

Installation Adrian Searle encounters

Silicon nightmare: it's lonely work in Yuri Pattison's ghost office

Lights flicker, shelves gather dust and cables twist like snakes - all that's missing from this tech workspace are workers, leaving you feeling like a lab rat in a maze



Powered down ... a houseplant sits on an unoccupied desk in Yuri Pattison's User, Space.
Photograph: Chisenhale Gallery/Andy Keate

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Chisenhale Gallery in east London recently closed its doors and sent its staff on a five-week break. It has now reopened. But as what? Is Yuri Pattison's User, Space an office, a warehouse, temporary quarters or an art installation? Come to that, am I spectator or viewer; critic or user? Don't answer that.

A swanky new arrival desk stands in what's now called the "power lobby". It looks like the same old power-free lobby to me, just made-over. Beyond, half-installed (or half-abandoned) warehouse and office paraphernalia fills the big gallery. Has some kind of tech company started up, then powered down? Where is everyone? Abducted by aliens, made redundant by a do-not-reply automated message? Maybe they've just moved on. Everything gets rebooted.

You can wander around if you like. Bring a laptop, hold a meeting, use the Wi-Fi. Everything is switched on, the joint humming with a constant backwash of white noise, a hollow threnody from an ambient MP3 that bends between a murmur and a howl. Listen close and beats emerge from the ether, as if a prisoner in a distant galaxy is banging on a pipe in their cell. Then the whole thing starts to resonate, as the fans in the rack server kick in. It is a start-up, after all.

Pattison's work, the result of an 18-month residency in London's Tech City, is less a replica or stage-set reconstruction than a continuation of the thing itself, seamless with what it reproduces. Even when there's no one here, everything ticks over as it should, the Bitcoin miners delving away in their Bitcoin mines up on the shelf. It doesn't look like anyone has sat at the table running down the centre of the gallery for a long time. It is covered in whorls of dust, an electro-magnetic storm of shed skin, sebum and environmental particles, attracted by static. The dust patinates the new, soiled merely by its presence in the world. Soiled, too, by ours, with our leaky, scabrous bodies. Perhaps that is why everyone has gone. We are unclean.



Dead zone ... a long table gathers dust. Photograph: Andy Keate, Chisenhale Gallery/Courtesy of the artist; mother's tankstation limited, Dublin; Helga Maria Klosterfelde, Berlin; and Labor, Mexico

The Dexion shelving racks, lining a side wall, look pretty empty. They've got the cabling in, and there's some wired-up stuff winking away. Over our heads, flat, hovering, suspended rectangles and squares of pure white light go on and off. Rhomboids and chevrons of light reflect on the long table, glint on the shelving, smear on rippled polythene draped over chairs and freestanding walls, sway over corrugated plastic and on the peel-off protective film that still hasn't been removed from various surfaces.

It also reflects on transparent Euro stacking containers, on a number of replica Eames chairs, on the edges and faces of routers and relay switches, the polythene-covered beanbags, the glossy surfaces of leaves sprouting from indoor plant-holders, and the bulbous air-filled cells of weightless packaging that sit, instead of a living human presence, on the retro-repro modernist chairs.

“ Looking down at a screen set into a table, I can only see myself from the rear. The camera is somewhere behind me ”

My head feels like an inflated envelope. The light reflects off the lenses of my glasses and the screen of my smartphone, but seated and looking down on to a screen set into the under-surface of a transparent table, I can only see myself from the rear. The camera is somewhere behind me, relaying my movements with a few seconds' delay. Time yaws and stretches. I'm an empty echo of myself beneath these blank planes of light that begin to remind me of a futurist and suprematist past, and the hanging planes of colour in the work of Hélio Oiticica.

Being reminded of other art doesn't really help or take us anywhere. Where we are has an aesthetic borne of 1970s New York lofts, cybercafes and the shared workspaces of the global tech industry. Not that you would ever find me in such joints, not by choice anyway, although when I worked as a factory cleaner and an office messenger boy I did get a kick out of the atmosphere in those spaces after hours. There aren't any after-hours any more; business trundles on without end or break.



Sleepy time ... the yurt made of shelving units. Photograph: Andy Keate, Chisenhale Gallery/Courtesy of the artist; mother's tankstation limited, Dublin; Helga Maria Klosterfelde, Berlin; and Labor, Mexico

Time to lie down, on the beanbags beneath the framework of the Dexion yurt, among the plants that, Nasa has determined, will keep the air in space, or in a disaster zone, fresh and breathable. In orbit, can you buy a spider plant? In the wake of disaster, will there be rubber plants around? It is more like the naughty corner here, a sin-bin for the indolent, a time-out space for the hard of thinking.

The windows above, usually covered, give a view of sky and rooftops, chimneys and satellite dishes. As the smart-film on the glass switches into operation, the view fades to a blank and milky opacity. Now you see the world, now you don't. It is sleepy time. But is there any siesta in the 24-hour, zero-hour work regime? Should I do some melatonin, sip some caffeinated smartwater and pop some Noopept, hyperventilate or just kill myself without ado? It would free up some meat-space and oxygen for my anonymous co-workers, if there are any.

“ Should I Skype someone, send an email or tweet my isolation? A scream for help undoubtedly wouldn't do

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I feel as though I'm only partially here myself, but then that's the way things go in Silicon Valley, at Silicon Roundabout, and down in Silicon Gulch. Wish I could get the techno-lingo right. They're all laughing at me behind their little screens, watching the lab rat in the maze. Maybe I should Skype someone, send an email or tweet my isolation to my several thousand followers, but I suspect they're all bots. I need an Artificial intelligence to watch over me. Traditional cries for help, a yelp or a scream, wouldn't do. I'd probably have to learn to code. Is my AI angel up to the job?

On screens, cameras wander around inverted Docklands workspaces, circle like goldfish before the curtain windows at dusk, travel miles of ducting and follow the neural pathways and bundled arteries of the new information economy. We wander empty meeting rooms, Damien Hirst-like office cubicles and dead zones. There is no sign of human presence, only a promise and a residue.

There is a projection of one of those chairs on a flapping curtain of draped polythene. It looks like an x-ray. After a while, the chair collapses, melting before my eyes. In a little gurgling tank on a shelf, lumps of grey muck litter the bottom. Look closely and they are tiny scale figures of humans extruded from grey plastic, as though the rendered-down left-behind of human end-times.

A poem done up with cable-ties, a syntax of conjoined euro-adapter plugs, slung together with cabling and ducts, jack sockets and electrical tape, Pattison's User, Space employs the forms and language of technology. The list of works is a litany of brand-name packaging systems and



Wired-up stuff ... cables and shelves. Photograph: Andy Keate, Chisenhale Gallery/Courtesy of the artist; mother's tankstation limited, Dublin; Helga Maria Klosterfelde, Berlin; and Labor, Mexico

hardware, components and accessories. It is a journey through hackspaces, homogenous co-working spaces, Amazon logistic centres and no-tech zones.

It is much like inhabiting a William Gibson novel I know I shall never finish. I have to keep restarting, only to stall again, and again. I'll never get to the bottom of it. We are becoming used to the realistic or even fully functional art installation, but how real is real and where does it end? Maybe it doesn't, and it no longer matters.

Yuri Pattison's User, Space is at the Chisenhale Gallery, London, until 28 August.