

New narrative forms and new target groups

Composer Mathis Nitschke and media artist Luciano Pinna in conversation Mathis Nitschke is a conceptual artist, composer and theater maker. He creates operas and music theater, installations, films and concerts throughout Europe. With his design studio Sofilab, he developed the app "Vergehen", a GPS-controlled opera that you can walk through. In October 2017, the augmented reality opera "MAYA" premiered in the ruins of the former Munich-Aubing cogeneration plant. A real novelty at the time. Luciano Pinna is a conceptual artist and AR designer whose projects are shown and performed around the world.

neue musikzeitung: What are VR and AR all about?

Mathis Nitschke: VR takes you out of the real world, while AR adds a layer to the real world that can be designed in many different ways: Visual, auditory, informative, olfactory, physical.

nmz: Are VR and AR more like effects, add-ons, gimmicks or the classic stage format of the future?

Nitschke: It can be anything and depends entirely on the individual production. Gimmicks can also be right in the right context. The technology as such is neutral. It is their application and integration that makes them either interesting or superfluous. In any case, it can be said that opera has always researched the latest sensory stimuli and used them immediately. There is no reason why opera should not be involved with VR and AR.

Luciano Pinna: As an artist and musician, it is interesting and important to explore these technologies. From an experiential perspective, of course. They enable new ways of telling (familiar) stories. There are also social perspectives: it is a (very big) change that these technologies are changing the way we live our lives and communicate with each other. Think of the smartphone. Personally, I think it's important for artists to be involved in these discussions alongside technicians and politicians, as they have a unique way of making these technologies accessible to a wider audience.

nmz: Is AR a new format or just an extension of classic formats?

Nitschke: I believe that you get better results if you don't take the approach of enhancing classic formats with new technologies. The chance is that the technology poses really interesting fundamental questions. What actually is reality? Especially as this question is particularly interesting in the theatrical environment, where we are constantly asking it anyway.

I believe in the approach that we should look for new formats that allow participation in an informal environment. We humans like to share our impressions, so people should be able to talk to each other (like in the opera, I was once told...).

People should be able to explore. Curiosity and the joy of discovery are elementary components not only for working with the technologies, but also in the encounter with them as an audience. At MAYA, I like to refer to our use of smartphones as a "magic magnifying glass".

If you think such questions through to the end, then you end up with formats such as "Symbiosis". Or even "MAYA". I think we have tried out some possible answers so well that they are still valid.

Pinna: How many centuries does the history of music and opera in particular last? How many years have photography and film been around? The emergence of artistic AR experiences began about 25 to 30 years ago. That's nothing compared to the other media. These are the first experiments with potentially fundamentally new ways of experiencing the world. Perhaps the next stage of these technologies is needed to really change things. But we need to start now to see where we want to be in the next 25 years.

nmz: What role does the audience play: new listening and viewing skills needed?

Nitschke: New skills are certainly not necessary. The audience learns the necessary skills in the same way as in a game while playing. If it is not possible for the audience to acquire the necessary skills during the experience itself, then the experience is poorly designed. AR technology makes it possible to involve the audience in the game in a completely different way and turn them into active participants instead of just passive consumers. This active role should always remain voluntary, but it is the one that opens up new levels.

Pinna: As mentioned above, part of the experience is to question the use of technology. For example, do I watch via a smartphone and see the full augmented opera or do I watch directly without a screen? I have to make a decision, which is interesting in itself. This is all the more emphasized as we already walk around with a smartphone in front of our face in everyday life. For this new audience, experiencing the world via multiple "interfaces" is becoming a matter of course.

nmz: What projects are you working on? Individually or as a team?

Nitschke: I'm not particularly active as a stage composer at the moment, as I'm a bit exhausted from unsuccessfully attracting funding on an ambitious scale. Theater work with new technologies quickly becomes very expensive if you want to do it seriously enough to produce something great. Unfortunately, there is currently no confidence that a great result can be achieved in proportion to the financial outlay. The jury members are too frustrated by non-functioning or cheap-looking digital projects. I can't blame them, I even share their experience. The reputation of digital projects was already low before Covid, and even more so now after the Covid-induced glut. I always wanted to prove that there is another way, but obviously it hasn't been enough yet. But who knows what the future holds.

Pinna: As I mentioned, I worked with Mathis on two projects: the AR opera Maya and the AI research project Lure.

This year I worked with choreographer Jasmine Ellis on the Reality Warping project. It's a dance performance that uses artificial intelligence, projection mapping and live music to question reality, perception and social constructs. I used two projection screens between which four dancers performed, with each dancer using a smartphone to film themselves and the others. The premiere took place in June in Munich at the HochX Theater and at ARGEkultur Salzburg.

<https://soulsonic.com/portfolio/reality-warping>

Another project that was shown this year at SXSW Austin, Texas, is Symbiosis, a performative, multi-user and multi-sensory VR installation by Dutch artist collective Polymorf. In Symbiosis, the human body is redesigned. A participant is placed in a customized suite and experiences a speculative story about life as a symbiotic being in VR through sound, image, pressure, smell and food.

<https://soulsonic.com/portfolio/symbiosis/>

Last project, the augmented reality opera Antigone Exp. No2 by the music theater collective AGORA. In it, the audience becomes part of a choral scenography and is invited to move

freely or follow a specific protagonist with their own phone. The special feature here is that everything is filmed live by two cameramen (with AR on top) and the audience can look live into the opera or watch what is being filmed on their smartphones. Shown in 2022 at the Theater im Delphi, Berlin and Gare du Nord Basel.

<https://soulsonic.com/portfolio/antigone-exp-n2/>

nmz: In what way do composition, direction and technology meet?

Nitschke: Composition, direction and technology must be considered simultaneously from the outset. Only if the chosen artistic form has an existential need for technology will something exciting emerge. Conversely, of course, art must not allow itself to be limited by the current state of the art. Then you have to find creative ways out and, in my experience, these are the forks in the road that become interesting, then you enter new territory.

Pinna: I completely agree with Mathis here. It begins and ends with the experience. At the same time, through the exploration of technology, a concept can be (further) developed and new paths discovered. The intersection between disciplines is where things get interesting, when things collide, the essence of the experience can manifest itself.

nmz: You mentioned that financing is a bigger challenge than with conventional productions. In what way? **Nitschke:** It's a big problem. But I also understand the funding side. Why should you invest a few hundred thousand euros in a project that will only find a limited audience a few times? Actually, there would need to be scaling options like in the film to make funding opportunities like in the film possible. But then you'd probably have to say goodbye to live actors and then you'd no longer have human theater. I have a few ideas that go in the direction of interactive live theater. But at heart, I am a theater maker in the sense of Peter Brooks: "I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. one person walks through the space while another watches; that's all that's necessary for theater action." You need people and space for theater, not a screen. Hardly scalable.

Pinna: It can be a challenge. At the same time, it is important to attract new target groups, find new ways of telling stories and explore the impact of these technologies.

Nitschke: However, the cost structure for digital projects may be changing fundamentally at the moment. In winter, I will be developing a digital project that I will be prototyping this time with the support of ChatGPT instead of a (justifiably) expensive developer. The concept phase in particular involves a lot of trial and error, which as an artist can quickly drive developers crazy and cause costs to explode. I'm curious to see how it works. It's quite possible that a digital artistic project can be realized at a much lower cost in just a few years. This approach would then also fit better into the existing funding systems.

nmz: Won't repertoire opera be degraded to film music thanks to the use of AR and other technologies?

Pinna: NO. Wrong question on so many different levels.

The interview was conducted by Andreas Kolb
NMZ - Neue Musikzeitung / november 2023