

Benoît Maubrey's ARENA was an incitement to be make noise and be heard.
from Gordon Hatt

ARENA was the centrepiece of the CAFKA.18 biennial exhibition of contemporary art in the public spaces of the Waterloo Region. It was CAFKA's largest ever fabrication project involving collaborations with the artist and architects, carpenters, electro-acousticians, programmers, students and volunteers. The 320 speakers that made up the work were sourced by donation from both friends and supporters of CAFKA and from complete strangers who had heard about the project and wanted to help or who just wanted to clear out their basements. We bought speakers too, from thrift shops and junk stores from across Southwestern Ontario.

ARENA was built at Lot 42, a former steel factory in Kitchener, Ontario. The vast building complex had been rented by Communtech to be the site of the 2018 True North Waterloo technology conference. Communtech generously allowed CAFKA to use a portion of the convention floor as an assembly space. Rex Lingwood oversaw the construction of the four-module support structure and was helped in the construction by Mark Resmer. Benoît Maubrey project managed the speaker assembly with help from Jago Whitehead, Johnny Camara and volunteers. Work on site began on May 1 and was complete by May 23rd.

ARENA came alive following the True North Conference when it was moved to Carl Zehr Square in front of the Kitchener City Hall. It remained for the duration of the CAFKA biennial. ARENA was live and interactively accessible to the public from 11 AM to 8 PM daily. It became a stage, a seating area and a public address system to groups and individuals who brought their smart phones, microphones and musical instruments to perform for themselves and passersby. CAFKA also programmed a series of performance events intended to highlight the interactive potential of the artwork. ARENA was the site for dance parties, wedding pictures, selfies and photo ops by politicians, for guerilla theatre, for poetry and for all kinds of music. Through it people of all ages connected. It was pure fun.

As a work of art ARENA literally visualized the sounds it helped amplify. The 320 connected speakers weren't louder than any commercial PA. The visual effect of the different shapes and sizes and speaker styles were like a metaphor for the infinite variety of voices of people invited to participate in the ARENA event. And they felt it. People were fascinated by ARENA's details, the hundreds of speakers, old and new big and small, and the fact that they all worked. They were drawn to its functionality but they were inspired by its theatricality. They brought their phones, their guitars, their microphones and they were drawn to the way ARENA worked as an amphitheatre and defined the city hall square as a performance space.

ARENA incited people to dance and sing, to play music, recite poetry and profess their love to each other. They made noise: Really happy, soulful noise. And they were heard.