

Has art boxed itself into a corner?

They've starved, stripped and suffocated. We've seen them sleep, do shopping and read out lists. Now, PJ Harvey wants us to watch her record a whole album while she sits in a big box. Time to pack in art's most claustrophobic trend?

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"There was a funny moment when the door handle didn't work properly," recalls Ben Wright, lead singer of brutal death metal band Unfathomable Ruination. "There I was inside a metal box of about 1.6 metres squared with the band and our gear - and 40 minutes of oxygen." Did you think you might die? "I did think it might have been more appropriate for another death metal band, Suffocation, to be in there."

Unfathomable Ruination had been invited by the Portuguese artist João Onofre to enter a steel cube, called Box Sized Die, that had been placed outside London's Gherkin as part of the Sculpture in the City festival. The cube was hermetically sealed and soundproofed so that when the band started playing, no one outside could hear their set. They could only feel vibrations. "We could have just played a CD and no one would have been any the wiser." But you didn't? "No, I was bawling my head off."

Onofre told the band the length of the performance was to be determined by how long the oxygen inside lasted. No one in the band, incredibly, thought to do a cover of Air Supply's All Out of Love. Unfathomable Ruination were in radio contact with organisers on the outside and, happily, the door handle eventually worked. Which is how Wright survived to speak to me.

Onofre's cube functioned as a rebuke to a new trend for live artists to put themselves in see-through boxes, as if they were stuffed birds or pickled sharks. More and more performance artists are at it. Actor and model Milla Jovovich was locked in a glass cube for five hours at the 2013 Venice Biennale. Playing the part of a ditzy actress, she spent the time shopping for high-end goods online as the Plexiglas cube filled up with cardboard boxes. She tweeted: "how did i end up getting this much stuff?! lolol! i swear i'm very simple normally."

And what was in the cardboard boxes? Tiny interns doing work experience performance art with Jovovich? Sadly, no. The boxes and the cube were part of artist Tara Subkoff's Future/Perfect project, a critique of consumerism's impact on our environment. Future/Perfect juxtaposed poignantly with Ai Weiwei's installation Sacred at the Biennale. This consisted of six huge iron boxes containing fibreglass depictions of scenes from his 81 days in a Chinese prison, complete with guards and cell-beds. Sensibly, Ai Weiwei wasn't in those boxes himself: he, unlike Jovovich, had

a bit of previous with unsimulated incarceration.

Late last year, an Australian reworking of Ibsen's *The Wild Duck*, shown at the Barbican, put its actors inside a Perspex box as TV monitors registered the precise time everything took place. But, as with Jovovich, there was microcosm within macrocosm - this time, a little Perspex box with water and a live duck symbolising something or other. And right now PJ Harvey, like a perp in custody, is recording her new album on the other side of a sheet of one-way glass in the basement of London's Somerset House. "It is like watching zoo creatures. You want to poke them with a stick, make them do stuff, screw and eat each other," wrote the Guardian's art critic Adrian Searle. Harvey told one interviewer: "You have to go through dull moments to get to the goods." Well, you might have to, PJ, but do we? To be fair, it could have been worse: had PJ been a painter, spectators might find themselves literally watching paint dry.

Someone somewhere is doubtless already writing a tiresome thesis about today's S&M consumerist-voyeurist ethos. Certainly, in today's Plexiglas faceoff between artist and audience, it's the latter that blinks first. Sure, we have a 24/7 surveillance society, realising in CCTV the all-seeing panopticon that Jeremy Bentham imagined and Michel Foucault theorised, but sometimes even security guards nod off. Perform, monkey boy, damn you, one feels like yelling at these artists.

In 1988, Leigh Bowery preened, posed and lounged on a couch in a range of fetish outfits at the Anthony D'Offay Gallery. It proved, among other things, to be a shop window for his talents: Lucian Freud saw the fleshy Australian performance artist ("I found him perfectly beautiful") and made him his latest muse.

And then there was Tilda Swinton, who spent 15 hours in a vitrine at London's Serpentine Gallery in 1995, seemingly asleep. "I am lucky," said Swinton. "I have a very strong and convenient bladder." It was a remark that made me think of when Spinal Tap played *Rock'n'Roll Creation*, each member emerging from pods, *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers*-style. But the bassist's got stuck. Did he have a strong bladder, the world wondered, as roadies hammered at his pod doors and then tried to burn it open with oxyacetylene torches? Unacceptably, history has no answer to those questions.

Thankfully, Swinton survived to reprise her performance of *The Maybe* at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 2013. A notice by the installation read: "The Maybe 1995/2013. Living artist, glass, steel, mattress, pillow, linen, water and spectacles." The superb headline from the *New York Post*? "More in snore!" What was *The Maybe* about? Satire on celebrity? Actor "resting" between gigs? "The meaning of the piece has nothing to do with me," said Swinton, who collaborated on it with artist Cornelia Parker. "It is entirely in the eye of the beholder."

True, but some beholders were upset. "It was like the end of *Snow White*, when she's lying in a glass box," art lecturer Martina Margetts told the *Independent* after visiting the Serpentine. "It was a bit unnerving. There were children crying, they didn't know if she was dead or alive." You made children cry, Tilda. Happy now?

The late British fashion designer Alexander McQueen induced writer Michelle Olley to lie naked in a glass box in 2001 as the coup de theatre of a fashion show. Olley agreed and wrote a diary about her experience, including the following entry: “Apparently Gwyneth Paltrow’s coming. GWYNETH PALTROW’S GOING TO SEE MY BITS!!!”

After Olley survived exposure to fashionistas while naked in a confined space with flying moths (“I wanted my knickers back on pronto”), she ran across Isabella Blow. Olley recalled the late magazine editor congratulating her on her performance, saying it “said something about me being Poseidon, the fish god – the bearded trident-carrying half-man, half-fish god, which puzzled me. I told her I thought I was more in the paganistic, full-moon Celtic style Venus of Willendorf mould – those lumpy female figures that keep popping up on Palaeolithic burial sites.” Nobody has that sort of conversation after the launch of Debenhams’ autumn knitwear range.

Two years later, David Blaine hung without food in a box suspended in mid-air beside the Tower of London for 44 days. Inspired by Kafka’s short story *The Hunger Artist*, Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha* and, possibly, his burgeoning love handles, Blaine fasted while people hurled food and abuse at him. “I think it was a natural reaction,” said Blaine sweetly. “People didn’t know if it was real – was I cheating, was I secretly eating food, was I sneaking in and out? They were confused. Without their reaction, you really had nothing. I had friends ready to throw stuff at me in case nobody did that, in case it didn’t happen on its own.”

The following year, 16 performance artists took shifts to sit at desks inside a glass box in Trafalgar Square and read out lists of years for seven days and nights. “We want people to watch and think about the meaning of human existence and consciousness and mortality,” said Margot Heller, director of the South London Gallery. Not since that yawnsomely long tracking shot of a traffic jam in Jean-Luc Godard’s film *Weekend* has boring your audience been so attention-sappingly deployed as an art tactic.

Last year, Dutch artist Dries Verhoeven put himself in a glass box inside a Berlin theatre, soliciting strangers on gay hook-up app Grindr. The resultant conversations with Grindr users were projected on to a screen outside in a public square. One of the first people to respond later released a statement on Facebook calling the project “digital rape” because he hadn’t known the conversation would be broadcast. Soon after, Verhoeven ended the project, but not before unwittingly posing a topical question: in a 24/7 surveillance society, where omniscience isn’t just God’s thing, what should be private?

Also in Berlin last year, the Jewish museum staged a show called *The Whole Truth ... Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Jews*, in which Jewish volunteers sat in glass boxes and answered visitors’ questions. “I feel a bit like an animal in the zoo,” said Ido Porat, the first volunteer to sit in the box, “but in reality, that’s what it’s like being a Jew in Germany.”

Journalists noted that putting Jews on display in glass boxes was reminiscent of the bulletproof glass box that held the Nazi mass murderer of Jews, Adolf Eichmann,

during his 1961 trial in Israel. “Step right up! See the Jews!” wrote Salon’s critic with pardonable sarcasm, underlining the show’s presumably unintended freak-show vibe. True, non-Jews could have asked Jews out for coffee if they wanted to get the poop, but society doesn’t roll that way.

One last glass box. In 2007, Antony Gormley invited visitors to wander through a steam-filled glass container at the Hayward Gallery. According to the sculptor, *Blind Light*, as the installation was called, undermined what architecture ought to do: “Architecture is supposed to be the location of security and certainty about where you are. It is supposed to protect you from the weather, from darkness, from uncertainty.” So, instead of that, one wandered lonely in a cloud, occasionally bumping into strangers - for Londoners, it was like a reminder of what the city’s pea soupers were like before the Clean Air Act. For Gormley, it meant that each visitor could become “the immersed figure in an endless ground, literally the subject of the work”.

Absolutely. But it also meant that, just for once, we could have some time off from the modern penal servitude of looking.

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