

Earth Stories and the Crackle of Time

In a metaphorical deep drilling, “Soil Specimens.Site.Leipzig. The last 500 Million Years” explores the former Bowling Club and investigates the city and the ground beneath the surface – elaborately interweaving geological and social developments.

by Dimo Rieß, 3 December, 2021

The echo of bowling balls rolling down bowling lanes faded decades ago. The former Bowling Club (Bowlingtreff) is in a kind of “Sleeping Beauty slumber”. In place of thorn hedges, graffiti creeps up the walls. You don't need a sword to enter. Only one ticket for the production: “Soil Specimens.Site.Leipzig.”, an encounter that pivots between exhibition and theatre, science and mythology.

If you stand outside the entrance, your gaze is drawn upwards, up to the angular glass dome of the post-modern octagon. Perhaps also to the neighboring tower of the town hall or to the city's striking high-rise, the City Hochhaus, typical landmarks of Leipzig's city centre. Next to the former Bowling Club is Wilhelm-Leuschner-Platz, destroyed in World War II and still a wasteland. Cities thrive and wither visibly on the surface. The ground below, on the other hand, seems unchangeable, stable, as if it has been there forever. But it hasn't.

The interdisciplinary project “Soil Specimens. Site. Leipzig.” literally drags the visitor underground and into the paradox of the mole's perspective: Deep down, our view stretches into the dizzying distance, namely: the last 500 million years”. This is the project's subtitle. Those who are there swim through the river of time.

Geologists read layers of earth like a history book that describes how everything is in motion. How, more than 500 million years ago, the greywacke was pushed from the Mediterranean area into the region and later covered by the primeval North Sea as it advanced. How the glaciers of the Saale Glaciation crept in, leaving Scandinavian boulders behind. “Migrants” is how the performance describes the rocks. The term, otherwise common in other contexts, casually refers to the production's ambiguous seesawing between geological and social change.

In the former Bowling Club, which reopened for “Soil Specimens. Site. Leipzig.”, pieces of rock lie on an old counter, silent witnesses to the evolution of the earth. On a gravel bed in a black tub: manatee bones, once excavated in the open-cast mine in Zwenkau. Almost mystical in the soft light. The stage designer Bernhard Siegl set up the exhibition. Friction is generated by contrasting the raw concrete construction of modernity and fossil remains from a time long before man.

Deliberately chosen, the location itself serves as a symbol of change: Rammed into the ground almost 100 years ago as an electrical transformer substation for the stable power supply of a greedy boom town, it was later built over and converted for a short time. Now it is half in ruins again and on the verge of resurrection. In a few years, Leipzig's Natural History Museum will be moving in.

As a co-producer, the Natural History Museum provided exhibits, expertise and contacts to the scientific community. The project was received with open arms, says Ronny Maik Leder, director of the museum. In his opinion, art and science belong together. Many natural scientists, the universal scholars of past epochs, were also great artists, painters, sculptors, poets. "There are many laws in the theory of aesthetics and harmony that can be researched empirically, which is what natural science is all about." And: "It is easy to forget: science is creative. You develop new methods through new thoughts."

Uwe Gössel, the artistic director of "Soil Specimens. Site. Leipzig.", sought, at an early stage, to forge a close alliance with science. The metaphorical deep drilling was intended to expose Leipzig's soil in an interdisciplinary and multi-perspective way, guided by a collective idea. "Like a band", as Gössel describes the artistic team he has put together for this purpose. In addition to the costume designer Bernhard Siegl, the team includes the actress Annett Sawallisch, the composer and musician Mark Polscher, who set up a sound installation and plays the soprano saxophone and synthesizer live. Like the documentary filmmaker Niclas R. Middleton, who moves between geological and cultural-historical references in collage-like video images, Polscher researched on site: by inspecting, for example, the landscape wounds of the open-cast mines and translating them tonally.

Thomas Goerge, the theatre maker and costume designer (etc.) for Christoph Schlingensiefel, weaves short chapters of a mythologically-charged earth theatre between the essentially fact-based pillars of the performance. To do this, he has placed a red drilling rig on the bowling lane, which, instead of penetrating into the ground, digs up memories via video projection. At the same time, a choir of "townspeople" put together by Brian Völkner, roams the bowling lane. It is the undead who tell us about the past. And the three Fates, goddesses of destiny in Roman mythology,

Rulers of the thread of life.

Joining the contributions of art and science, Leipzig residents top off the narrative triad. "There are people present who have a personal history in common with the Bowling Club," says Gössel. Their tales are incorporated. "At the same time, they stand for the community whose soil we are negotiating." A soil that can mean both home and homesickness. Like the performance reflected in Gudrun's story, a person, like so many others, who left Leipzig between the end of the war and the construction of the Wall. With Gudrun, Gössel adds his own family connection to the saga of Leipzig's soil. It is the life story of the theatre maker, which at the same time tells of a fate shared a thousand times over.

Thus, "Soil Specimens. Site. Leipzig." resembles a musical score that superimposes the unequal rhythms of geological history and social developments and allows them to permeate one another. It becomes clear that soil establishes the conditions for human life. In a material and ideal sense. How we deal with it defines our future.

Exhibition and performance, installation and narration, scientific knowledge and mythological narration merge into an amalgam that reflects two contemporary trends. First: experts come out of their specialist niches and work in an interdisciplinary manner again. Second: artists often reflect on aspects of the "Anthropocene", the term for the age in which man has become the decisive factor influencing his environment. A

field in which "Soil Specimens. Site. Leipzig." is thematically anchored and intuitively creates connections. In the best possible sense, the production teaches humility.

"Bewitching as the fantasy of timelessness may be, there is far deeper and more mysterious beauty in timefulness," says the American geoscientist Marcia Bjornerud. This awareness is enriched by "Soil Specimens. Site. Leipzig."

About the author:

Dimo Rieß works as a theatre critic for the Leipziger Volkszeitung and as a freelance journalist for cultural topics. Previously he had only seen the inside of the distinctive Bowling Club in 2007 as part of an exhibition. At the invitation of the production team of "Soil Specimens. Site. Leipzig.", Dimo Rieß came and listened to the crackle of time between greywacke, the choir of the dead and massive layers of concrete.