

The Darkest Hour at 3am: a personal letter

Dear Sleepy Head,

The Darkest Hour at 3am began as a personal research into my decade-long insomnia, slowly evolving into a curatorial project. When translating this research into an exhibition, I asked myself how best to present the experience of insomnia alongside the artworks. The conclusion was obvious: an immersive, non-white cube setting infused with theatricality. The architecture of the exhibition itself is a critical component of the project, essential for delivering its methodology, and I am truly in awe to have worked with spatial designer Angela Pang to bring this vision to life. The concept is to guide you through three rooms—the Insomniac Room, the Treatment Room, and the Sleepland—that trace a journey from the detrimental effects of techno-capitalism on sleep toward the restorative potential of mindful relaxation and sleep hygiene.

This experimental, environmental approach bridges the gap between conceptual understanding and personal application, empowering you to explore and internalise strategies for sleep awareness. Sensory elements within each room enhance the thematic cohesion and storytelling, guiding you through a transformative experience that culminates in a renewed appreciation for healthy sleep habits. Crucially, as is clearly evident, our dependence on digital technology is one of the primary causes of sleeplessness and is only deepening. Instead of rejecting its omnipresence, this exhibition questions the possibility of coexistence. *The Darkest Hour at 3am* does not offer a definitive solution but instead explores the awareness and alternative possibilities of sleep in the digital age.

The Beginning of the Research: The Insomniac Room

I am always tired due to my thalassemia trait, but being tired doesn't mean I can fall asleep easily or soundly. My insomnia has many sources: the anxiety of adulthood, a habit of spiralling thoughts, and occasionally, revenge bedtime procrastination. Insomnia is a vicious cycle; bad sleep at night leads to poor performance the next day. I blame my capitalist mindset for the guilt I feel about being unproductive. As the syndrome worsened each day, I procrastinated more and my desire to be productive diminished. Eventually, my apartment became a war zone: takeaway containers piled up in the kitchen, dirty clothes scattered on the floor, all illuminated by the constant glow of flashing screens and background noise. This domestic collapse is the direct inspiration for the Insomniac Room—a physical manifestation of the chaotic lifestyle that severe sleep deprivation breeds.

The Insomniac Room is a studio apartment that serves as the exhibition's entry point. It confronts visitors with a meticulously cluttered and visually overwhelming environment, representing the loss of control and self-care that accompanies a hyper-connected, always-on lifestyle. This room symbolises the internal psychological turmoil of an anonymous

insomniac. The pervasive presence of digital technology—a computer, TV, and tablet—emphasises how these devices blur the boundaries between our personal and professional lives. This constant state of stimulation makes it impossible to unplug, directly contributing to heightened anxiety, stress, and insomnia. Subtle audio elements, like the faint hum of electronics or the ping of notifications, complete the sensory overload, mimicking the relentless mental chatter that keeps you awake.

The immersion begins with Kate Mitchell's *IN TIME* (2015). In this 24-hour video, she clings to a clock's minute hand, acting out a full daily cycle. Appearing as a maintenance worker, she highlights the relentless pressure of a society where labour is attuned to time's constant passing. If *IN TIME* projects non-stop capitalism's core ideology, then Ben Grosser's *Stuck in the Scroll* (2024) analyses its colonisation of our waking moments. This net art, which monitors Grosser's compulsive TikTok scrolling, exposes how the infinite scroll hijacks our brain's reward system with dopamine hits, creating a trance-like, ghostly state where we forget the past and cannot imagine a future. This repetitive, ghost-like existence is unsettlingly manifested in Tobias Bradford's *Dog* (2024). A robust kinetic dog twitches in a mechanical sleep, its motion mirroring our compulsive daily rhythms. It visualises the “work like a dog” ethos while evoking the uncanny vulnerability of a dreaming animal, blurring the line between rest and death. It is a perfect metaphor for the insomniac's private, inescapable struggle.

Acknowledge My Sleep Habit: The Treatment Room

I learned that unless clinically diagnosed, sleep is mostly influenced by external factors. But knowing this and acting on it are two different things. For years, I understood the problem intellectually, yet remained trapped in the cycle. My determination to finally have a good night's sleep was, ironically, fueled by the very capitalist mindset that contributed to my insomnia—I needed to perform as expected. This unavoidable perception is engraved in my mind.

So, I laid out a set of rules, a strict regime I (try to) follow: no caffeine after 4pm; no naps, or if necessary, ones that do not exceed 45 minutes before 4pm; in bed by 11pm and awake at 6:30am; exercise regularly to boost stamina—the list goes on. These loosely bound rules formalise a struggle I have negotiated for years. I consider this realisation an acceptance of reality: knowing there is a problem and trying to fix it. It is a transitional stage that can be viewed as a treatment, a temporary yet strict and almost brutal process, like visiting a clinic. This treatment is a platform to understand and relearn the act of sleep. It is the direct inspiration for a room that operates as a sleep clinic, where care and attention are key to acknowledging the urgency of sleep deprivation.

This eerie, isolated transitional space invites you to become a patient. Seated in a medical armchair, you experience three low-situated video works. This undisruptive journey promotes

mindfulness, offering meditations on the very technologies and rhythms that disrupt our rest.

Yoojin Lee's *Artificial Stars* (2018) traces the interdependence of light, visibility, and activity. Juxtaposing digital temporalities with a history of artificial light, it points to the imposed rhythms that disrupt sleep in a world without pause. In contrast, Cleo Miao's *In the Wudang Mountains* (2020) presents an intimate portrait of sleep's collapse. A leaky roof in her Boston apartment escalated into a brutal lived experiment when the landlord removed the roof entirely. This violation of shelter triggered a dreamlike state, blurring waking and sleeping. In response, Miao developed her own prescription: the disciplined ritual of Kung Fu, learned from a booklet. This act of creating order through movement became her personal treatment to reassemble a broken daily cycle.

James Raphael Tabbush's *Long Night (Beryl, Speak)* (2025) is the final piece in this therapeutic triptych, a direct portal into the cognitive chaos of insomnia. A puppet jerks between lifelessness and life on a bed, embodying the body's exhaustion at war with the mind's hyperactivity. The audio track is a cacophony of the subconscious—manifesting as beams of light, unintelligible emotions, and a recurring cognitive earworm. The work masterfully charts the psychic effects of anxiety, not its sources, providing a vivid diagnosis of the internal landscape that must be navigated for rest.

The three video works in the Treatment Room function as a sequenced diagnosis, moving from the macro to the micro to dissect the anatomy of sleeplessness. Together, they form a comprehensive therapeutic triptych. This deliberate curation moves the "patient" from understanding the broad context of their ailment, to recognising its personal impact, and finally, to confronting its innermost reality. The journey through the Treatment Room is thus a process of moving forward, preparing the visitor for the release and rest offered in the final space, the Sleepland.

The Final Destination: The Sleepland

I tried "everything" to fall asleep. Tracking my sleep revealed a tangible difference between seven and nine hours, and I learned that females often require more sleep for memory maintenance. This knowledge was empowering. While not a perfect success story, I no longer panic. Sleeplessness is now a signal that something in my waking life needs attention. This enlightening journey has allowed me to understand myself more deeply.

This project is about the act of sleep itself—an essential state we cannot escape. We are compelled to pause reality and enter the Sleepland, where time stretches. This final destination is a space of resolution. Here, the artworks are meditative and therapeutic, yet self-aware. They form a spectrum of explorations into the possibility of rest, each investigating a different method to "return to sleep."

Elisa Giardina Papa's *Labor of Sleep, Have you been able to change your habits??* (2018) embodies this therapeutic function. Its nine-day series of video exercises mimics self-improvement apps as a guided ritual to recalibrate the body's rhythm. Woven into this framework is a critical thread; the work is self-aware, examining how even our tools for rest are part of a system that quantifies sleep, acknowledging the paradox of digital devices as both the cause and proposed remedy for our restlessness.

TCOY's *Fruityloop* (2025) translates a personal sanctuary into a meditative installation. Inspired by the hypnotic lull of a car ride—the artist's sole gateway to rest—it recreates this sensory trigger. The work repurposes the chaotic grammar of Instagram stories to mirror fading memory. A nocturnal journey plays through a rearview window, its compressed rhythm mimicking a mind processing the past whilst drifting into sleep. Behind, a mirrored wall with a fragmented vinyl decal presents decontextualised images as a visual lexicon. Together, they construct a fragile architecture for sleep, making tangible the surrender of the self to external monotony.

Karen Yu's *Only through repetition, through only repetition* (2025) introduces analogue discipline. Using a baby mobile—an object that can over-stimulate instead of soothe—she explores the paradox of routine. The work argues that sleep is a skill honed through daily practice. A motion sensor that activates only in your presence frames stillness as a discipline, proposing that we can coexist with technology by mastering our relationship to it.

In *Sleepland*, the return to sleep is not a single solution but a spectrum of possibilities: the digital ritual, the sensory trigger, and the practised discipline of letting go. And so, in the quiet of the *Sleepland*, the frantic chase for a solution gives way to a more profound understanding.

The journey through these rooms—from chaos, to treatment, to this final contemplation—does not end with a perfect lullaby, but with a quieter mind. It does not end with the guarantee of sleep, but with the peace to meet its absence, without panic. *The Darkest Hour at 3am* is my map of that fragile peace, an invitation to acknowledge the struggle and the first step toward soundless sleep.

I hope you have a good sleep.

“Former” Insomniac,
Alberta Leung

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