

WEEKEND

February 17, 1984

Four Singular Versions of a Room of One's Own

LONDON — The simple idea was to give each of four English artists a room of his own. The idea became more complicated when no space could be found to display the results. The London department store Liberty's came through with part of its top floor, a natural space in view of the store's long interest in design and the passion of its founder, Arthur Lasenby Liberty, for the arts (in addition to being a respected retailer, Liberty was often, and gratifyingly, mistaken for the Prince of Wales, later Edward VII).

The exhibition, "Four Rooms," which opened to wide attention last week, will be at Liberty's until March 10, when it begins an eight-month tour of provincial galleries. It has

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nothing to do with interior decoration but is the response of four well-chosen artists to a limited space (roughly 20 by 20 feet, or 6 by 6 meters), ranging from a live-in sculpture by Anthony Caro to a grim hospital room by Richard Hamilton.

The abstract painter Howard Hodgkin describes his room, the only one the visitor can actually sit in, as having a deliberately claustrophobic and rich appearance. "Sadly, because it is in a public place, nothing very exciting can go on in it," he adds. The painter and performance artist Marc Camille Chaimowicz describes his room, the only one that a visitor cannot enter but must look at across a barrier, as "a frozen frame from an imaginary movie."

"Four Rooms" is an Arts Council of Great Britain exhibition devised by Michael Regan, who wearily says he hopes his next show will consist of tiny paintings hung on walls. Regan came to the Arts Council from the Victoria and Albert Museum and has tried ever since to interest the Arts Council in the applied, as well as the fine, arts. "Four Rooms" seemed a way of getting the twain to meet and Regan chose four artists who had used interiors as their subjects.

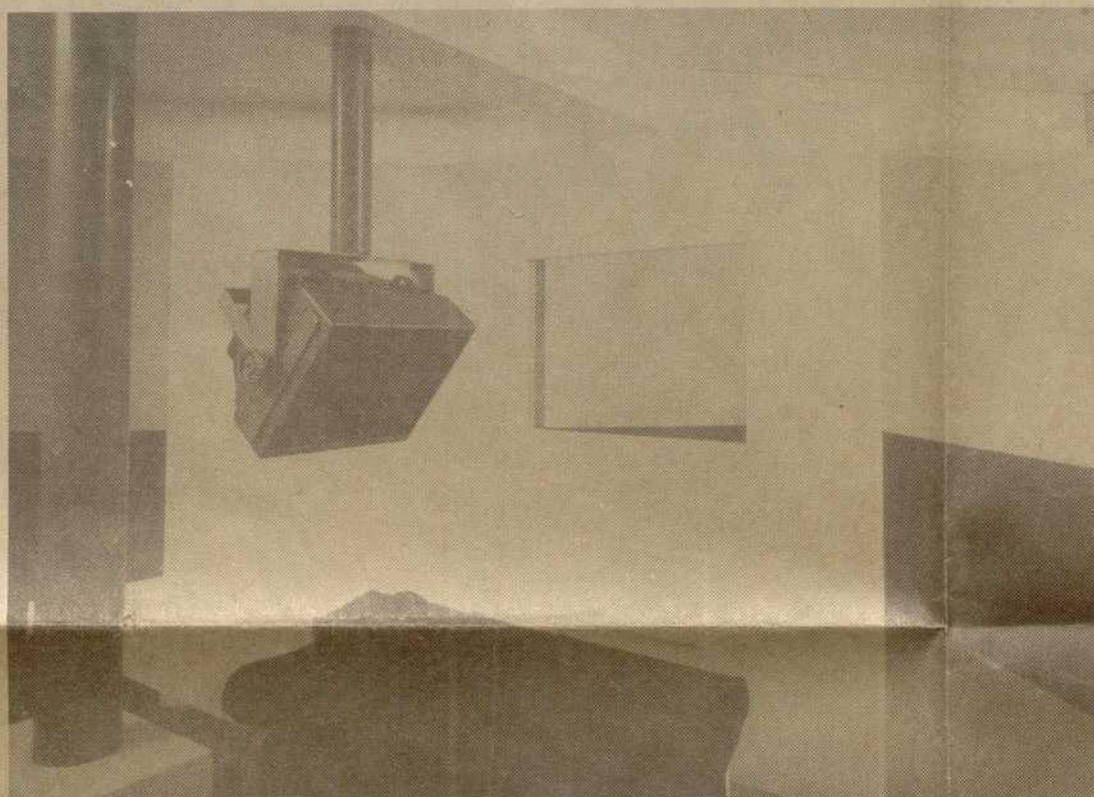
"Hodgkin's paintings are abstract but they're all about the psychological drama that goes on in a room, represented in pure color," Regan says. "With Chaimowicz there is a clearer link because he does performances in rooms and uses his own flat as an art work. In this room he has detached himself."

"Hamilton has depicted rooms in drawing and prints and did an interior for the 'This Is Tomorrow' show in 1956. Caro is a sculptor who in recent years has been working on table pieces that look as if they have chambers and as if they could be much larger. His is the only room you can walk around and into."

Caro's room is a jauntily jumbled tower that scrapes Liberty's ceiling and can be climbed into by lithe visitors who must put on special slippers so as not to mar the Japanese oak finish. Caro, who has not worked in wood before, says he found the sawing and hammering of his assistants awfully noisy.

"This is like sculpture turned inside out," he says, watching visitors disappear into his piece. "I don't think we appreciate enough the space we're in. That's what sculpture's all about."

Richard Hamilton, 62, is with Caro the senior artist in the show and the most experienced at making interiors and in installing exhibitions. While the others found room-making much harder than expected, Hamilton shrewdly chose mostly ready-made objects and



Richard Hamilton's room.

is the only one of the four to consider how his room will look when filled with visitors (merely sinister when empty, it should be totally alarming when full).

"I thought something somber was required," Hamilton says. "It was clear that Hodgkin would be decorative, Chaimowicz poetic, Caro sculptural." His own room was inspired by his having had his stomach X-rayed.

A pop artist who first became known for his collage, "Just What Is It That Makes Today's Homes So Different, So Appealing?" People still connect him with Pop. "I am afraid as I get older that I will be left behind," Hamilton says. He is right up to date in the pessimism his room shows.

"I feel the room is very pessimistic in that it is representative of its time. We have been going through 10 years of depression — the '50s and '60s optimism is over."

Hamilton's coolly worked-out room features a hospital bed with what looks like an X-ray machine over the patient. It turns out to be a television screen on which Margaret Thatcher endlessly, and soundlessly, speaks. The inspiration, says Hamilton, was the bleak, seedily clinical style of the present Establishment. "The essential characteristic of such a space is the way it implies an impartial energy: if we wait our turn patiently, we will be given the treatment." For all its sickness, the room is, says Hamilton, inspired by passionate anger.

By contrast, Marc Camille Chaimowicz's room is a fantasy space, part sanctuary, part threat. The youngest and least known of the four artists, Chaimowicz approached the job with surefooted intensity. "I am the one who had the least to lose and the most to gain. It was my first opportunity to work on such a level," he says.

His room, mostly in gray, is in part a homage to such designers as Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier and Eileen Gray. Its most startling feature is a

hopelessly tilted desk called "On Decline," on which Chaimowicz says one can, with some difficulty, write, though not type.

"It is both a piece of sculpture and functional," Chaimowicz says. "It is a metaphor for the 'Four Rooms' project — the duality of the fine arts and the applied arts trying to meet."

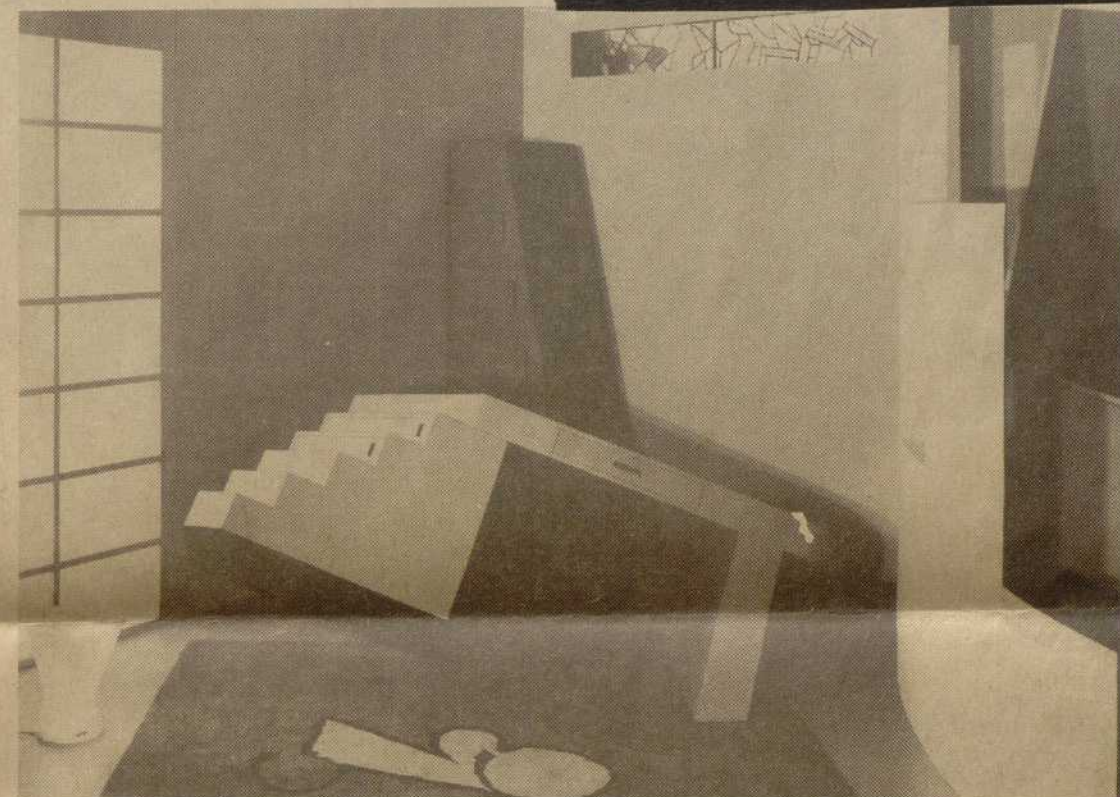
Since he had a domestic space in mind, Chaimowicz added a colored slide sequence of the young and typewriterless couple who might inhabit his room. Evidently they spend a lot of time on the telephone because he also has what he calls a telephone couch surmounted by an arch. "The arch protects it and is threatening," says Chaimowicz. He is slim, with delicately outstanding ears. "It's the Fall," he enigmatically adds.

Like Chaimowicz, Howard Hodgkin, the high flyer of the group with a growing international reputation, has had his furniture and fabrics manufactured and offered for sale. The lesson he has learned, he says, is just the opposite of what the show intended: "Designers are designers and artists are artists," he grimly says.

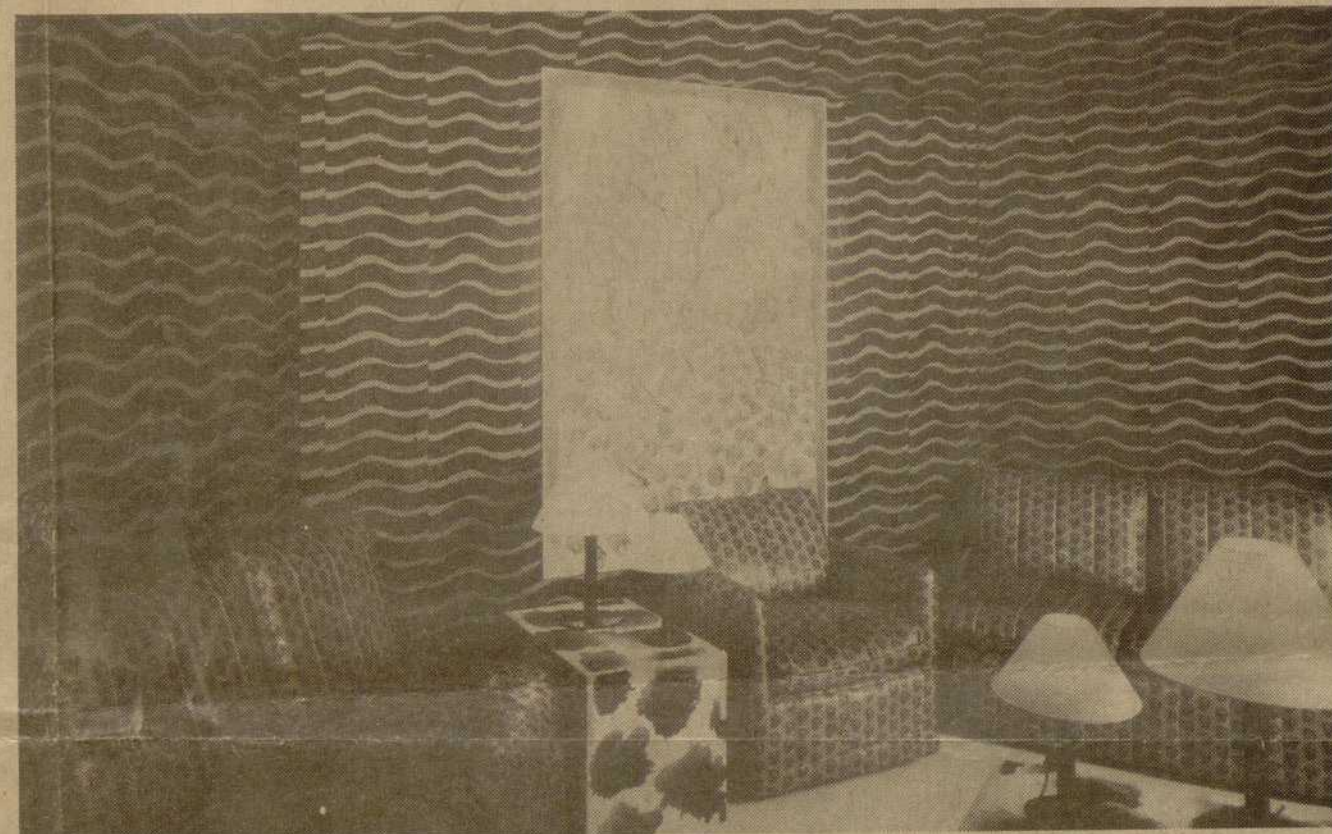
In his impoverished days, Hodgkin did a bit of interior decorating. Poverished now, he has done and redone his Georgian country house out of a spirit of perfectionism and is fascinated by interior decoration.

"I think everyone is these days," People now care more about decor than clothes, he says. "Interior design is not concerned with being rich — anyone can do it. This show is probably very well timed because everyone cares about where they live."

Hodgkin's space has eight fine lamps of his own design and is packed with chintz-covered furniture. "I want it to have a claustrophobic, rich appearance. It's not a real room, it's a fantasy room. It is not a work of art. Some of these rooms are, mine is not. It has nothing to do with real life, it has nothing to do with art."



Marc Camille Chaimowicz's room.



Howard Hodgkin's room.

Could he live in it? "Not for a minute."

Hodgkin says he wanted his room to be inviting, and it is. His pride, and now his sorrow, is the handsome patinated bronze

lamps. "The manufacturer said I had made a Model T Ford. Unfortunately they are priced like works of art. So instead of a Model T, I've made a Rolls-Royce."

"I've always wanted a lamp that looks like a

lamp — you could use these everywhere," he says sadly. "I'm proud of them. Lighting is a pain for everyone, it can ruin an interior. After sex and money," he says, "it is the biggest pain."