

Ottica TV: Exhibition Review
Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley: 'The Rebirthing Room'
Studio Voltaire, Clapham, London. 31/01–28/04 2024

Exhibition Website: <https://studiovoltaire.org/whats-on/danielle-brathwaite-shirley-the-rebirthing-room/>

The Rebirthing Room is a solo exhibition at the Studio Voltaire by Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley. She is a Berlin/London-based artist, with her practice focusing on Black Trans Archive in animation, sound, performance, and videogame development.

Studio Voltaire used to be a Mission Hall connected to a church back in the 1890s. Today, it undergoes transformation into a gallery space, where the current exhibition, *The Rebirthing Room*, is more than just a display area. It can be interpreted as a space symbolising new beginnings and communal sharing, akin to a place of birth or a venue for personal reflection and confession. Within this context, the presence of religious imagery, such as the statue of Jesus on the pillars, evokes themes of redemption and liberation from inner struggles, aligning with the concept of spiritual rebirth found in Christianity.

Positioned as a classical style of solo game experience, 'THE REBIRTHING ROOM', utilises VR technology to pull the 'players' into other worlds, choosing from six demons, failure, anxiety, self-doubt, intolerance, addiction and low self esteem, through navigating an interactive head-shaped controller. Following the instructions by the call from the artist and walking through the coloured pillars with holy sculptures hanging, visitors are able to see the three-screen interactive videogame. Then, surrounded by withered bushes on the ground, the game is about to start.

Different from Brathwaite-Shirley's past exhibition at Arebyte Gallery, London, where players are asked to use a plastic gun to shoot at 'infected' beings, this time what they could do is to simply 'stare' at the demons. The longer being watched, the further demons will go away, eventually exploding. Instead, if too many demons approach without being spotted, the player would explode and the game is over. Winning or losing, that's the only outcome, which defines whether us, the players, successfully gained rebirth or not. The game controller could also be regarded as an anchor from a huge boat floating above the sea level, where lucifugous demons hide beneath that and manage to come closer to devour the boat, while the anchor stands to intimidate them. It also could be regarded as a virtual extension of human limbs, where certain physical-virtual transformation existed, as red characters shown on the wall opposite to the screen, 'change in the shadows'.

The three-screen interactive videogame is like a three-way mirror, attempting to reflect the inner identity of the players. *The three-way mirror* serves as a therapeutic tool¹, designed to aid individuals in reconciling traumatic experiences with their sense of self. It encourages them to examine the event from three different perspectives: reflecting on their past, the event itself, and the sum of their life experiences. This model, developed by trauma theorists Gusman, aims to acknowledge and honour the complexity of identity, particularly within

¹ Lahey, K. (2022) *Repeated reflection: Kate Lahey on main gallery exhibition three way mirror ' eastern edge gallery, Eastern Edge Gallery*. Available at: <https://easternedge.ca/repeated-reflection-kate-lahey-on-main-gallery-exhibition-three-way-mirror/> (Accessed: 25 March 2024).

various cultural contexts, within the framework of trauma therapy. In reference to this model, it is possible to deduce that the space is being created to make invisible identity crises and personal cognition visible, challenging the visitors to be true for themselves - what they are exactly hiding, what they truly are, or any traumas happened before but not yet recovered. 'I know they'll feel they don't want to say it out loud. And that's kind of what I'm banking on'², Brathwaite-Shirley adds.

The Rebirthing Room, where the visitors enter that would transform or not, remains uncertain. Some people could easily stop trying when being defeated the first time, while others might keep on playing until they win, or don't try even once. It is a common phenomenon for interactive or immersive artworks exhibited in the physical or virtual space, which also became part of their components. As Brathwaite-Shirley always did, archiving the pro trans space and seeing how further it could go next time, not only in the virtual records, but also in the social cognition realm. Here echoes with a call at the end, after playing the game — *Come back when you want to deal with it.*

Haoyue Chen 25/03/2024

² Silver, H. (2024) *Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley confronts gaming, VR and rebirth at Studio Voltaire, Wallpaper**. Available at: <https://www.wallpaper.com/art/exhibitions-shows/danielle-brathwaite-shirley-the-rebirthing-room-studio-voltaire-london> (Accessed: 25 March 2024).