

# One on One, No One (Just me)

THE ALT PROJECT by Kaan Koyuncu - Stijn van Linden – Robbert Ritmeester

## 1. From exploring your theme, what phenomenon did you find interesting? How is it captured in your statement?

Our theme is “ALT”. Alt can be a great many things. A key on a keyboard, an abbreviation for alternative, or a low female singing voice in music. When we started out we were kind of lost. There were so many directions we could go. One direction we certainly didn’t want to take was the one that was associated with the keyboard. We could, however, gain inspiration from its workings. The Alt key is designed to modify or change, similar to the shift key. In terms of HCI (Human computer interaction) the alt function must be predictable. This can’t be the goal of an interesting installation.

1. The Alt-key as a predictable modifier key
2. Enigma machine: (un)predictable without a random function
3. Total randomness leads to meaningless interaction

We went off to brainstorm about modifications in daily life. The Alt-key is a modifier key; it is the stimulus after which one reality is replaced with the other. In daily life, we see changes in perception all the time. Very much like taking drugs and medicine, even a cup of coffee can change your view; an enormous problem that seemed unsolvable one day, can be completely gone the next day after the proverbial good night sleep. It happens all the time both in positive as in negative ways. We are interested in finding out what happens (perception, cognition) and how to reproduce the effects.

*Everything looks different after a good night sleep* is a very interesting cliché. The wonder of the phenomenon is that the world it-self hasn’t changed. All though still open for scientific inquiry, a "fact" in a scientific context is a generally accepted reality. These facts add to the body of knowledge. When, after elaborate research the conclusion is drawn that something has the value 6, it is also 6 in the evening and on Tuesdays. That is the purpose of science: it is not personal (it is not an opinion) and can be reproduced. Regular life is quite different. Six can, without changing, be perceived as 5 and even turn yellow. As a human, we can experience reality as dynamically as our character or mind-set allows us.

It is obvious that it wasn’t really an option to drug people who come to view our exhibition, and thus we tried thinking of a more natural means to chance someone view on reality. To change how someone views the world. For the project this led to the next step, that it is not about sensory fluctuations. It is about how altered (emotional) perception leads to an, matching, altered view of reality. Very much like a projection.

To try and change someone’s view on the world is no easy task. First, we asked ourselves: what is a view, and how do we change it? What do we want to change? We tried thinking of certain illusions to confront people with a different kind of reality. Italian psychologist Giovanni Caputo published an article in the journal *Perception* about a visual illusion where your own facial features reflected in the mirror seem to become distorted. This happens after a short while (10 minutes) of staring in a semi-dark room. The article was commented upon by Doctor researcher Mascha Linszen from UMC Utrecht Hersencentrum: *Perception is an interaction between the senses and the brain. As the input of the senses is less, the brains itself will fill in more.* It sent us in the direction of *the bored mind*. The

subject of sensory deprivation (Sendep) or perceptual isolation (the deliberate reduction or removal of stimuli from one or more of the senses).

As a prototype, we used a cardboard moving box with a hole inside. Inside the box there was a lamp, which you could turn on and off. The effect of sitting down with a box over your head is surprising. As soon as you turn on the light we got the idea that we were in a different room. Confined, cosy and safe. We were alone with our thoughts. We made the comparison with the brain in a vat. What if that was what it was like to be a brain in a vat? When you turn on the light you are inside the vat, alone and thinking. At the same time your body feels vulnerable; outside. As soon as you turn off the light you are in the outside world again. The dualities between mind /body and inside/outside can be felt as a quite strong sensation.

This idea started evolving into a more complex idea. Moving away from 'a projection' and towards a more interesting interaction set up (predictability versus randomness). We intended to connect two boxes with each other. Inside these boxes there is a screen, buttons, levers and other things to fiddle with that would trigger an event. These two boxes are then hooked up with a static miniature landscape. Somehow, we wanted to let the two people inside the box interact with each other and with the landscape. Although the interaction set up was solid, it needed a masterpiece in the centre to power it. We also realized that the process of changing your mind is continuous; knows a multitude of triggers and is very personal. Manipulating triggers with the intention of changing people's mind is within the standard toolbox of psychiatrists, marketers and artists. Making this the topic of the semester project would be placing the project within a very well-known perspective. After a month (!) of sketching, researching and talking we felt we were empty handed.

It had become complicated rather fast and Max advised us that it would be better to take a few steps back. Remember where all the ideas came from and maybe work back from the core again. And so, we did. We went back to the drawing board. Changing people's perception was no longer the goal. The deconstruction of thinking, as a phenomenon that came forward in the experiments with the head in the box became more prominent.

Is there a homunculus inside your head that talks to you? Is there a need for social context to think (or an absence)? How about opinions versus facts? Is your body part of your thinking? These questions are important when constructing a personal sense of reality and when (and how) to change your mind. The alt-theme is translated in our statement being:

### **Can you hear yourself think?**

#### **2. Why is this phenomenon interesting?**

It is a human phenomenon and it is personal. How do you construct your personal sense of reality? The focus of the question lies within the 'hearing' part: what or who do you listen to? For example, can you 'hear' your body thinking? Do you 'hear' as a scientist in agreement with other scientist about what constitutes a fact or as a 'politician' like Donald Trump when boldly stating that climate change is an opinion?

The statement is also interesting because it can not only be discussed but also made sensible and experienced. We find the head in a box phenomenon interesting because it was unexpected, but so very real. That something so simple can alter your view on a situation. It could be an experiment inspired by António Damásio who formulated the somatic marker hypothesis, a theory about how emotions and their biological underpinnings are involved in decision-making.

### 3. What is the work or installation, and how is it derived from the phenomenon/statement?

The installation is the result of a number of prototypes and consists of two parts connected by wires.

The first object is a scale model of a landscape with sand hills. In the back, there is a moon with pulsing light as if the result of atmospheric changes. Two camera's view the landscape and sent the live feed to the other object. The landscape is 80 centimetres wide by 60.

The second object consists of two chairs back to back, with an enclosed top part. Above each chair there is a hole in the enclosed top part where the visitor can stick his head inside. The visitors head is in his own, separate part of the enclosed top part. On the inside, at the end of the box there is a screen. These screen are turned inwards, so that when someone sits on the chair, this person looks at the screen. Inside each compartment there is a small light and a communication device. On the outside of the box there is a switch. Each visitor can control a (hotel) switch. This object is 204 centimetres wide; 200 cm high by 50 cm.

When the light in the box is off, the screen lights up and the person will look at a miniature version of dunes with half a moon hovering over it; a communication line between the two boxes is opened.

When the light in the box is on, the screen is black and the communication line is closed.

The installation represents the brain inside a vat versus the outside world idea. When the light is turned on you're all alone contemplating existence. When the light is turned off you can see the outside world and communicate with the other person.



### 4. Why does one experience (part of) the phenomenon/statement through the work?

We don't expect each visitor to experience the same. The statement *Can you hear yourself think?* is indeed mend as a personal question and it must lead to different results. The visitor probably does

not become aware of the statement. However, the design decisions that are made, are hinting in certain directions:

Putting your head inside brings you in an unusual situation (as mentioned before).

When the light in the box is off, one can see a landscape with a moon above it with pulsing light as a result of atmospheric changes. When nothing else happens, this is it: your head and that world from your perspective.

If there is another visitor, you might be looking at the moon with someone else however you might not notice this yet. You hear the faint familiar white noise of an old phone and you say something. The other visitor hears you and talks back. Who is there? Do you see the same thing on the screen? Since there are two cameras', each visitor sees the landscape with a slightly different perspective.

*One on one:*

*Is there anybody else? Can you tell me what you see? I might be seeing the same. Tell me what you think; please try.*

If a visitor remembers there is a switch, he can pull it. It is right beside the visitor's head on the outside of the box. This changes to light on both ends of the box. When looking at the landscape, the video feed is now cut off and the telephone connection to the other box is lost. A small light bulb turns on. This immediately changes the visitor's perspective. All you see is the inside of the box, you are alone. You become aware that you can't see your body, you can't see the people around you. You might hear muffled sounds on the background.

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*Can you hear yourself think? Is it a voice inside your head? Or is there something preceding a thought; a shiver somewhere inside your body? You have to listen closely.*

If there is somebody in the other box when the switch is pulled, this visitor will witness the change without knowing what causes it or being responsible for it. A sudden loss of control.

For further reading please visit our blog: <https://alt2017.wordpress.com/>

We thank all teachers and class for their valuable feedback and like to mention Max van Duijn separately for his stimulating optimism and great advice.

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