

# Primal Experience: Works of Art as Artificial Wombs

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## Abstract

The exploration of technical artworks termed "artificial wombs" involves physically placing the viewer inside the work, incorporating touch, vibration, body position, and temperature experiences. This immersive approach aims to evoke primal sensations akin to being in a safe womb. Examining projects like "Nemo Observatory," "Sound Capsule," and "Haptic Field," where participants encounter artificial environments, the study delves into psychological drivers of tactile and bodily immersion. While some projects aim for calming environments, others introduce surprising disturbances. Notably, these differ from VR experiences, emphasizing a physical separation from surroundings. Examples like "Optofonica Capsule," "Iso-phone," and "Waterwalk" engage kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses, challenging participants physically and mentally. The study explores the genuine, sensory "inside" experience in these artworks, distinct from metaphorical immersion.

## Keywords

Artificial womb, interactive art, immersion, poly-sensorial environment, psychoanalysis, birth trauma.

## Introduction

I am referring to a format of technical artworks that could be called "artificial wombs". Their common denominator is the physical placement of the viewer inside the work, so that besides the visual and auditory sense, touch, vibration - body position, temperature experience and other sensations are added. Through this, the viewer gets an experience that can be classified as the most primal - being in a safe womb. My job would be to delve into the psychological drivers of this tactile and bodily immersion.

However, of course, these are not always calming and relaxing projects, but can present a safe environment with some surprising disturbances. Here I mention the following: "Nemo Observatory" (2009) [1] by Lawrence Malstaf, "Sound Capsule" (2008) [2] by Satoshi Morita and "Haptic Field" (2016) by Chris Salter, TeZ and Ian Hattwick.[3] In all of them, an attempt is made to achieve the participant's disconnection from the habitual physical environment and to achieve a multisensory surround with an artificial environment.



Figure 1. Lawrence Malstaf "Nemo observatory" (2009), <https://lawrencemalstaf.com/work/nemo.html>.

"Nemo Observatory" is a barrel-like cylindrical environment with a diameter of 3-4 meters. The participant sits in the armchair in the middle of it. Pressing the button on the handle activates the powerful fans, as a result of which a vortex of polystyrene foam particles begins around him. Gradually, the "storm" surrounding the participant becomes more and more dense, but being located in the eye of the tornado, so to speak, the viewer remains untouched by the particles.



Figure 2. Satoshi Morita "Sound Capsule" (2008), <https://archive.aec.at/prix/showmode/12770/>.

Satoshi Morita's "Sound Capsule" resembles a giant slipper into which the viewer must crawl. There he gets various sound and vibrational experiences - the experience is multisensory. There are eight sound sources. The catalog

description of the work indicates that the viewer can feel as if inside someone else's body. Understandably, this refers to the prenatal experience.

"Haptic Field" by Chris Salter, TeZ and Ian Hattwick simulates the experience of a visually impaired person: the participant puts on glasses with frosted glass. The whole environment becomes blurred and foggy, but by touching and receiving tactile sensations from the suit with vibrating actuators, the user experiences objects and the environment as if from a state of "childlike oblivion", as the authors write. They also refer to the psychoanalytic effect of touch, as the project analyzes the contradiction between sight and touch in everyday communication. [4]

### Primal experience

In the interpretations of these examples, you can see a turn to popular psychoanalytic terminology, which tends to be used sometimes to explain the work in a more exciting way. On the other hand, the works are really motivated by those original emotions and unconscious primal experiences, which can be considered universal and also have a superficial layer, a sensory level: the work can be perceived without going into deep concepts and without reading explanations. But the aforementioned projects are different from the projects that we can perceive through 3D glasses and VR technology. The main difference between VR and the aforementioned projects is the creation of a specific physical environment, as a result of which the viewer is physically separated from the surroundings: placed in a lying position in a sleeping bag-like enclosure, a cylindrical room or dressed in a suit with vibrating modules - the viewer is detached from the surroundings.

"Optofonica Capsule" (2008) by TeZ (Maurizio Martinucci) could be mentioned where participant "climbs in" and experiences sound, visuals and vibrations. [5]

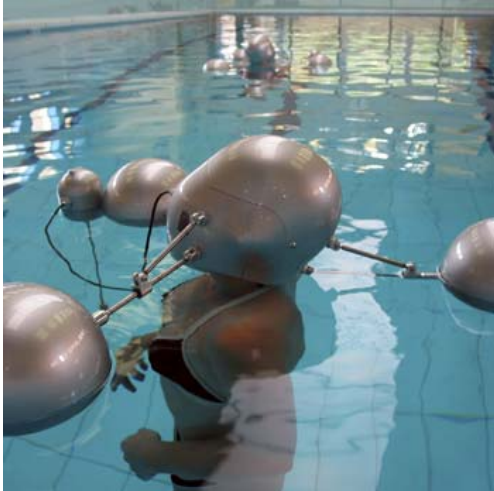


Figure 3. James Auger, Jimmy Loizeau, Stefan Agamanolis "Iso-phone" (2004), <https://web.media.mit.edu/~stefan/hc/projects/isophone/>.

The authors of "Iso-phone" (2004) are James Auger, Jimmy Loizeau, Stefan Agamanolis, [6] and the content of the work is telecommunications - it is a cross between a so-called relaxation bath (floatation tank) and a telephone. The participant dives into a pool with water at body temperature, which makes one forget the surrounding sensations.

Jeffrey Shaw's "Waterwalk" (1969) [7] suits as an example where the participants walk in plastic tetrahedrons, or the analogue of the same work, "Waterwalk Tube". [8] In these projects, the viewer's kinesthetic and proprioceptive senses are fully engaged.

In Luc Courchesne's project "The Visitor: Living by Number" (2001), [9] the viewer has to stick his head into a hemispherical round screen where he sees a panoramic image, cut off from the rest of the world and seeing only an electronic image. The viewer can move by saying the numbers 3, 6, 9 and 12 with his voice.

### Difference from metaphorical immersion

There are several projects where the author has planned for the participant to be physically present, to place the work in the physical body. And this is not in the same sense as being in an installation environment is also "inside", but where the viewer's body is put in a demanding position, where he has to achieve some goal together with the work.

In these works, the location "inside" the work is real, not as a metaphorical "immersion", as a sensory capture. The viewer is inside the machinery.

### References

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## Biography

**Raivo Kelomees**, PhD (art history), is an artist, art historian and new media researcher. He studied psychology, art history and design in Tartu University and the Academy of Arts in Tallinn. He is senior researcher at the Fine Arts Faculty at the Estonian Academy of Arts and professor at the Pallas University of Applied Sciences. Kelomees is author of *Surrealism* (Kunst Publishers, 1993) and article collections *Screen as a Membrane* (Tartu Art College proceedings, 2007) and *Social Games in Art Space* (EAA, 2013). His doctoral thesis is *Postmateriality in Art. Indeterministic Art Practices and Non-Material Art* (Dissertationes Academiae Artium Estoniae 3, 2009). Together with Chris Hales he edited the collection of articles *Constructing Narrative in Interactive Documentaries* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014). In collaboration with Varvara Guljajeva and Oliver Laas he edited the collection of articles *The Meaning of Creativity in the Age of AI* (EKA Press, 2022).