

MIT List Visual Arts Center
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[LIST PROJECTS]

Kenneth Tam

April 18 – May 21, 2017



ALL IMAGES *Breakfast in Bed* (still), 2016
Single-channel HD video projection, sound: 32 min.
Courtesy the artist



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Although it is surely the activities—pell-mell, absurd, and strangely erotic—that most viewers will remember long after viewing Kenneth Tam's *Breakfast in Bed* (2016), I'd like to focus on the room. Faux-wood paneling, inoffensive carpet, bays of fluorescent light—all seemingly generic architectural conceits—are ever-present in this space. The earnest whispers ("Jealous of your beard, dude") and excited utterances of the seven men in Tam's video are contained by this architecture (importantly, they never appear outside of it), which Tam purpose-built inside his studio in Houston, Texas, like an architectural Matryoshka doll.

What is it about such spaces? Church basements, unfilled or recently emptied-out dens, out-of-date meeting rooms in office buildings. These spaces are for self-discovery and debasement, at once menacing and pleasantly banal. They are not specific to a geographic region, because they can be found in every part of the US—North, South, East, and West. They even slip between domestic and institutional contexts. In other words, even before Tam convenes his improbable group of players, culled from a call posted to Reddit, the room is already suffused with *something*.

That something is narrative possibility. And so the men who find themselves within Tam's room, cannot help but to enact old stories in unfamiliar ways—ones about, say, the porosity of relationships, or about what it is to be a man (a game whose rules constantly change and also, in many regards, frustratingly stay the same).

In *Man, Play, and Games* (a text familiar to Tam), the sociologist and theorist Roger Caillois establishes a structural language for describing games, which he proposes are an admixture of competition, chance, simulation, and vertigo.¹ These qualities are placed along a spectrum of anarchic to intensely rule-based productions. While these are criteria against which the activities in *Breakfast in Bed* might be measured, it is Caillois's particular insight that the playing of games can sometimes puncture the systems of order attached to them, and we might surmise by extension, the spaces they occupy. That playground games happen on the playground and not in the classroom bespeaks not only a social order made manifest (playing is for outside, just as sure as learning is to be done indoors), but configures the playground games' life-or-death stakes for many children. Similarly, the paid participants of *Breakfast in Bed* are able to project versions of themselves (honest, nefarious, playful, alpha) precisely because they gather together weekly to play in an unmarked room. This room, outfitted only with beer and camera equipment, gives the participants the psychological latitude to encounter one another in profoundly moving ways.

Another way to think of this is via a particular child's toy that intrigued Sigmund Freud, called a "Mystic Writing-Pad." Comprised of a wax or resin tablet topped by two sheets of celluloid, it works by pressing a stylus or fingernail onto the surface of the celluloid, and its contact with the substrate makes a mark appear—lift the celluloid, and the mark is erased, even though it remains scratched onto the tablet. Freud invokes his reader to imagine one hand writing on the mystic pad and the other "periodically rais[ing] its covering sheet," to suggest

the ever-cycling life of the mind.² Tam's room works this way—and thus might appear generic because we are in the end meant to identify it as a psychological space, rather than a strictly architectural one—with the men inside of it making meaning and wiping it clean with each new endeavor. What goes on in the room can't be fully forgotten, but neither can it be completely remembered; a narrative on loop, unresolved in its order and its effects.

Andy Campbell

ABOUT THE ESSAYIST

Andy Campbell is an Assistant Professor of Critical Studies at USC – Roski School of Art and Design. His writings have been published in *Artforum*, *Pastelegram*, *GLQ*, and *Aperture*, among others. He lives and works in Los Angeles.

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Kenneth Tam (b. 1982, New York) lives and works in Houston and New York.

List Projects: Kenneth Tam is curated by Henriette Huldich, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Film Screening and Discussion

Friday, May 12, 12 PM

Kishonna L. Gray, Phd, Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholar; Visiting Assistant Professor, MIT Comparative Media Studies/Writing Program.

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1. Roger Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, trans. Meyer Barash (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 12.

2. Sigmund Freud, "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing Pad' (1925)," in *General Psychological Theory: Papers on Metapsychology* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 216.

