

Sensory Deprivation

Text: [Till Bödeker](#) | Section: [Articles by Artists](#)

Abstract: Till Bödeker explains the concept and the scientific references of his work THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX, which consists of an isolation tank in which sensory deprivation can be experienced.

This article includes a field report, a description of the artistic concept and a video. The text explains the scientific references of my project and the video captures a performance that took place during the yearly exhibition of the *Kunstakademie Düsseldorf* in February 2020, in collaboration with Konstantinos Angelos Gavrias.



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX (2020). Photo: Till Bödeker.

The concept of *THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX* is based on a self-built isolation tank (made from a wine barrel) and the experience of sensory deprivation, i.e. the withdrawal of all sensory stimuli. To achieve this, one goes into the tank, lies down and drifts in warm salt water for a certain time. In a scientific experiment several test persons would make this experience and report about it. In the art context, I was the only one to lie down in the tank so far. Therefore I will describe my individual experience as precisely as possible. I consider this as *part of the artistic work*:

Inside the tank

When you get inside the tank, everything turns black and silent. You lie down in the water, float and wait. Although the space is small, I do not feel constraint. I wonder what the perceptual category of space means at all in this place where there are no visible walls. Since the salt water is heated to body temperature, the perceived outer border of my body becomes blurred with the surroundings. My skin sensors can no longer feel where my arms end spatially. At the same time I become very aware of the position of my limbs in relation to each other, which I try to bring into a balanced position. While my arms and legs slide apart as if by magic and come to a rest after half a meter distance from the trunk, I am surprised by the difficulty of finding a balanced neck position. I first have to learn how far back I should stretch my head, because – unlike in a bed – there is no more noticeable resistance. I occupy myself with my lying position for a few more minutes until the movements and small adjustments stop being necessary.

It is a truly sheltered and self-contained state. My stress level, which is always constantly high during the hectic week of the Rundgang, suddenly drops drastically. There are no more tasks I have to fulfill, no more conversations I have to be ready for and no more expectations or constraints. It amazes me how simple and pleasant everything feels. Despite my increasing relaxation I do not become tired, but more attentive, focused and calm. I had imagined this experience to be much more dramatic or existential.

I begin to think about the concept of my work and enter into a longer stream of consciousness, which can only be roughly described in retrospect. Starting with the question of whether it is possible and what it means to think outside, I first of all examine the content of the statement “THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX”, its various meanings and its function as a connection between outside and inside. This connection leads me associatively to the philosophical thought experiment [Brain in a vat](#), which also deals with a famous cognition problem. Examining the relationship between my tank and [Brain in a vat](#) seems potentially interesting, I think, but postpone it until later. Now the topics are constantly changing, sometimes becoming more fragmented and detailed, sometimes more general and fundamental; they interweave in an interesting way. As time goes by my thoughts revolve more in a way of mental patterns and less logical and related to concrete contents. Unlike in dreams, this perceptual state does not seem to me to be condensed and arbitrary, but feels rather very liberating and boundless. It's as if my consciousness were to thoroughly clean up my brain and at the same time to observe how this cleaning up feels.

The gong sounds after an hour and I slowly get ready to get up. When I get out of the tank I am a bit sensitive to the light and the overall noise level. Nevertheless, the deep serenity I experienced in the tank lasts and remains for the rest of the day.



THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX (2020). Photo: Till Bödeker.

The isolation tank

The neurophysiologist John C. Lilly invented the isolation tank in 1954 at the *National Institute of Mental Health* (NIMH). Lilly wanted to isolate the human brain from external stimuli in order to draw conclusions about the functioning of the human consciousness. The background of his research is, among other things, the assumption of the psychologist Donald Hebb, based on earlier isolation experiments, that the brain is dependent on constant stimulation from the environment. Without such stimulation, the sensory regions of the brain would begin to “deal with themselves” and, for example, produce hallucinations; in contrast to Hebb’s psychological approach, Lilly did not consider these effects to be “psychopathological” hallucinations, but located them in the “area of ‘normal mental processes’, but with an expanded view.”^[1] The tank served him as an experimental laboratory for self-observation (introspection), partly with the aid of psychedelic substances. In the process, he also made spiritual experiences of which he reported in detail in books such as *The Center of the Cyclone* or *The Deep Self*, which met with greater popular scientific interest, e.g. in the New Age movement.

A fundamental problem in the exploration of altered states of consciousness or phenomenal consciousness is the so-called epistemic asymmetry. This problem consists in the fact that knowledge about consciousness can be acquired from the inside and the outside: From the inside means access through self-experience e.g. of Qualia (individual instances of subjective, conscious experience), i.e. the perspective of the first person. In contrast to this, the objectifying external perspective is obtained by empirical access to the object.^[2] Due to these two different ways of access, it is unclear which has the better claim to knowledge in case of a contradiction. Such a contradiction occurs, for example, when a subjectively experienced state of consciousness does not correspond to the measured brain waves, or

the existing knowledge about their relationship. The confrontation and interaction of these two fundamentally different methods is of essential interest for consciousness research.^[3]

The concept

The structure of *THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX* is very similar: while the experience of isolation as a core component of the work can only be experienced from the inside, the tank itself can only be perceived sensually from the outside. Both perspectives refer to each other; it is not possible to grasp the work of art in both ways at the same time. Nevertheless, they should conceptually be understood together, which is what the title *THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX*, which can be read on the outside of the tank, encourages one to do. Its design is an ironic allusion to *Pushed As If & Left As Is* by the conceptual artist Lawrence Weiner.



Isolation and singing bowls

As a variation of my project Konstantinos Angelos Gavrias used therapy bowls (singing bowls that come from a music therapy background) to test the effect of sound on my experience of isolation. Hearing Konstantinos's music, my focus shifted from my own thoughts to the sound experience as an auditory and physical experience. Since the sound of the bowls was also transmitted through the water, it became tangible, so to speak, which I subsequently documented in handwriting and drawings. It is planned to conduct further experiments under different conditions.

The work will be shown again this year at the exhibition *74th International Bergische Kunstaussstellung* in the Kunstmuseum Solingen (22.09. to 01.11.2020).

▷ [Solingen Museum of Art: Press Release](#)

Picture above the text: *THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX* (2020). Picture: Till Bödeker.

[1] John C. Lilly: *The Deep Self*, Basel 1988, S. 75.

[2] <https://www.spektrum.de/lexikon/neurowissenschaft/epistemische-asymmetrie/3611>

[3] Dieter Vaitl: *Veränderte Bewusstseinszustände: Grundlagen – Techniken – Phänomenologie*. Stuttgart 2012, S. 13.

Tags

1. aesthetic experience
2. Aesthetics
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