



RESEARCH PROJECT

„...each grows stronger when nourished by the other.“

Interview with Till Bödeker and Katrin Lohe at the ZERO foundation

“Seeing, hearing and feeling - phenomena in nature, science and art” - the ZERO foundation will pay attention to this topic in the coming years. The research focuses on bringing the future, present and past together. The historical knowledge from the ZERO period becomes the input and trigger for new art processes. The ZERO foundation is supported by a research traineeship on the part of the Ministry of Culture and Science of North Rhine-Westphalia (Ministerium für Kultur und Wissenschaft des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen), thanks to the financial support from the E.ON Stiftung. The foundation was able to win the MIT Museum Studio and Compton Gallery of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Cambridge (MIT), MA, USA - where Seth Riskin now succeeds Otto Piene - and the State Art Academy (Staatliche Kunstakademie) in Düsseldorf as cooperation partners. In response to an advertisement in the academy, 43 art students had applied to participate. Six artists were invited to the international collaboration:

Margareta Bartelmess, Till Bödeker, Yunju Lee, Sean Mullan, Johannes Raimann, Christoph Thormann.

The artistic practices of the participants are just as diverse as their references to ZERO art. At this point we would like to introduce the participants to you on a monthly basis.

Till Bödeker was born in Düsseldorf in 1991. In addition to studying philosophy and literature at Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf, he began his studies at the Art Academy (Kunstakademie) in 2016 in Rita McBride's class.

Katrin Lohe: In the 1950s, the ZERO artists were very positive about science. A lot was happening in science and technology at the time. How do you feel about science? What do you think about that?

Till Bödeker: The science that generates new knowledge is fundamentally important to me. E.g. a black hole was "visualized" for the first time last year by a team of physicists. I found that very interesting. Of course, nowadays the whole field of Artificial Intelligence (AI) is important for the world - and thus for art. I would like to highlight GPT-3, an autoregressive language model that can independently continue to write all types of text. The resulting texts can hardly be distinguished from human texts. This could automatically generate millions of fake blogs and wage information wars. Other social and political consequences of this powerful technology are still difficult to overlook.

In your opinion, should an artist implement such socio-political issues artistically?

Yes, of course. That's part of what determines our present.

In addition to science and technology, nature was also very important to the ZERO artists. It was their source of inspiration. They tried to represent the energy that they extracted from this nature. One wanted to reach people anew with it. One wanted to draw attention to this energy and nature. How do you see their philosophy and this approach?

I find the art of ZERO fascinating and I can relate a lot to it. I like the idea of a radical new beginning and the turn towards aesthetic experience as part of the work - this relates also to my work "THINK OUTSIDE THE BOX", an isolation tank in which one experiences oneself. Aspects such as the contrast between materiality and immateriality can be translated into the present. But the general question about nature is different nowadays: Heinz Mack's installations in pristine and limitless natural spaces certainly also work in times of climate change, but would inevitably be confronted with the transience of nature.

The ZERO artists also wanted the viewer to become part of the work of art, e.g. in the „Lichtballette“ (“light ballets”) by Otto Piene or the „Lichtregen“ (“light rain”) by Günther Uecker. What do you think about that? How far should the viewer become part of a work of art?

At that time, it was definitely a new step by the ZERO artists that contributed to the expansion of the concept of the work, to include the viewer's experience as part of the work. I find that exciting and likeable. It can also be read as an anti-elitist approach that is directed against the conventions of an art that is supposed to be untouchable.

As an artist, do you enter the discourse directly with the visitors? Would you like to know the opinions of the viewers?

In discussions at exhibitions, I always like to offer my own interpretation of the work, or whatever I have in mind, but it has more of an offer character. But I always try to "look after" my work a little. My works are also a bit like children that I have to look after, which is sometimes exhausting, but mostly fun.

You first started to study philosophy and literature at Heinrich Heine University in Düsseldorf. How did it come about that you also started studying at the art academy (Kunstakademie)?

Exactly, I am also studying philosophy at the same time, e.g. at the class of Prof. Markus Schrenk. My aim at the beginning was to be able to understand the current philosophy discourse. First I dealt a lot with Kant, then with epistemology and the theory of science. But I wanted to study art beforehand and finally started my studies with the motivation to combine art and philosophy.

When did you start engaging with art and expressing yourself through it?

I have always expressed myself creatively through drawing, making music and programming. In my early 20s I also wrote short prose and practiced a lot of "automatic painting" in order to express unconscious states. Back then I had a completely different understanding of art than I do today.

Did this change come from studying philosophy? How did you get a different view of art?

Yes, that also has to do with my occupation with philosophy - with the differentiated view of reality that can be transferred to other areas. But I didn't really get into the study of art until I was accepted into Rita McBride's class. Through her I got to know my artistic possibilities, as well as through our numerous excursions. I'm thinking about the Bruce Nauman exhibition at Schaulager. I hardly knew him before and was completely enthusiastic about his humorous and clever artistic language.

Since I was concerned with art and philosophy, Rita McBride early on suggested the American artist Joseph Kosuth, one of the first conceptual artists to see art as an epistemological tool. That was exactly the interface I was looking for back then.

Do you have the feeling in general, but also for yourself, that you can express yourself in all directions and in any way with art? Does art have limits – and is there a definition of what „art“ must be like?

Nowadays it has become more exciting to have a closer look at what is going on around me, than to define the limits of art. Which discourses are there? Where do I want to start? Where do I think, I want to get involved? Perhaps now, I see the art world more as a world of "discourse". I find my position in dealing with the complexity of the present. I am not an artist who waits lonely in his studio for inspiration or brilliant ideas.

The very banal question arises: "When do you become an artist?". That is a question that is becoming increasingly difficult to answer.

You can pretty well describe how the art world is structured sociologically and who belongs to what. It is primarily about networks and power structures. Philosophically, I agree with Arthur C. Danto, who understands the concept of art in terms of institutional theory. On the other hand, I think it's important that access to the art world is as open as possible and not exclusive, for which you have to do something once you are part of it.

Let's get to your installation "Think Outside The Box": The work consists of an isolation tank in which sensory deprivation, i.e. the withdrawal of any sensory stimuli. One person lies in the tank while the observer "only" sees the box from the outside. The experience you have in the box cannot be noticed from the outside. What was your thought?

Viewed from the inside, you have an experience that is about your own mental states, which is maximally subjective. And from the outside, it is an intersubjective experience as different people see the same object. The contradictory nature of the connection between the experience within and the object visible from the outside is the artistic concept.

Actually, it was meant that anyone can go in, not just me. Unfortunately, this was not possible at the 74th Bergische Kunstausstellung in the Kunstmuseum Solingen in 2020, so visitors had to imagine the experience. Since November 26th, 2020 I have been showing the

tank again in the „Nails Projektraum“ as part of the “Test Chamber: Isolation” exhibition and this time I would like to enable anyone interested to experience the isolation themselves. Registration is via the Nails website - there are still a few places available in December: www.nails-room.com/till-boedeker

You yourself wrote down your experiences that you made in the box. And you also want the visitors to share their experiences with you when they were inside the box.

This is exactly the question I address in “Test Chamber: Isolation” in the Nails project room. I don't want to reveal how it is solved at this point.

Basically you are already on the threshold from art to science with your work of art, right?

It is already heading towards the limit, since the concept, like the experimental setup of the "isolation tank", comes from science and consciousness research from John C. Lilly. I basically treat the scientific concept like a readymade. For me it is a very exciting question whether the context shift enables a different, aesthetic (self) experience.

When does science become art? Or the other way around - when does art become science? Are there flowing transitions or can this be clearly defined? How is art and science related?

I believe that certain areas can be clearly defined. There is e.g. art that doesn't claim to have anything to do with science. Then there are artists who point to scientific theories or elements, as is the case with my tank. You can still keep the two areas apart to some extent, even if there is a connection or if there is a discourse. Another area is "Artistic Research". There art and science can - possibly - also coincide methodically, which, by the way, we are currently investigating at w / k - Zwischen Wissenschaft & Kunst, an online magazine: <https://wissenschaft-kunst.de/fragen-an-die-kuenstlerische-research/>

You also work for the online magazine w / k part time. How did that happen?

This was a coincidence: At the beginning of my art studies, the philosopher and editor Peter Tepe invited me to work for the magazine. And then I even became editor-in-chief. Today there are three of us running the magazine with circus researcher Anna-Sophie Jürgens. The aim of the magazine is to „work out the individual science-art connections, that exist among artists, in individual studies as precisely and comprehensively as possible and to develop the artistic concepts on which they are based, in order to enable a deeper understanding of these art forms.“ (Quote from " w/k in 5 minutes ") The special thing about the magazine is that we proceed in a differentiated and study-like manner, but publish articles that are understandable for everyone - I can recommend a visit to the website to anyone interested in the topic.