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Being Yam Lau: Travels of the Body in the Mind
Yam Lau, *Between the Past and Present: Lived Moments in Beijing*. Katzman Kamen Gallery, Toronto. November 24 – December 22, 2012

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BEING YAM LAU:

TRAVELS OF

THE BODY

IN

THE MIND.

Yam Lau, *Between the Past and the Present: Lived Moments in Beijing*, 2012. Installation. © Photo: Yam Lau.







Yam Lau, *Between the Past and the Present: Lived Moments in Beijing*, 2012. Video still.



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Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent. *Wovon man nicht sprechen kann, darüber muss man schweigen.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein, "Proposition 7," *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*

Wittgenstein subsequently refuted his most famous declaration, leaving us enigmatically suspended. Yam Lau's *Between Past and Present: Lived Moments in Beijing*—structured as both digital animation and video documentary—sets us on this same path, but in the end speaks through the silence, not as a refutation, but as an affirmation of an experience we all recognize yet cannot truly share save as an approximation in its externalized form. Lau's work speaks to our experience of that silent dialogue in the mind from which we form the architecture of our world through the crucible of engagement and release. The work presents us with four states. The first is that of internal dialogue; in the second state the world is observed in silence; in the third the world intrudes on consciousness with all its clatter and noise, breaking the glass of reflection; in the final state there is simply the infinite regress of the *mise en abyme*.

The tension between silence and engagement is at the core of Yam Lau's sensibility, and here he opens by casting us between opposing forces—the intimacy of the glowing study against the infinite darkness of night. Lau's open and spacious framework draws the viewer into a familiar, yet seldom so beautifully articulated sense of time and space, where the boundaries of the material and the immaterial are staged for us in what George Santayana described in reference to the night sky as "a level of intricacy, delicately poised between bewildering complexity and banal simplicity."¹

This is a work that takes time: it takes more than one viewing for these elliptical images, their overlapping and oscillating realities, to fully resonate with our ability to apprehend, to form an empathetic bond. That sense of qualia, the way things seem to us, that these images emit generate complex multifaceted sensorial states that cannot be truly memorized or even transmitted to others in their entirety. They have become the substantiation of the artist's and the viewer's intuition. It is through these intuitions that we begin to feel the complex dimensions of time, space, place, objectness, history, their texture, their possibilities and potential beyond the visual.

The opening sequence of the work guides us towards a distant windowed space, a study situated as though an island over a body of water at night and illuminated by a single burning candle, the embodiment of finitude. Through a series of glimpses, disappearing and reappearing images, we see Lau himself working at a desk. The island, a labyrinth of fenestrations, floats over the silvery mercurial waters. I somehow know this place, yet have never felt our internal infinite cosmic space of mind so vividly constructed, so familiar yet so seldom represented. The sense of fluid perforated spaces, images of here and there, now and then, open up and contract subliminally beneath the threshold of our consciousness, weaving Lau's narrative to a soundtrack of pitch and interval that resonates with a complex simplicity.

But this complex simplicity is suddenly interrupted as Lau abruptly resituates us in another complexity. Working with his past, a China that he can only experience in the present, Lau brings us the sounds and visual noise of a busy shopping street in Beijing. Here again, however, we are shifted from the street itself to the silence of looking out from behind a shop window at the street—from the sound of being there to the silence of the observer, a partition of experience that lies at the heart of both documentary and fictional persuasion. In the silence behind the shop window we recognize the cultural traditions



Yam Lau, *Between the Past and the Present: Lived Moments in Beijing*, 2012. Video still.

of gateways, ambulatory fences, associated patterns and textures that mingle with the images and scenes of contemporary Beijing, creating their own dynamic and rhythms. This existential movement, within and without, announces the rhythm and spatial composition of the work.

In the past, as Bodil Jønssen writes,² it was understood that “time was nature’s marvelous way of preventing everything from happening all at once.” Jønssen contrasts this sense of time with our contemporary experience of time as “not just the span of time you have; it’s also the time you have *right now*.” It is the interpenetration of these two beliefs—the sequential unfolding of time and our contemporary sense of the simultaneity of time collapsed—that Lau builds into his visual narrative. That narrative is held suspended between two poles. One is the dream-like sequencing of overlapping images that in their slow dissolving repetitions enable us to find that connectivity within us that transports us into the time and space of the infinite. The other pole is a busy street in modern-day Beijing with its noise and the finite quiddity or is-ness of ‘being here.’ Lau’s work in that sense presents a paradox, a simultaneous stretching and collapsing of visual time in which our senses bond with the rhythm of time past and present, which carries his narrative seamlessly into the potential of anticipation.

To paraphrase Henri Lefebvre: The illusion of a transparent, pure and neutral space, philosophical in origin, has shifted to complex multivalent viewpoints, overlapping the historical, physical and physiological, linguistic and so on. It is this analysis that confers a concrete existence upon space as being beyond simply mental abstractions.³

It is in this sense that Lau’s layering of objects, images and people simultaneously as mental and material thresholds, announces a different interpretation of place. Near the end of the street segment of the work, as we look out through the silence behind the shop window, we see Lau pass and just for a

fraction of a second his face looks in on us, collapsing the space between artist and viewer, between production and apprehension, confirming Damasio’s observation that not only can we hold the world within us, but we can—amazingly—also hold ourselves within that world. An extraordinary event, when one gives it some thought, which in this work proceeds to carry us, subliminally, through a layering of repetitions, a circulation of openings and re-openings as the traditionally composed circular gateway to the studio slowly advances towards us, taking us out of the world of the present across the desk with its rulers and measures, beyond the island—Rilke’s world, “large, but in us is deep as the sea”—into the speckled blackness, returning us to the vast unspeakable silence of empty space until, as Bachelard writes, “merely through memory we can recapture by means of meditation, the resonances of this contemplation of grandeur.” We have come full circle, yet arrived at the same place for the first time, now paradoxically aware of both who we were and who we have become. Perhaps such an approximation is the intention of all artworks.

Yvonne Lammerich

Yvonne Lammerich is an artist who for many years has worked with the liminality linking real and projected space. Her most recent work includes the TMCA project, an investigation of virtuality and real space, and the Ideal House project, concerning art/architecture and lived experience.

Notes

1 John D. Barrow, *Inner and Outer Space*, p. 152.

2 Bodil Jønssen, *Unwinding the Clock*, p. 17.

3 Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 292.