

This time around: *Room* by Yam LAU

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The scene, as it unfolds, is quite simple: a man arrives "home" to a darkened apartment. Entering what appears to be the bedroom, he switches on a light located near the head of the bed. Crossing the room he undresses, climbs into a pair of pajamas, and retires. At which point the light is switched off, leaving the screen of a portable television set as the room's only source of illumination.

But we are already somewhat ahead of ourselves here for, prior to the illumination of this interior living-space and the situation that transpires within its confines, between the switching on and the switching off of the principal light source, Lau briefly exposes his set-up. Thus, right from the start we are shown what I will refer to as the armature: a rotating space-cell. Now this open frame—digitally constructed, it's roughly cubic and resembles a conventionally framed four-wall set—is given to us through the lens of a virtual camera located, we can imagine, on a circular track set on the floor of a darkened, and likewise virtual, studio. As this "camera," already tracking to the left (for the scene, our little narrative, is already underway), slowly circumscribes the armature, one can anticipate that eventually all four sides of the structure will be revealed; and it follows, each of its four faces will, at some point, become, if only for a moment, aligned with (that is to say, become parallel to) the picture plane established by "our" already-in-motion point of view. I mention this arrangement only to note two canonical schemata that are, at each of these points, simultaneously configured there. The first concerns a certain "theatrical volume," that of the classical stage, the face or *frons scaenae* of which is, of course, always "unconditionally" open or, as some would have it, "missing." The second schema—structurally a confirmation of the first—refers to the conventions of Alberti's "box" or *costruzione legittima*, the application of which offers to the spectator's gaze the illusion that it is possible to penetrate or pierce pictorial space with little or no restriction. However, such access comes at a price, for what is opened, brought into relief by the dictates of perspective (this also applies to the stage of representational theatre and its proto-

cols), not only remains, in its distance, uninhabitable (i.e., forever confined to the hither side of the picture plane) but is, as well, ineluctably marked by the "negative" of topological space, by what might be called, following Jean-Luc Marion, a "counter-appearance." Call it what you will, the *invisible*, the "invisible in the visible;" in any case, it's the very means by which the "invisible gives relief [depth] to the visible," that is, how the visible invariably sets itself off from itself.

But here's the twist: Lau's armature, insofar as it addresses the *mise en scène* of the classical stage, has been rendered as closed even as it presents itself as being, at first sight, more or less transparent. In fact, the aperture of the proscenium stage, in each case or each face has been, literally speaking, barred; and, to the degree that it offers, in each instance, a certain amount of resistance to the gaze, it has become in effect a screen. Having thus marked what more often than not is mistaken for an unrestricted, "pure" opening (the missing fourth wall of the theatrical stage), Lau attempts to overcome or, at least, displace the constraints of perspective by moving his virtual point of view in such a manner as to make each of the four sides of the armature/screen, in turn, visible. Projecting ahead a bit, we could then describe Lau's set-up as possessing a cruciform, "fourfold" structure composed of two sets of opposed or mirroring surfaces, each of which can now be considered a projection screen.

An emplacement or setting-in-place, then, in four parts or four moments: a mode of passage—a tour or turning that also incorporates a crossing of axes—that, once set off in the clearing established by a certain volume of light, strives to technically inscribe its scene, its "taking place" (the *a-letheia* of Heidegger's notion of clearing or *Lichtung* comes to mind here) only to have it collapse at the point in which this lighting effect is extinguished.

(...)

In the dying moments of the last installment, the image, once again collapsing, erases itself. Darkness, along with the first scene, returns. Losing speed, our position succumbs to the gravitational pull of the abyss at the centre of the armature so that, at the point of



closure, the entire overall screen reads as barred, the scene *itself* cancelled.

So what exactly has happened? Has anything happened? Has anything taken place? Can we now speak, with any assurance, of something as now installed? Does it make any sense to speak of "installation" at this point? I must admit, in spite of having rerun the sequence numerous times, I'm no closer to anything one might call a definitive answer. In retrospect, it's apparent that each of the four frames has proffered itself as semi-transparent screen allowing it not only to host one of four scenes but also to bear within it the scene appearing simultaneously opposite it. The upshot of this effect, this show-through is to dispel the illusion that the space enclosed by the armature is being filled or fleshed out as first surmised. On the contrary, its interior must now be thought of as empty, a void or abyss, a perverse "clearing" at the heart of the whole matter. Which makes everything, all four events, all four takes of what is assumed to be one singular occurrence, simply—but is there anything simple here?—so many diverse surface effects. For some, this would amount to nothing more than stating the obvious, that all we're dealing with here is a four-sided, semi-transparent screen (which, as far as I can determine, receives its

images, its programming *as if* from a central source within the armature, thus making the external manifestation of each scene—I'm excluding the superpositionings which would then read across the central, communal gap the right-way-round—a reverse of their original source). In a purely descriptive sense, this is pretty much the case. However, such a claim assumes that, despite the distractions of what some might consider to be merely superficial effects, the essential function of the programme is the (re)presentation of a rather straightforward scene and that Lau, having had to technically show his hand, at least has had the good sense to allow the seams of its production to show. Again, if it were all just a question of having things arrive more or less in one piece, one would be hard pressed to mount a compelling counter-argument. It would all come down to the issues of programme, of their coming to pass in some reasonably coherent form. Spread out as one continuous surface, this "passing," this having "arrived" would then resemble a panorama as if, in becoming available to the eye in one go so to speak, the ordeal of having to account for the totality of its effects would be greatly reduced. But the spectator, in Lau's scenario, has been ejected from the room; which amounts to saying that there is no privileged, no secure internal (or,

Yam LAU, *Room*, 2006. Video and 3-D animation software. Image courtesy of the artist. Photo: Bettina Hoffmann.