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In Augusta Raurica: "Raise yor voice!" By Mathias Balzer June 18, 2018

The Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer brings free speech and politics back to the theater of Augusta Raurica



"VoiceTheater" by Rafael Lozano-Hemmer
The Mexican artists Rafael Lozano-Hemmer transforms Augusta Raurica into a voice theater

The freedom of speech is a high good, a threatened and at times dangerous one. Socrates drank the poison cup for this freedom in Athens 2417 years ago. Not long ago, we contemporaries were allowed to dream the dream of a free, uncensored Internet, where everyone and every one can express his opinion.

But the algorithms and their helmsmen have taught us a lesson: The allegedly free speech has become the business model of Facebook, Google & Co. The dream of liberal transparency threatens to go down in the mire of Fakenews, censorship, data abuse and Darknet. But free speech is fortunately independent of technology. It

belongs to man and his body alone. He just has to stand in one place and open his mouth.

The Mexican-Canadian artist Rafael Lozano-Hemmer is a specialist in actively involving the public in art works. He develops situations in public space where people can express themselves freely. "I create platforms for voices that I can no longer control," explains the 50-year-old artist.

The House of Electronic Arts in Basel and the Theater Augusta Raurica have invited Lozano-Hemmer to realize an installation in the Roman amphitheater in Augst. Supported by historians and archaeologists, the artist has studied the Roman theater intensively.

"This theater was a structure that reflected the balance of power in Augusta Raurica. At the front sat the priests, stewards and privileged ones. Then came the citizens and behind them women and children and the poorest," says the artist. "The outsiders of society appeared here 2000 years ago; Actors, dancers, musicians."

A talking theater

Lozano-Hemmer is reversing the situation for his installation "Voice Theater". It is the visitor who activates the theater. In front of him, in the middle of the semicircle, stands a pillar designed as an intercom. He looks into the auditorium of the theater, equipped with 51 loudspeakers and 421 small headlamps. He is asked to speak. When he does, his voice is recorded and an automated voice-theater is set in motion.

Ascending from bottom to top, the speakers reproduce what they said, mingling with speeches previously held by someone, and swelling to a chorus of voices, words, and songs. The speech becomes part of a collective memory, a talking theater.

The voices, in turn, activate the floodlights that transform the stepped stone funnel into a huge, golden glowing sign. Of course, that's the nicest thing in the dark. The "Voice Theater" is also open from 10 o'clock in the morning.

Start for new cultural model

What we leave as an echo to the 2000-year-old theater is fundamentally free. Lozano-Hemmer says: "The world collapses. We can not and should not be silent here. "The audience, says the artist and the organizers, is specifically challenged to tackle the question of what culture means to each individual.

This requirement has a real political background. The canton of Basel-Landschaft is currently working on a new cultural model. The "Voice Theater" in Augst is the prelude to this process. The Office of Culture sees this as an opportunity to encourage broad circles to participate in the cultural future of the region, and not just the German-speaking population. Guided tours are available in 14 languages, including Arabic, Farsi or Tamil.

"Speech so I can see you!"

The ancient theater is also the place where community representatives, land groups, party presidents and cultural offenders to formulate their first ideas for a cultural mission statement. From this starting point, there will be ten to fifteen meetings in the regions of the canton in 2019, in order to gather as completely as possible the cultural needs, demands and wishes of the Basel suppliers.

Art and politics meet in this arena of free speech. It is good that there are such practice sites. Because to say his opinion is a requirement of the hour. Given the political mood in his homeland, the German actor Simon Zagermann said at the opening of the installation into the microphone: "It is high time that we open our mouths again!" Socrates put it this way: "Speech so I can see you!"

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