Creative rationale

The featured asymmetrical structure, a large-scale installation by João Ó, is a visual mechanism designed specifically to explore the experiential aspect of perception. In assessing the information conveyed by an artwork, the question of cognition is raised: how much of what the eyes see is in fact assimilated by the brain and thus understood, in comparison to what is lost in the process of comprehension? This mechanical abstraction is manifested through both audio and visual stimuli whose aim is to examine the deceptive operation from a phenomenological standpoint.







INTRODUCTION

Macau-based artist and architect João Ó refers to the creative side of his studio practice with the label "Buildings Are Not Enough," a dispassionate claim appearing to suggest that the nominally independent territory of art could in some way constitute a spatial supplement for the more utilitarian—albeit less necessary—field of construction-oriented architectural design. The supplement marks a very particular logic that will be familiar to practiced readers and writers alike: following Derrida's analysis, it "adds only to replace," both justifying and transforming the naturalized mythology of the original term it follows only to overtake (Derrida 144). João Ó notes, in this obligingly neat elision of the architectural, that other forms of practice like photography, sculpture, and installation actually contain much of the aesthetic and conceptual energy of buildings, leaving the reader to wonder what, precisely, these supplementary alternatives contribute to the field of architecture that the building does not. It is a strikingly asymmetrical parallel; whereas the photograph and the installation sit comfortably above and behind the building, the functional categories to which these terms belong, namely art and architecture, are somehow positioned in terms not of intellectual grounding but rather of professional practice. The artist and architect work side by side, the one naturalizing the work of the other.

Adjacent to this rhetorical claim, which defines how one might productively situate art and architecture within João Ó's practice, there is a political claim relating to the current status of Macau and the Pearl River Delta as sites for this discussion. As has been well established, the Pearl River Delta mega-city, stretching from the twin corners of Macau/ Zhuhai and Hong Kong/ Shenzhen through Foshan and Dongguan to the apex of Guangzhou, once provided a fertile ground for experimental discourses of future urbanism, feeding everything from curatorial projects like Hou Hanru's "Canton Express" and Tobias Berger's "Pearl River City," not to mention multiple iterations of the Shenzhen Biennale of Architecture and Urbanism, to artist collectives and spaces like Big Tail Elephant, Yangjiang Group, Vitamin Creative Space. For a variety of reasons, however, in the intervening years this sense of energy in bridging art and architecture has dissipated, particularly in the mainland portions of the region. Macau and Hong Kong seem to represent the last enclaves of a once-thriving conversation, and João Ó is one of the more outspoken figures to remain involved.







IMAGE

In terms of artistic practice, João Ó seems to split his efforts primarily between photography and installation, two fields that the viewer might retroactively assign to the artist's relationship with architecture. Photography, broadly conceived as image-making, can be a method of both capturing space and creating it. For the series Thresholds (2011-ongoing), he uses large-format prints, typically produced at a scale just slightly smaller than the human body that does not intentionally overpower the viewer but rather creates a window or door through which one may pass, to catalogue a species of spaces that may be endemic to the sort of East Asian metropolis through which the artist and his audience so often find themselves passing. These are spaces empty of human presence, but the photographs are not composed as paeans to the mechanical or industrial. Instead, João Ó focuses on the semi-public, semi-private non-spaces that characterize flow throughout the city: columbaries, backstage areas, HVAC facilities, courtyards, pedestrian tunnels, and so on. There is a distinctly science fictional quality to these images, as if the artist were preparing a psychogeography of some recently rediscovered space station. As a designer and supervisor of public housing construction projects in his architectural project, João Ó is certainly influenced by the logic of repetition with difference, and has gained the ability to create new spaces even as he documents and categorizes existing spatial modalities. Information is organized to the point that it becomes nonsensical, not to say chaotic.



In his latest project, Entropic Chamber (2012), João Ó would appear to forego photography altogether in favor of a very clearly installation-oriented exhibition. A roughly cubic structure, dark and industrial, can be approached from two facing sides. Between these two open faces, two movable wings and four fixed shelves modulate the flow and visibility of light emerging from several bright bulbs. The wings rotate slowly and in tandem, moving to an experimental sound composition, brusque and terrifying, that seems at odds with the well-oiled technical grace of the installation itself. In a way, each of the open faces of the structure constitutes a shifting photographic image, a strictly controlled pattern of light that alternately freezes and shifts again. Here, of course, sound and vision interact in a way that would be impossible working with the traditional photograph, but what remains is the logic of what João Ó calls "deception." The chamber offers the impression that, somewhere within its internal mechanical workings, there is a light core dominated by chaos (or over-organized information), transforming any particular vision of its interior into a limited position. It is the fundamental proposition of phenomenology: the viewer calls the object into being by virtue of his or her position, but, in this case, the available options are limited to the simple categories of "front" and "back."









BUILDINGS

The artist is not necessarily mistaken in that this particular machine gives off very little information; we are faced,

ARE NOT

perhaps, with a system so complex that its chaos is reduced to visual simplicity, or perhaps, on the other hand,

ENOUGH

a machine of such utter simplicity that it can only be masking chaos.
















CODA

Viewing the first physical iteration of this project at the Macau Museum of Art it becomes clear that the emphasis of its machinic capacity is on constraint rather than chaos. Sound composition and environmental affect aside, the device itself is strikingly simple in its movement, cycling as it does through a series of moves in which the wings at the center of the installation turn with, toward, and away from each other. João Ó brings to the project parallel possibilities for its reception: typically, this ballet is choreographed in advance, and the audience is free to circulate around its ongoing maneuvers. During live performances, however, the movement of the wings, quality of lighting, and aspects of sound are controlled manually by the artist from a DJ booth adjacent to the work, allowing in notions of human error. Here, it is the body of the artist that comes into a slow conflict with his work, adjusting its presentation only minimally but still activating it in such a way that it is no longer simply a cold, dead apparatus but rather becomes technologized--a tool. If the object itself focuses on the constraints of its extremely limited range of motion and lighting, it is the artist who returns chaos to the work, seeming to act in parallel with the droning noise composition as he assists the installation in its performance of its own being. Art brings chaos to the constraints of architecture, calling upon the sculptural and performative properties of the work. After the performance the piece sits silently, not abandoned but no longer living, and the audience is again free to approach its safely controlled confines.



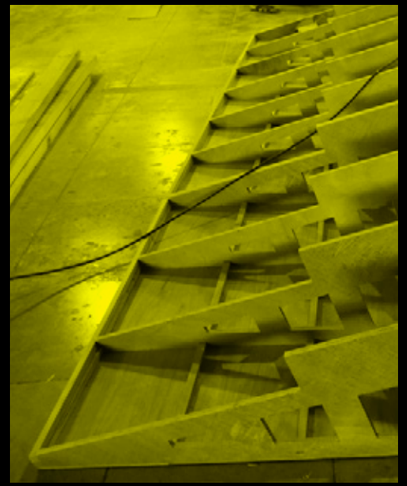
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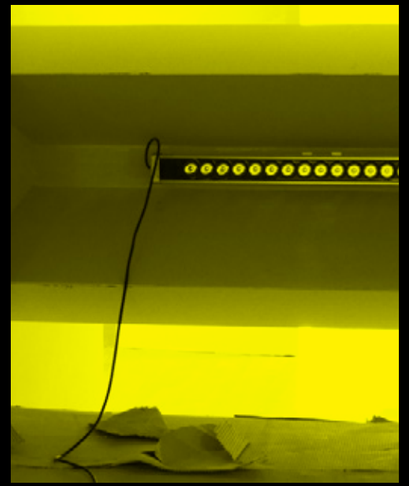
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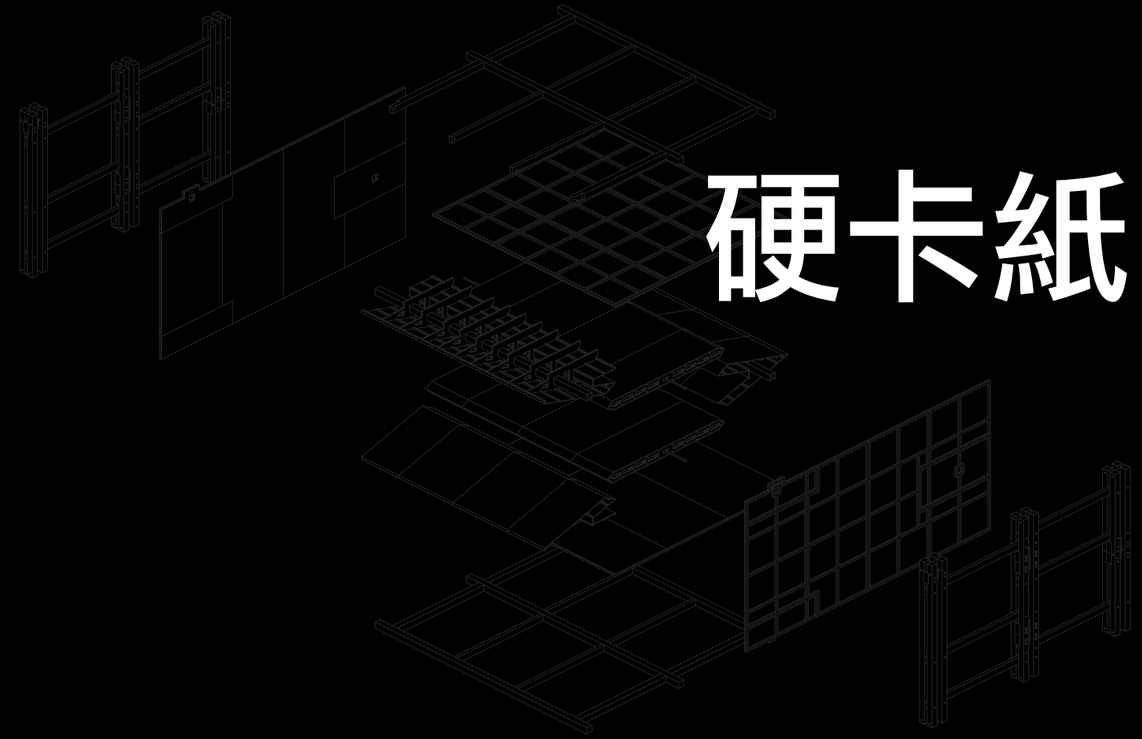
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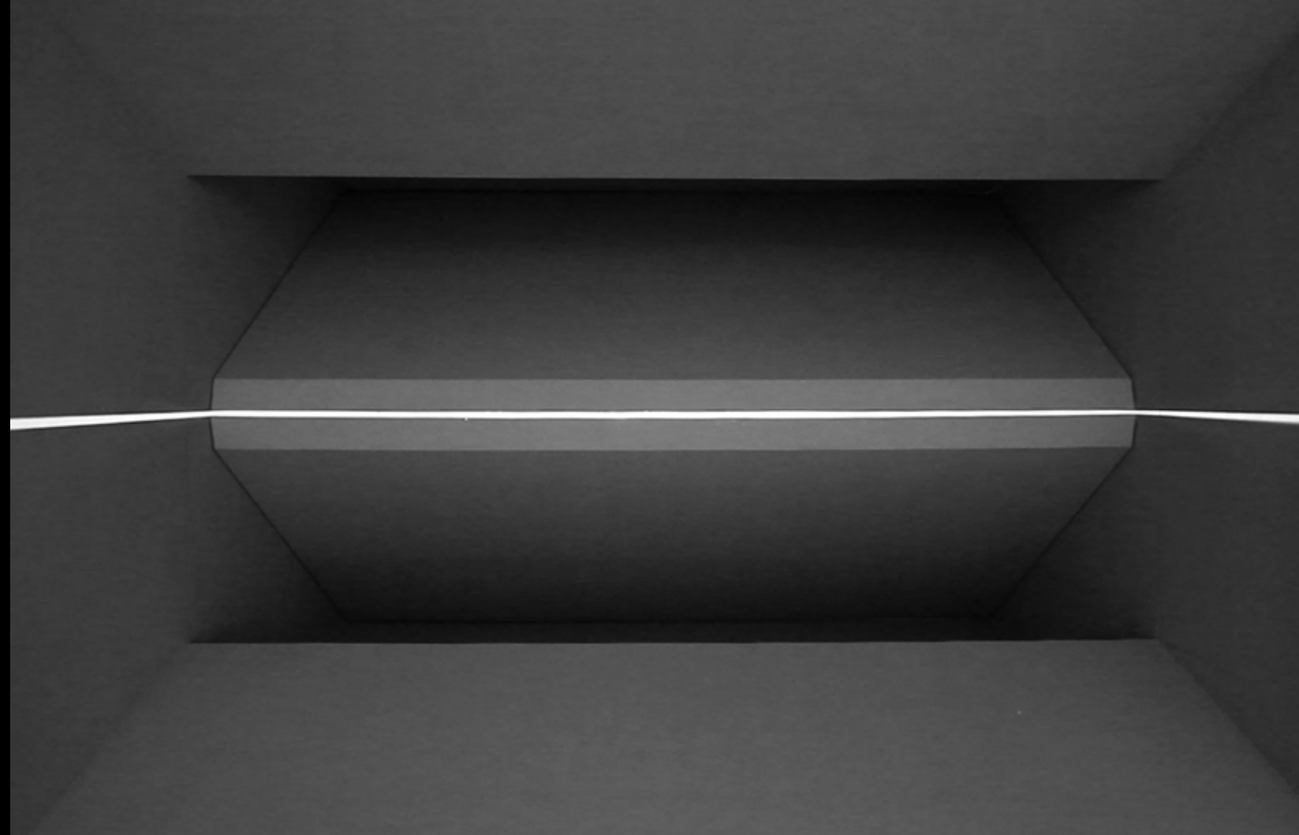
創作理念

展覽展出蘇約翰創作的一個大型非對稱裝置。藝術家設計此視覺裝置作品，旨在探究觀感體驗這一主題。在觀眾欣賞及思考作品帶出的訊息時，一連串有趣的認知問題同時浮現：其實，人眼所看到的東西，有多少會被大腦吸收理解？而在嘗試理解的過程中，又有多少資訊會失落其中？透過該機械裝置抽象作品，蘇約翰運用刺激性聲像來表達其創作意圖：從現象學角度出發，審視觀感體驗過程牽涉的虛幻和欺騙性成分。

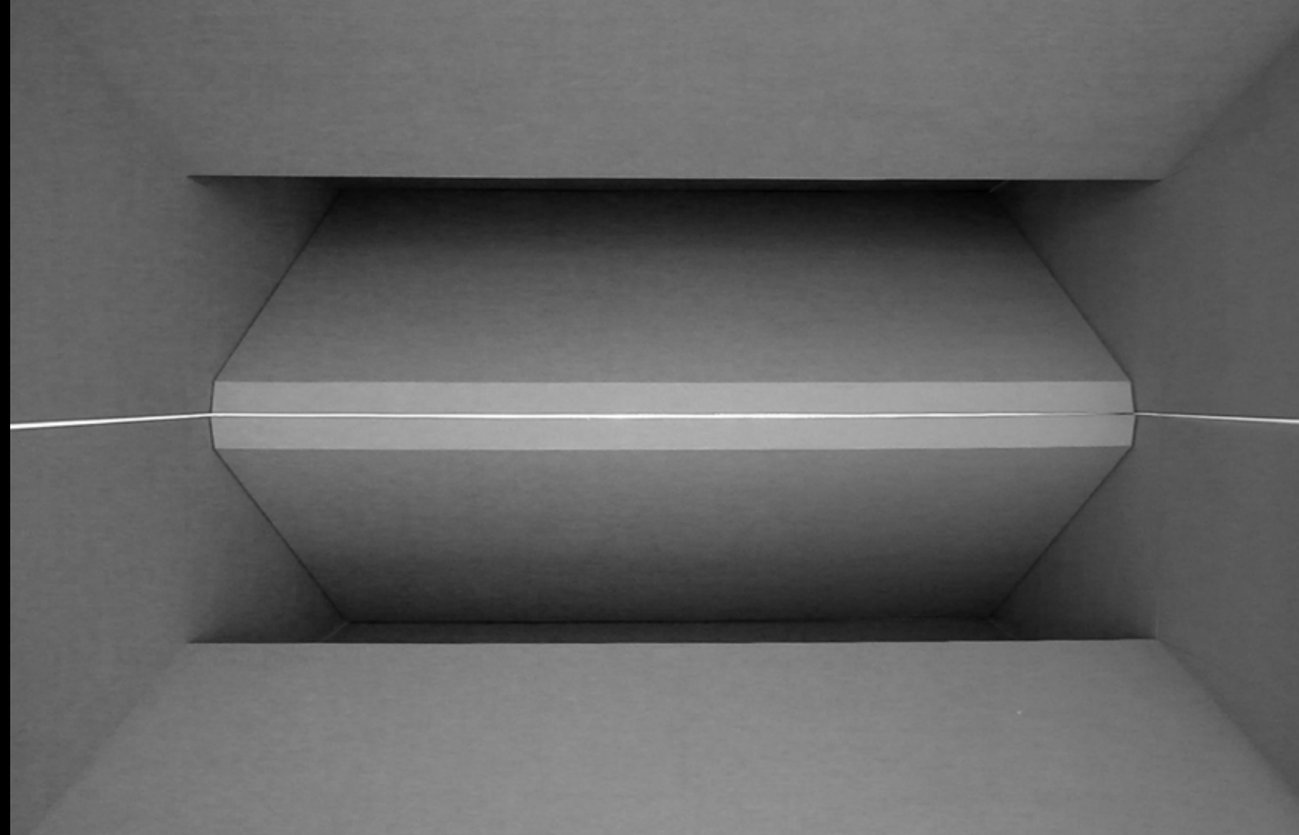

混沌之室
CÂMARA
ENTRÓPICA

影像

就其藝術實踐看來，蘇約翰的創作遊走於攝影和裝置之間，觀眾可能會追本溯源地認為他與建築的密切關係使這位藝術家選擇了這兩個領域。攝影藝術從廣義來說是製造圖像的藝術，可說是種捕捉空間以及創造空間的創作形式。在他的作品系列《初始Thresholds》(2011開始，仍在進行當中)，他運用了大尺寸列印，這些印品的尺寸比人體稍小，其中開設一扇窗或門讓人通過，而非故意給觀者造成壓迫感，從而界定出一種空間形式，它可能具備東亞都市特色，藝術家本人和他的觀眾會經常穿穿梭於這些都市。這些空間沒有任何人類存在的蹤跡，但其照片捕捉這些鏡頭並非向機械或工業社會致頌。相反，蘇約翰專注於半公共半私人、體現著城市流動節奏的非空間，例如為人忽視的鴿棚區（columbaries backstage areas），高壓交流電設施，小庭院，行人隧道，等等。這些圖像具有明顯的科幻特質，仿若藝術家在描畫某個新近發現空間站的心理地理學圖像。蘇約翰是設計師，也在自己的建築項目中監管公共房屋建設工程，因此他必然會受差異與重複邏輯的影響，深明重複的同時注入不同新元素的道理，即使在攝錄現存空間形式並將之分類時，他也具備創造新空間的能力。在資訊的編排上，他則令資訊顯得荒謬而淩亂。

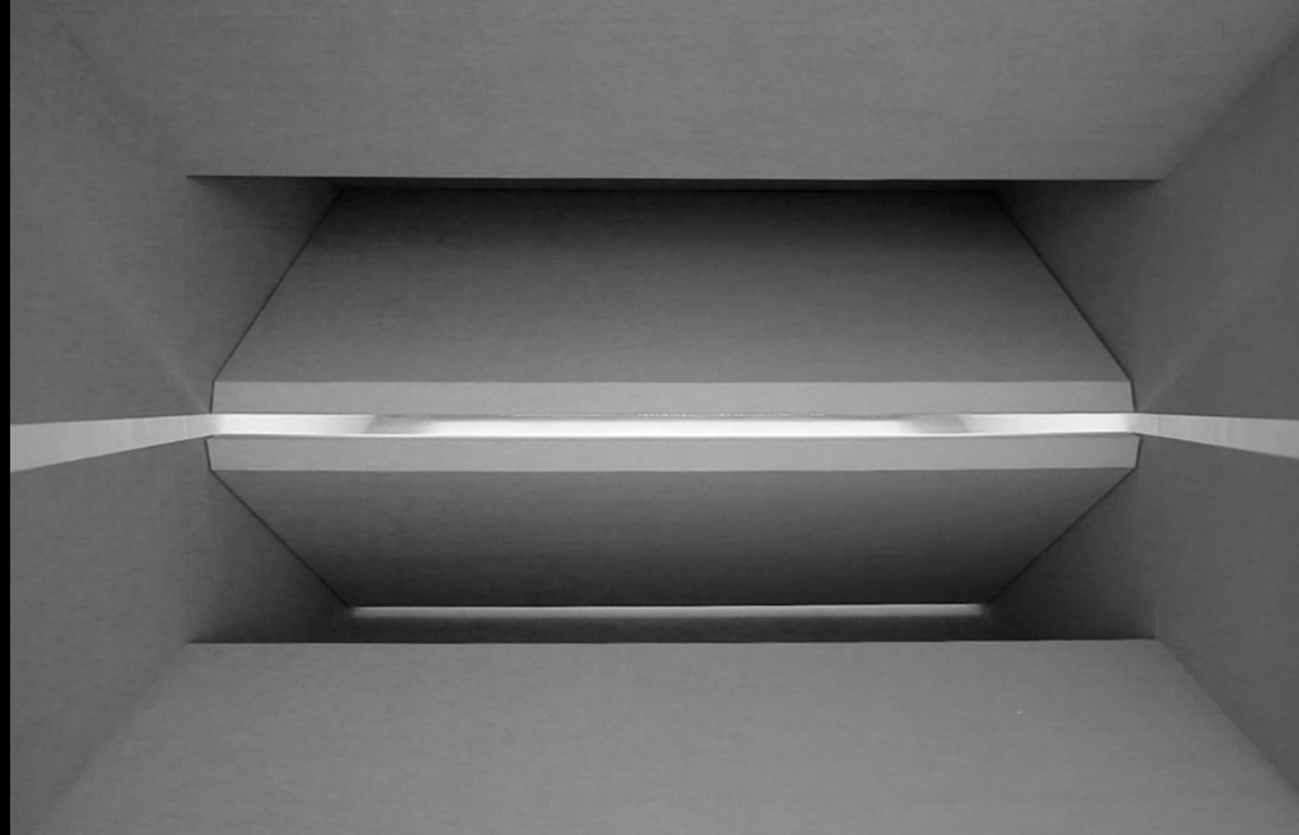


然而，在其最新項目《混沌之室》(2012)中，蘇約翰卻看似全盤放棄攝影，轉向製作一個顯而易見的裝置展。該裝置大致上是個立方體結構，灰暗，帶工業化特徵，觀眾可從兩個相對的面接近這個裝置。在開放的這兩個面之間（即裝置內），裝有兩個可轉動的翼，四個固定的架，它們負責調節空間的流動以及調控數個強光燈泡發出的光線亮度。那對翼伴隨著一段實驗聲樂慢慢一前一後地轉動，營造出突兀的不安感，而裝置本身技術優良，運轉順暢，二者的反差明顯。從某種角度來看，每一開放面都構成了一幅變動中的攝影圖像——受嚴格調控的光線圖，它時而凝止不動，時而又再開始轉動。當然，在此裝置中，聲音和視像產生某形式的互動，利用傳統的照片是不可能產生這種效果，於是，蘇約翰提出的“欺騙性”或“虛幻”概念便在此顯現。這個小室給人的印象是，在其內部的機械構造中，有一個由混沌（或堆砌過度的訊息）主導的光線核心，它把其內部的特定視覺形象轉化為一個有限的位置/情景。藉此，現象學的基本命題浮現了：觀者從自身的位置角度出發，重新營構所看到的物件/景象，但是在《混沌之室》而言，觀眾的選擇僅限於兩種：“前”與“後”。



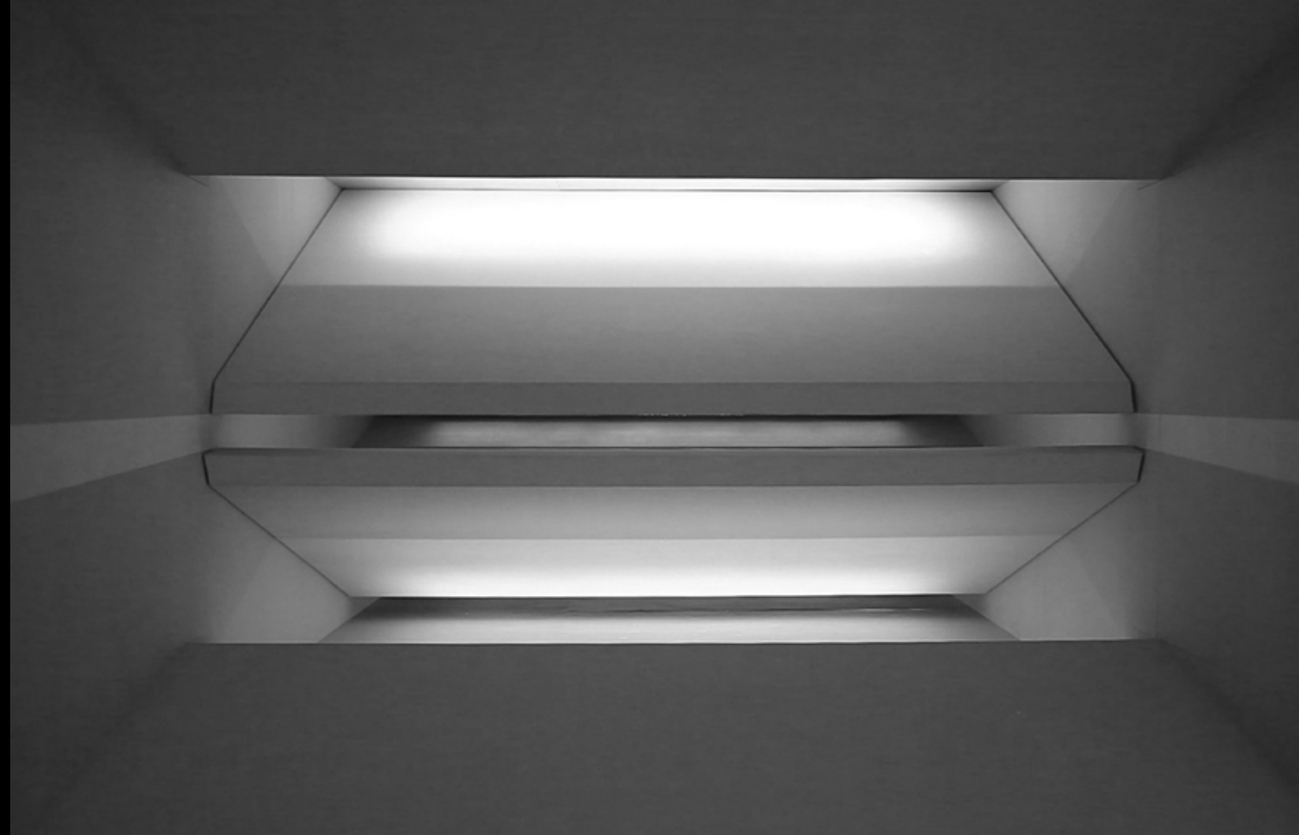


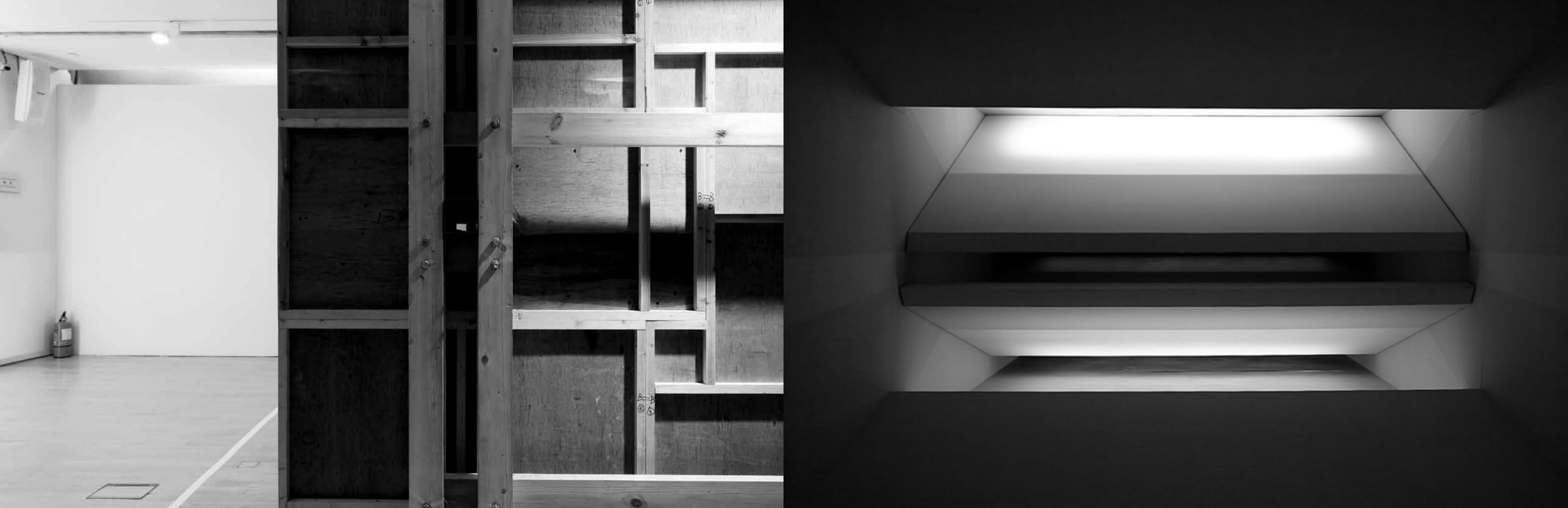




如果我們視《初始Thresholds》為從人種志角度探討非空間，那麼藉《混沌之室》，藝術家蘇約翰已轉為製造非空間。顯而易見，這種轉變不但只見於其建築設計實踐（我們可以肯定他一定參與過某類型的實用性公共空間建築項目），現在還出現於他的藝術創作中，這標誌著他邁出了重要的一步，極力探索已存在的空間邏輯——即是說，認同補充替補的含義。當然，蘇約翰對裝置並不陌生。譬如其作品《我最喜歡單獨空間My Favorite Single Room》（2011）。此作品是與何明桂合作項目的一部分。項目中，兩位藝術家單單根據另一方的文字說明，塑造或重新創造呈現承載著對方重要回憶的空間。其實，《我最喜歡單獨空間》製造的只不過是這樣的一個非空間。掀開絲絨布簾，觀眾進入一個狹小的圓形空間，牆壁主要由空架子構成，部分架上擺放著魚缸，魚缸內只有一塊塊的木頭和簡樸的喇叭錐盆。這個作品再次通過聲音與人身體的位置營構經驗，然而，（對比《混沌之室》）在這個稍早前創作的作品中，觀眾被賦予的位置選擇稍多些。

關於《混沌之室》，蘇約翰提及機械抽象作品這個概念。當然，故意曲解藝術家詮釋其作品的方法總是有建設性的；像《混沌之室》就啟發觀眾思考：這並非一個以機械材料建構的抽象作品，而是憑藉其自身的機械化特質創造出來的抽象作品。技術層面而言，本次展覽的重心——這個機械裝置，既不抽象也不具表現派特徵。它畢竟不是個雕塑，只是項普通物件。但這並不表示，因為該機械裝置給出的訊息非常有限，因而藝術家把握錯了；或許我們面對的是一個十分複雜的系統，因為太複雜所以其混亂反而被簡化至最簡的視覺印象，或者說，也許另一方面我們面對的是一個如此極不起眼的簡單構造，其簡之下包藏著一片混沌。雖然幾乎在任一位置，或任何兩或多個位置都能止住機械裝置轉動的雙翼及木架，但觀眾憑經驗可能得到的觀看位置主要有兩個（即“前”與“後”）。這顯示出在畫廊常見的觀者中心關係中，本裝置是個含義極為開放的術語。從此兩種位置觀看裝置，令觀者感受到某種暴力，某種被排斥感，裝置的航機翼及其裝甲模樣的主體更是增強了這種感覺。當然，必須指出的是，這個裝置並非一個建築；單單建築並不足夠。





評論

（我）在澳門藝術博物館看到這個藝術項目首次開始其反復不斷的物理性運轉，顯而易見，藝術家意在強調其機械性能的局限性，而非混沌的一面。撇開不談樂聲和環境的影響，就裝置本身而言，它的運轉極其簡單，周而復始，位於裝置中心的翼亦隨之轉動：時而動向一致，時而向對方接近，時而分離。從觀眾接收的層面而言，蘇約翰為該藝術項目帶來了並行不悖的可能性：特別的是，這支舞曲是預先編排好的，而觀眾可以隨意自由地在裝置運轉時，在其周圍走動。然而在現場表演期間，翼的轉動、燈光的明暗色彩以及音響效果等全都由藝術家本人透過作品附近的一個DJ台進行操控，這意味著容許人為錯誤的介入。在此，藝術家的身體與自己的作品產生了一種緩慢的衝突，他以最細微的方式不著痕跡地調控著該裝置作品的演示，但同時也使它活動起來，成為一個技術化配置——一個工具，而不再是個冷冰冰、死氣沉沉的裝置。如果說這個物體本身受其非常有限的運動和燈光（變化）範圍的規限，那麼就是藝術家將混沌輸送回作品，當他“輔助”裝置，令裝置進行自己(而非藝術家)的表演時，他仿似根據單調的嗡鳴樂聲的節奏而作出調控，動作與聲音協調一致。蘇約翰藉藝術把混沌帶到了建築的受限界限內，帶出了作品的雕塑及表演性質。表演完畢，作品靜靜地立在那裡，它並未被棄置，但已然了無生氣，而觀眾則又可再次隨意接近這個被安全操控的裝置的四周。



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