served By Krump Dancers At George Floyd Protest Downtown LA



MS: ❤️

That really gives a lot of context to the movement in *Silent Spikes*. I didn't see that movement as oppositional, most likely because the person in your video isn't in direct conflict with someone else. But dance as protest can simply be an occupation of space—it doesn't necessarily have to read as "oppositional." There's history of this with queer people, which was more of a disco thing.

The anniversary of the Stonewall Riots was yesterday.

<https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/gabrielsanchez/this-is-what-gay-liberation-looked-like-in-the-70s>

KT: For sure, having a body occupying space can be as powerful as the movements themselves. Which leads back to the railroad strike, which as a work stoppage was about bodies at rest and unwilling to be productive.

MS: Have you done any dance yourself?

KT: My decision to work with performers is less about my own experiences and more related to how I've used movement/physical expression across a number of my projects. Most of the participants in my videos are not trained in dance or movement in any way, and we don't rehearse beforehand. I find that when they are asked to express themselves or communicate through this way, it opens up a different affective space that can take them out of their socialized selves, or *habitus* as Bordieu describes it. Sometimes it's humorous and absurd, and can even be cringeworthy, but that's important. I use untrained movement to unsettle a social relationship, or create a space for vulnerability that the men I work with would not otherwise share.



Kenneth Tam, *Silent Spikes*, 2021. Video still. Two-channel HD video with sound, 20:29 min. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles.

MS: And then there are the the costumed cowboy scenes. I believe there are three types of shot: one cowboy propelling another on a buckin' bronco type of seat, paired seated cowboys talking to each other, and then the staged photo shoot. I know that your participants are all Asian American. Do they identify as men?

KT: Yes, all men.

MS: Am I correct that with the two seated cowboys, you prompted one to comment on/compliment the other's appearance?

KT: The prompt was to just describe the person based on the few interactions they've had. We did a number of different versions where one was just positive comments, then positive plus criticisms, then whatever they wanted to say. Invariably there was some projection and embellishment, as they only knew so much about the other, but I did ask them to be as earnest as possible.

This was something I also did in *Breakfast in Bed* (2016), and in that instance it was done to much more humorous effect. Here I really wanted to tone down the humor, even though I know there are still awkward moments that are funny to hear.

MS: The *Breakfast in Bed* scenes felt uncomfortable to me, whereas these costumed scenes felt more gay.

KT: Yes, I have been told that some of the scenes by the fence reminded viewers of a conversation from a first Tinder date.



Kenneth Tam, *Silent Spikes*, 2021. Screenshot from iOS. Two-channel HD video with sound, 20:29 min. Courtesy the artist and Commonwealth & Council, Los Angeles.

MS: I don't think it was only the conversation that makes me read it this way. The staginess of the clothing and the postures of the two men sitting around together—legs stretched out, sometimes ankles crossed—makes it seem like play acting, like a meetup from some sort of cowboy fetish culture.

Or maybe even the awkward beginning to an adult film!



KT: ❤️

I think the performative is where things become the most unstable and interesting. I'm always looking for opportunities to undermine the social

scripting of my participants. A simpler way to say this is that we are in some ways always performing ourselves, and I use the camera to create situations where that becomes more apparent.

MS: ❤️

Funny that this male-male cowboy scenario becomes the situation where gays and also your participants are highlighted and possibly destabilized in their respective roles performing themselves!

In the case of the gay porn, the cowboy is used to emphasize a degree of hyper-masculinity, roughness, “naturalness,” earthiness—grit, dirt, and sweat. This stands in contrast to many stereotypes of gay men. In any of these costumed scenes, what do you think the relationship is between your participant’s identities and the cowboy trope?

KT: I’m interested in how this symbolic character can become complicated by a subaltern’s performance of it. And to see what can start to open up within the space of representation when those that have been on the peripheries of certain grand narratives start to occupy a more central role, what contradictions might arise when they’re asked to take on new qualities.

MS: Did you come to any kind of realization about masculinity and Asian American identity/representation through these scenes?

KT: I don’t think I was trying to learn more about identity as much as I was trying to enlarge the space of representation for my participants and also question the existing boundaries of those things you mentioned. I’m not interested in coming to any conclusions about Asian American identity or masculinity, a task that can feel essentializing and perhaps be part of the problem, in that we think we know what either of those things are and build assumptions based on them. Rather I want to unsettle any straightforward understanding of how those two ideas might intersect, and to create images that ask their audience to constantly reevaluate those terms.

X—

Kenneth Tam received his BFA from the Cooper Union, New York and his MFA from the University of Southern California. He has had solo exhibitions at the Minneapolis Institute of Art; MIT List Center for Visual Arts, Boston, MA; Commonwealth & Council and Night Gallery, Los Angeles; and has participated in group shows at the Hammer Museum, Los Angeles; 47 Canal, New York; Hollybush Gardens, London; and SculptureCenter, Queens. Tam is currently a Lecturer at Princeton University.

Matt Siegle is a mixed-media artist. He has exhibited throughout the United States and Europe. In September, he will exhibit at Liste Art Fair Basel with Good Weather (North Little Rock/Chicago), and in 2022, he will participate in *Who We Are in Time and Space*, curated by Michael Ned Holte, at the Pasadena Armory Center for the Arts. Siegle currently teaches sculpture at Dartmouth College.