

Lena Herzog

Last Whispers **VR**

An Immersive Oratorio

Concept / Directed / Produced by Lena Herzog
With Composition and Sound Design by Mark Mangini
VR Production by Last Whispers Non-Profit & Emblematic Group



Today over 7,000 languages are spoken worldwide. By the middle of the century, half of these voices will have fallen silent. At an unprecedented speed, faster than the extinction of most endangered species, we are losing our linguistic diversity—and the very means by which we know ourselves. By definition, it occurs in silence, since silence is the very form of this extinction.

Last Whispers: An Immersive Oratorio is an invocation of the languages that have gone extinct and an incantation of those that are endangered. In collaboration with VR pioneer Nonny de la Peña and her company, Emblematic Group, artist Lena Herzog has been working on an immersive VR oratorio in three parts. Each part will comprise its own stand-alone VR experience and embody three distinct expressions that viscerally answer the question of how to tell an extinction whose form is silence. The first piece, already made, will have its world premiere in 360-degree video at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival, as part of the official selection of the Sundance Institute's New Frontier program.

With the support of the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme at SOAS University of London, along with the Smithsonian, the Rosetta Project, and over a dozen other world archives, and with the generous help of the Simons Foundation, Herzog and her team created a scored and spatially designed sound composition from the world's greatest linguistic archives.

How can one address an extinction the form of which is silence? By making what has gone silent alive and present to us. Both binaural and 8.1 (octophonic) sound projection used in the two mixes are perceived by the human ear as a distinct and genuine 360-degree immersive soundscape. Such immersive sound environments prompt the brain to perceive these voices as "present." Created using Epic Games' Unreal Engine, each language in the experience is anchored within the 3-D space to a beacon of light that represents the geographical location on the globe where that language originated.

Animation and imagery in *Last Whispers* is precise and abstract at the same time. The locations of the languages are marked with pulsing dots, anchored by GPS onto the contours of the continents and countries. Yet the real topography of the globe is substituted by a "digital quilt blanket" sewn from satellite photographs of catastrophic climate events, reflecting one of the reasons for human migrations and dislocations, including those that are linguistic.

The trajectory of these vanishing voices begins far away, like a distant echo. This chorus comes closer and closer and then envelops the visitor. The "others" become familiar and real until the visitor falls into being with them at the last exhale.

Last Whispers transports audiences into a virtual landscape composed of the fabric of vanishing voices and accompanied by original animation that poetically links image and sound.

Last Whispers is co-presented by UNESCO, which, along with the UN General Assembly, has declared 2019 the Year of Indigenous Languages.