

Text by Georg Weckwerth, artistic director, TONSPUR Artsociety Vienna:

Due to developments in Austria, Germany, the USA and several other countries around the world the TONSPUR Kunstverein Wien, in collaboration with the Volkstheater Wien, realised a universalist art project by Gerhard Rühm on 22 February 2025 that was as concise as it was spectacular. Well over 1,000 participants gathered in front of the entrance to the Vienna Volkstheater in an event lasting several hours where they recited the Universal Declaration of Human Rights — adopted almost 78 years ago — word for word into a microphone, speaking individually and one after the other. The spoken words were conveyed via two large loudspeakers in the public space for all to hear — while also being recorded live.

For Gerhard Rühm, a legendary figure in the Austrian post-war avant-garde, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ranks at the very top of all humanity's written manifestos. It is the first document to describe rights that (should) apply to everyone, at all times and everywhere in the world. The poet, playwright, draughtsman, collagist, conceptual artist, composer and performer, born in Vienna in 1930, had long wanted to present this manifesto in a form "that gives the biggest possible impact to the issue". At the instigation of Georg Weckwerth, the founder and artistic director of TONSPUR Kunstverein Wien, the recording directed by Gerhard Rühm in 2025 has now been reworked and mixed by ORF sound engineer Martin Leitner, in the universal artist's words, "to create a self-contained prose text for broadcasting on the radio and intended to take the form of an installation at a suitably frequented location. The effect is likely to be overwhelming".

The world premiere of the approximately half-hour-long radio version by Gerhard Rühm of "word for word — a total recitation of the universal declaration of human rights" in German, is scheduled for Monday, 10 August 2026 at 9.00 pm on the Ö1 programme "Blaue Stunde". A few days later, on 13 August 2026, the eight-channel installation of the same title — created for the TONSPUR collection for public space — has its world premiere on Vienna's Heldenplatz in front of the Weltmuseum Wien, where it will be played on a loop daily from 10 am to 8 pm until 30 August.

Heldenplatz has been selected as the venue. It is one of the country's most famous public squares and as a key location for the culture of remembrance in Austria the square provides a suitable and a worthy setting for the presentation of an artistic concept that has been realised with the collaboration of many people – in recognition of our democratic values, which need defending now more than ever.

Save the Date

The German premiere of "wort für wort — totale rezitation der allgemeinen erklärung der menschenrechte" by Gerhard Rühm is on 19 and 20 September 2026 at the Schauspiel Köln. As part of a major public celebration to mark the theatre's reopening following years of renovation, "wort für wort" is being performed over two days in the theatre's Agora in loop. Kay Voges, former artistic director of the Volkstheater Wien and current artistic director of the Schauspiel Köln is giving the introduction.