From *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo* to the *Museum of Human-Hunting*. From scenography to scenographics in the work of Thomas Bellinck

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Abstract: This article explores how Belgian theatre maker Thomas Bellinck turns the scenography of an exhibition into a critical framework to examine the politics of memory and representation at play on the European continent. In his projects, Bellinck plays with conventional modes of displaying and exhibiting to challenge the current course of the European Union (as in *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo*) and question how the EU copes with migratory movements (as in his long-term and ongoing project *Simple as ABC*). By exhibiting fictive artefacts through conventional modes of displaying (pedestals, display cases,) or bringing these modes of display to the stage, Bellinck highlights the agency and critical potential of these 'mere' instruments in an exhibition. Insisting on the performativity of the infrastructure of an exhibition becomes a scenographic strategy in Bellinck's work to mark the role of scenography in the epistemological process that comes with visiting an exhibition and the discourses an exhibition tries to convey.
Keywords: Thomas Bellinck, Scenography, Scenographics, Potential History

Introduction

This special issue searches for scenographic strategies and practices interrogating the way modes of display in exhibitions shape the historical, social, and cultural meaning of objects. The work of Belgian theatre maker Thomas Bellinck attests to such critical approach. In 2013, Bellinck created *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo* (Esperanto for "House of European History in Exile"), a fictional exhibition on the origin, rise and collapse of the European Union from the point of view of the distant future. The futuristic-historical museum travelled from Europe's capital to Rotterdam (2014), Vienna (2014), Athens (2016), Wiesbaden (2016) and Marseille (2018) and was adapted in course of the years to the crises the European Union was facing at that time.[1] The innovative treatment in *Domo de Eŭropa* of the conventional use of modes of display in science museums, history museums or national museums surfaces the politics of memory at play in such institutions. For his current ongoing and long-term research project *Simple as ABC* (2009 - …), Bellinck elaborates on the scenographic strategies employed in *Domo de Eŭropa* to interrogate the apparatus of the exhibition and the museum in relation to one of Europe's current challenges: the question of

[1] The analysis here is based on the version of *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo* presented at Festival de Marseille in Mucem, Fort Saint-Jean, Marseille. From Saturday 16 June 2018 to Sunday 30 September 2018.

mass migration and the politics of mobility for non-Europeans citizins. *Simple as ABC* consists out of 'a series of performances, publications and installations scrutinising the apparatus of the EU's mobility management policy facilitating the movement of some people, while simultaneously criminalising the movement of other' (Website Thomas Bellinck).

The first section of this article explores *Domo de Eŭropa*. Tracing the fictive museum's compelling scenographic and dramaturgical features helps to mark the politics of memory and representation that are a play in the museum as an institution. In the manipulation of the museum's traditional infrastructure, Bellinck illuminates and explicates how glass cases, frames, labels, dioramas, and information panels are part of the scenography of an exhibition, influencing our gaze and apprehension of what is exhibited. By playing with the scenographic conventions of museums, Bellinck turns the infrastructure and apparatus of an exhibition into a critical tool to question the politics of representation. The critical potentiality of scenography, as illustrated by *Domo de Eŭropa*, invites us to connect Bellinck's project with the notion of 'scenographics', as introduced by cultural scenographer Rachel Hann. The second section of this text visits Hann's concept of 'scenographics', as developed in her book *Beyond Scenography*, to grasp the critical qualities of scenography as demonstrated in *Domo de Eŭropa*. In response to the emerging field expanded scenography, Hann separates scenography as a feature *of* and *for* theatre from her own concept of 'scenographics', through which she want to highlight what scenography *does* and articulate how encounters with scenography produces and cultivates affects. With Hann's work as a productive framework, the third section of this text explores how Bellinck transforms the scenographic traits of the exhibition and museum to the theatre stage, as he did in the first instalments of his current long-term and ongoing research project *Simple as ABC*.

Dusty Lenin-replicas and Angela Merkel-shaped lemon juicers: unfolding *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo*

When opening the door of *Domo de Eŭropa* one is immediately summoned by a growling clerk – an actor – to take a seat before entering the museum (figure 1). On the walls of the anteroom, pictures are displayed of the presidents of the European Commission: Jean-Claude Juncker (2014–2019), Michel Barnier (2019–2022) and Jarosław Kaczyński (2022–2024). Next to their portraits hangs a huge map of Europe's member states. Taking a closer look, one counts twenty-eight member states. Montenegro, Scotland, and Serbia have joined the EU. The Netherlands, France and the United Kingdom became independent nations. All the labels and information panels in the room are in Esperanto. And although it seems one is familiar with the information on display in this room, the data we get from labels, panels, or the sign saying "Scotland Office of the EU Parliament" indicates that what is presented differs from the European Union as we know it today.

After being ordered by the office clerk to enter the museum one steps into a space that does not correspond with the entrance of a prestigious exhibition on the history of the EU. One enters a storage room, packed with old promo-flyers of the EU, Lenin-replicas, and bubble-wrap-shrouded busts (figure 2). After working a way through the stored objects, one stumbles upon the entrance of the museum, covered in plastic, evoking an image of a museum under construction, in renovation or in decay (or a combination of these images). Going through the plastic one finds the entrance to access the exhibition.

The rooms of the first part of *Domo de Eŭropa take* the visitor through the history of a united Europe. Starting from its formation after the Second World War, as an initiative that encouraged and tightened economic collaboration, to the fall of the Berlin wall. From that historical tipping point on, Europe and the liberal democracy that it promotes are eulogized in the exposition by celebrating the end of history, and articulating the art of the compromise, which underlies Europe's triumph. The creation of centralized European institutions, such as the European Parliament, the European Commission or the Central Bank of Europe are proudly presented as stable and loyal pillars of the EU. The second part of *Domo de Eŭropa* offers the other side of the EU's success story: the cumbersome bureaucratic system imposing regulations and directives, the control of corporate lobbyists, and the callous economic competition between member states that has brought the hegemony of neoliberalism. The entente that was initiated to look after the interests of every citizen on the European continent has turned over the years into a corporate business, with economic growth as its sole objective, with side effects of growing inequality, austerity, and ecological pollution. *Domo de Eŭropa* continues by showing how the EU's obsession with economic growth caused ignorance of significant developments in world politics: a growing dependence on Russian and Middle Eastern gas, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism and the accumulation of power by the Chinese state.

As the exhibition's narrative continues, the combination of the external and internal problems put the European solidarity and unity to the test. As written on one of the information panels in *Domo de Eŭropa:* "Unity in Diversity" was becoming an overstatement in terms of unity, and an understatement in terms of diversity. Whereas our ancestors enjoyed unprecedented peace and prosperity, Europe's population started to experience waning wealth and doubts about the unfailing certainty of peace. In what *Domo de Eŭropa* defines as Europe's "Great Regression", the EU is crumbling. After the "Frexit" and "Nexit", Montenegro, Serbia, and Scotland entered hastily as new member states to restore the wound inflicted by the withdrawal of two of the Union's founding members. From that moment onwards, the EU entered a survival mode. The death throes of "Project Europe", as proclaimed in *Domo de Eŭropa,* was the Storming of the Berlaymont in Brussels on May 9th of 2025. Weeks of protests, riots, and energy blackouts enraged thousands of citizens and culminated in the European headquarters' siege. Although the EU was already dismantled

and the headquarters were empty, the Storming was mythologized as the death blow of Project Europe.

The cogency of Bellinck's *Domo de Eŭropa* lies in the anachronism engendered by the clash of temporalities mingled with an interplay between fact and fiction. Generally, we assume that the exhibits in a history museum belong to the past. But half of what is displayed in *Domo de Eŭropa* is not part of the past, but of the present. The result is a clash between our concepts of the past's linear time and the ever-present present. The theatrical setting of *Domo de Eŭropa* introduces what performance theorist Rebecca Schneider – drawing on the work of Gertrude Stein – called a 'syncopated time', a theatrical time where '*then* and *now* punctuate each other' (2). It challenges, according to Schneider, a linear conception of historical time and marks that our 'maniacally charged present is punctuated by, syncopated with and charged by other moments and other times' (92). Within this moment a critical distance towards our present is created and invites the visitor to question: what do I know about the origins of the EU? What was made possible by EU? Who benefited from the European Project? And who didn't? And what political decisions, feuds or different ideological perspectives have brought us to where we are today?

But Bellinck is not merely interested in confronting the visitor with its personal historical amnesia on the EU's genealogy. *Domo de Eŭropa* is primarily a critical comment on what Andreas Huyssen called 'musealization', the phenomenal rise and infiltration of memory discourses in all areas of everyday life. Symptomatic of this tendency that started at the turn of the century is the conservation, control and commodification of the past of a nation, a community, or a (scientific or artistic) discipline. As Huyssen commented on this trend in his book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*, it is not our history but memory and its politics we became obsessed with. Memory marks the relation of an individual, a community or a nation to its past. Museums play a key role in providing stable and traditional forms of cultural identity to maintain a connection between the past and the present. Since the turn of the century, we are witnessing an intensification and acceleration of this alliance, leading to what Huyssen describes as the 'hypertrophy of memory'. This notion refers to the heritage and culture industry recalling, reproducing and commodifying the past. A prominent expression of this trend, as Huyssen argues, is the way the historic centre of European cities such as Venice, Dubrovnik, or Bruges are transformed into open-air museums, presenting a romanticized past. 'Memory and musealization', as Huyssen concludes, 'are called upon to provide a bulwark against obsolescence and disappearance, to counter our deep anxiety about the speed of change and the ever-shrinking horizons of time and space' (23).

Bellinck's sources of inspiration for developing *Domo de Eŭropa* are both symptoms and products of this tendency. *Domo de Eŭropa* is (loosely) inspired by the scenography and the spatial dramaturgy of the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum in Hanoi, the Museum of the 1989 Revolution in Timișoara and the Museum of the Chinese Communist Party. But the main

sources of inspiration were the House of European History and the Parlamentarium, both located in Brussels. The Parlamentarium is the visitors centre of the European Parliament. The House of European History is a museum on European history in a much wider sense. It takes a much broader approach to history and - as a museum - places objects, as testimonies of history, at the centre of interest. The two complementary projects saw the light in a ten-year gestation period where the EU was confronted by successive upheavals: the financial and economic crisis of 2008 and the subsequent debt and bailout emergencies, the Eurosceptic and outright hostile attitude of right-wing nationalist parties about the EU and the arrival of refugees in the wake of the Arab Springs. In response to these crises, both the House of European History and the Parlamentarium aim to counter anti-EU sentiments and anchor Europe in (new) shared narratives. But as recently examined, the use of memory by the House of European History in the construction of European narrative (Kesteloot 2018) entails dynamics of inclusion and exclusions in terms of whose identity, story or history is (not) considered as European (Buettner 2018; Van Weyenberg 2019).

Domo de Eŭropa is a direct comment on the EU's politics of inclusion and exclusion in creating a discourse celebrating its history. The use of irony and exaggeration is one strategy employed throughout the exhibition to illuminate this agenda. For example, one exhibition space in *Domo de Eŭropa,* titled "Regulations & Directives", is dedicated to the EU' bureaucratic system. The room has framed directives and standards hanging on the walls on the curvature of bananas, the speed frequency of a windshield wiper, and the standard size of a tomato to be part of the EU's market economy. On the other side of the room are framed lobbyists' business cards and piles of dossiers put behind glass. As ironic references to the stereotypes connected to the EU, this strategy also articulates how inextricable attached objects or events become to the presented discourse of an exhibition once framed or put on display.

This ironic tone also runs through *Domo de Eŭropa* in what could be described as its "under construction/in decline"-aesthetic After working your way through the plastic-wrapped-up entrance, one stumbles on more doors or displays covered by plastic throughout Bellinck's museum (figure 3). Spaces are often too dark because bulbs are broken. Wires and cables are hanging out of the wall. One finds tools in some exhibitions spaces as if the contractor is still at work. Some spaces are too cold because of the air conditioner blowing, others are too hot and damp for an exhibition room. Such scenographic interventions convey the idea of a museum under construction, in renovation or in decline. But this "under construction/in decline" aesthetic can be apprehended as a metaphor for the EU: some are still under (re)construction and others in decline.

The amplification of these clichés of the EU is countered in *Domo de Eŭropa* by including actual events, facts, stories, or individuals that were influential in key moments of the EU but haven't received the attention and gratitude they deserved. An example in *Domo de Eŭropa* of such an inspiring figure that disappeared into oblivion is set up in the middle

part of the exhibition: Otto von Habsburg, also known as "Otto von Europe". Von Habsburg was the last crown prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and as an exiled heir he grew into one of the most important pioneers of European Unification. He fought Nazism with as much fervour as Communism, became chairman of the Pan-European Movement, and became later a member of the EU Parliament. In 1979, when von Habsburg was in the parliament, he left his seat symbolically empty out of protest for those oppressed behind the Iron Curtain. In reaction to the borders between East and West, Otto organized the so-called Pan-European Picnics, seemingly harmless, but a key moment in the opening of the borders and the beginning of the end of the Cold War. But as inspiring as the story of 'Otto von Europe' sounds, few visitors of *Domo de Eŭropa* have heard of him and have difficulties with distinguishing this figure with other parts of the exhibition because he is displayed with the same kitsch-aesthetic as many other objects.

The willingness of the visitor to consider a figure like Von Habsburg to be part of the EU's history is not only sparked by the man's story but also because he is portrayed within the context of an exhibition and according to the conventions of a museum. Scenography proves its capacity to convey ideas, discourses, and stories and its role in the inclusions and exclusion of these elements within the presented discourse. Once a photograph is framed or an artifact is installed behind glass within the context of an exhibition, it is decontextualized and becomes a part of the exhibition's narrative.

From scenography to scenographics

The main argument here for using *scenography* through the text instead of *design* in exploring the exhibition set up of *Domo de Eŭropa* is prompted by the way the use of *scenography* as a term has altered over the years. Since the turn of the century, the practice and definition(s) of scenography expanded and moved from the mere creation of scenery, costumes or lights for theatre to the acknowledging of scenography as 'an all-encompassing visual-spatial construct', responsible for the 'process of change and transformation as an inherent part of the physical vocabulary of the stage' (Aronson 2005, 7). Due to the rapid expansion of scenographic practices within and outside theatre, and a corresponding body of theoretical work on these developments, scenography is no longer understood 'as a by-product of theatre but as a mode of encounter and exchange founded on spatial and material relations between bodies, objects, and environments' (McKinney and Palmer 2). Considering relationality, affectivity, and materiality as underpinning and distinctive features of today's scenographic practices allows to explore other sites and spaces where encounters take place *by*, *with* and *throug*h scenography. Such an 'expanded scenography', as this emerging field is coined, permits to comprehend the many environments we move through during the day as scenographies. Widening such understanding of scenography, exposes how, as Sodja Lotker and Richard Gough noted, scenographies determine the context of performative

actions, inspire us to act and directly guide our actions. Such engagements with scenography, Lotker and Gough insisted, take place with our whole bodies. They disturb and challenge. As a powerful medium, it commands our attention, affects our emotions, and influences our overall perception and position within these environments (4). By exhibiting funny, unexpected and strange artefacts according to the conventions of an exhibition's scenography, *Domo de Eŭropa* demonstrates how dioramas, labels, glass cases, frames, pedestals, and information panels are more than practical and technical instruments to exhibit objects. Just as the displayed artworks, or artefacts, these are also building blocks in the construction of discourses. Appraising the design of an exhibition as scenography makes apparent the aesthetic parameters, media, tools, epistemes, and cultural references responsible for conveying meaning and emotion. As outlined in the exploration of *Domo de Eŭropa*, Bellinck's fictive museum is therefore more than an ironic comment on the current state of the EU. The exhibitionary effect is foremost a critical lens to survey the power mechanism at play in exhibitions and museums. Because the surfacing of the powerful epistemic roles played by the scenography of an exhibition is so key in *Domo de Eŭropa*, Rachel Hann's distinction between scenography and, what she coins as, scenographics, is seminal to explore here. Hann introduced the term as a response to the emerging field of expanded scenography, engendering the idea that 'scenography is *potentially* everywhere' (2019: 4). This dissemination of scenography beyond the realm of theatre blurs the boundaries between scenography and other disciplinary contexts.

The risk of the plural condition of an expanded field as scenography, Hann argues, is that one loses out of sight the driving force behind scenography's current state of excess: the critical potentiality of a scenographic trait. The expanded ethos of many scenographic practices expresses the urge and desire to liberate scenography from theatre, which is often considered additional and illustrative. An overuse of scenography in a manyfold of disciplines and contexts, Hann warns, might undervalue scenography's formative and critical dimensions again. Focussing on how to refine the established lexicon Hann introduces the notion of 'scenographics' as 'an argument for what scenography does' (2019: 14). Akin to the relationship between performance and performativity, theatre and theatricality or choreography and choreographic Hann separates scenography from scenographic because 'an object or event can impart a scenographic trait without necessarily being considered scenography' (2019: 4). What makes then an object or event scenographic, according to Hann, is the way it 'accounts for how the relationships between, objects, bodies and other objects enact a distinct form of place orientation' (2019: 29). Scenographics 'afford and evoke action', 'complicate and irritate a slicing of worlds that is ever present yet goes unseen and unconsidered', and therefore, they are 'agents for revealing acts of worlding' (2019: 135). By deriving ideas from new materialism and queer phenomenology Hann aims to underscore how the encounter with scenography produces affects, how such encounters are shaped by subjectivities and ideological conditions and to render complicit the human and

non-human agents in the situation produced by scenography. Hann's emphasis on what scenographics *do* and the affects it produces is interesting here to elaborate on the descriptive analysis of *Domo de Eŭropa* and explore what Bellinck's museum does to the spectator.

One of the affects Bellinck plays with is nostalgia. The false historical distances created by the decontextualization and fictionalization of what is shown not only triggers estrangement, but also sentiments of displacement and loss about something that has not disappeared. These are sensations that Bellinck wants to grasp and insert as a theatrical strategy. On the one hand, nostalgia functions in *Domo de Eŭropa* as a critique of how contemporary history museums – such as The House of European History– employ these nostalgic sentiments to glorify the past. On the other hand, reflecting on the present from the future stimulates a very unusual and destabilizing movement of commemoration and remembrance. As Bellinck expands on this nostalgic motif in *Domo de Eŭropa:* 'I really wanted to trigger in the audience this kind of sensation of going to a funeral of an acquaintance that is actually not dead. The museum had to evoke a sense of nostalgia for something that is still there, as an attempt to talk about death in order to avoid it' (Bellinck and Hendrickx 2016, 119). Hereby, in a strange and almost unsettling way, one becomes nostalgic about the present. By divesting nostalgia from its reactionary and restorative connotations, Bellinck turns this emotion through *Domo de Eŭropa* into a productive emotion. Near the end of the exhibition, one comes across a diorama depicting the small and dirty bedrooms of illegal immigrants employed in one of the greenhouses in the South of Spain. The final exhibition spaces show framed charts of drug use, suicide rates and migration of EU citizens to former colonies after the implosion of the EU. Bellinck's *Domo de Eŭropa* guides the visitor to questions such as: do we want these events and facts to remain fiction or to will they become a reality? Is this the way we will remember and commemorate 'Project Europe', as *Domo de Eŭropa* states, or will there be a new narrative that deserves its place in the EU's history? As Bellinck reflected on his travelling series of *Domo de Eŭropa:* 'I think today, I would really say that my museum is an attempt to finally put some things to the grave, to have a proper burial, say goodbye and observe a decent period of grieving. That's what you need, to move and go to the next level, so the new can be born at last (ibid).

Therefore, one cannot discard Bellinck's museum as merely an ironic or even cynical comment on the current state of the EU. Each encounter with an object in the museum offers an opening to reflect on how it ended up there. Dismantling the apparatus of the museum and scrutinizing the politics of memory at play, Bellinck confronts the visitor with historical junctions and explores who decided what, and for what reasons. This becomes an invitation to the visitor to reflect on Europe's motives for certain historical decisions, to trace the aftermath of these decisions in the present. And, more importantly, to ask a "what if?"-question, to speculate on how the EU's course would have looked like if other paths were chosen by past policy makers. 'I am not saying something is true, real or possible, but what if it were', Bellinck wondered on the imaginative power the potential utopian mood of such

"what if?"-question (Bellinck en van Dienderen 2019, 11). The figure of Otto von Habsburg is in that sense again illustrative for what Bellinck aspires to do. Embedding this story in *Domo de Eŭropa* does aspire to canonize von Habsburg, as the museum setting suggests, or to point out the visitor's inadequate knowledge of European History. What Bellinck demonstrates by including 'Otto von Europe' is the importance of inspiring individuals with a vision of the future. Although von Habsburg is not in every history schoolbook, he contributed to a united Europe, within the range of possibilities available to him. Europe could not have achieved what it has over the years without the passion of people like von Habsburg. In recent years, the debate about the future of Europe has not been dominated by Otto von Habsburg-like politicians, but by Nigel Farrage, Boris Johnson, Victor Orban, Matteo Salvini, Jarosław Kaczyński or Sebastian Kurz. What Europe needs are new narratives for the future, proposed by people like von Habsburg, and not the glorified narratives of half a century ago.

The use of scenography in *Domo de Eŭropa* illustrates how scenography does more than the mere assistance of the portrayal of events and objects. The ironic and critical treatment of the exhibition's infrastructure shows how scenography, as Hann stipulates, *does* something to us and the way we see, read, and think. It can disrupt, as *Domo de Eŭropa* does, a commonsense reading, and experience of the discourse presented within an exhibition and a museum. Manipulating the museum's infrastructure invites to reflect on other possible readings and experiences of the objects at display. In *Domo de Eŭropa*, the conventions at play in an exhibition responsible for shaping our gaze and knowledge are challenged by an assessment of these conventions of presentation and representation. Hann's distinction between scenography and scenographics proves not only to be fertile in surveying *Domo de Eŭropa* but also in the exploration of Bellinck present and ongoing research project *Simple as ABC*.

Towards a Museum of Human-Hunting

Interesting about Bellinck's current and ongoing project *Simple as ABC* is the way he integrates the scenography of the museum and exhibition in his performances on stage. As in *Domo de Eŭropa*, the use of some museal conventions is not limited to the mere presentation of objects or events. The 'affective destabilization' generated by *Domo de Eŭropa*'s scenography is transferred to *Simple as ABC* by using similar scenographic strategies (McKinney and Palmer 12). The role of dioramas, glass displays and frames on stage is to continue the examination of the politics of history, memory and (re)presentation Bellinck commenced in *Domo de Eŭropa.* Rachel Hann's notion of scenographics proves again to be fertile in exploring Bellinck's work. The use and manipulation of the exhibition's scenography on stage calls to our attention how orders of worlds orientate our actions and regulate our behavior in these worlds. Scenography isolates how worlds are made, felt, and

witnessed. Hence, as Hann concludes, 'scenographics have the potential to enact speculative worlds that afford new insights into what it means to be worldly or how to be *with* worlding orientation' (136). The exploration *Domo de Eŭropa* in the previous sections illustrates and endorses how scenography evokes such effect and reflections through the affective experience of visiting the fictive exhibition. This section focuses on what scenography *does* in three projects that are part the *Simple as ABC*-series and its role as 'agent for revealing act of worlding', as Hann describes the importance of what she calls 'scenographics' (2019: 135).

Simple as ABC#1: Man vs Machine (2015), a first instalment of the *Simple as ABC*-series, is a life-size replica of the control room of Frontex, the European Border and Coast Guard Agency based in Warsaw (figure 4). This twenty-first century diorama is accompanied by an audio recording of a conversation between Bellinck and a staff member of Frontex named Katja on the work and mission of Frontex. This installation was part of *Infini 1-15*, a performance created by Jozef Wouters and fifteen other artists.[2] Wouters posed each artist the following questions prior to the creation of the performance: "what kind of spaces could, or should new backdrops present or depict today?". The only restriction imposed by Wouters was that this question had to be answered by scenography, not by a monologue, lecture, or dramatic play. Bellinck answered this question by adapting and translating to the stage a diorama from *Domo de Eŭropa* depicting the Frontex-control room.

Bellinck's choice for the diorama is compelling because of the tradition of this dramatized mode of display used in museums. The diorama proliferated during the second half of the eighteenth century when state-controlled museums emerged and were staffed by professional researchers. The experts were no longer amateur researchers and their cabinets of curiosities, which were at that time a popular mode of presenting collections and an important source of knowledge. This shift had a significant impact on the moral and normative narrativizations delivered by the spatial ordering of displays defining the routes and pathways of the visitor. In the new epistemic modalities of the eighteenth century, the diorama was an epistemological tool for constructing scientific concepts of nature and to entertain the visitors by depicting animals and plants from the colonies in harmonic scenes wherein nature was uncontaminated and unspoiled (Aloi 2018, 103-116). Bellinck's engagement with this tradition, especially in relation to specificity of the project he was invited to, reverberates with the strategies employed in *Domo de Eŭropa*. Using the diorama as mode of display to present one of the EU's initiatives to observe, protect and police its borders Bellinck provokes the question whether we want such powerful and contested agencies to be associated with the history and values of the EU. This invitation to the

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[2] A more elaborate exploration of *Infini 1-15* by Jozef Wouters was part of the 'Theatre Architectures'-issue of *Theatre and Performance Design*. Delbecke, Jasper. 2019. "The theatre space as essayistic space: on *Infini 1-15* by Decoratelier", *Theatre and Performance Design*, 5:3-4, 233-249, https://doi.org/10.1080/23322551.2019.1692584.

audience is amplified by the context *Simple as ABC#1: Man vs Machine* was presented in. In the spirit of the question pursued by Wouters, Bellinck's diorama on stage of the theatre is an indictment and a concerned call for action. An indictment to articulate the influence of Frontex on the way refugees are treated at Europe's borders. A concerned call for action to stop the dehumanization of refugees and the reducing of human lives at risk as mere dots on the so-called "hots pots" at the fringe of the continent. Do we want these events to be presented as a reality or a reflection on reality on stage in the (near) future?

The use of parts of the scenography of a museum and the "what if?"-questions as in *Domo de Eŭropa* reappears on stage in *Simple as ABC #3: The Wildhunt* (2019) (figure 5). This third intermediate stop in Bellinck's ongoing research project is an audio performance with as its premise the celebration and institutionalization of the history of hunting, as displayed in one of the many hunting museums on European soil. Drawing on the work of French philosopher Grégoire Chamayou, Bellinck explains in the audio performance how the practice of hunting was not only limited to animals but was also applied to humans. As Chamayou outlines in his book *Manhunts*, human hunting is not a mere figure of speech but also entails concrete practices wherein humans were tracked and captured since the Ancient Greeks. The history of manhunting – on Indians, on the poor, on Jews, on foreigners, on illegals – attests to how each human hunt has its own rituals, techniques, and technology (Chamayou 2012). In the history of painting, a popular trope is "The Wild Hunt", a mythical ghostly hunting party driven by the wind, that runs at dusk in midwinters, with disaster following in its wake. Reflecting on hunting as an institutionalized practice Bellinck wonders in the opening sequence of the performance: 'What if would re-imagine the trope of "The Wild Hunt", today? How would be the hunters? Who would lead the hunting pack? Whom Would they hunt? What would happen if you were to put present-day human hunting on public view? What would that look like, a human hunting museum? Who would compose its collection? What would it consist of?'

These questions are answered in *Simple as ABC #3: The Wildhunt* by the stories of 'experts', as Bellinck announces them in the performance, who have intimate knowledge of the dynamics of human hunting today: refugees settled in one of the camps on the Greek Islands. The infrastructure of the museum translated on stage plays a key role in the presentation of these stories. On stage Bellinck is seated on a bench with a museum catalogue in his hands. On his right side, a bust of Aristotle, on his left an empty glass case. In the left corner of the stage, halfway up, a painted copy of Peter Nicolai Arbo's *Wild Hunt* (1877) is hanging. The combination of these elements evokes the idea of being in an exhibition space. The oral testimonies, taken from conversations Bellinck had with refugees, are presented through audio recordings, with the transcriptions projected on a LED-screen in the center of the stage. Within this exhibition-like setting, the LED-screen becomes a digital frame depicting stories instead of images in the imaginative museum of human hunting.

The choice to opt for oral testimonies in *Simple as ABC #3: The Wildhunt* creates an ambiguous situation in relation to the museum-like scenography on stage. One the one hand it demonstrates how these refugees are a part of silenced history and of an ongoing humanitarian crisis that takes place within the borders of the EU. The empty frame demonstrates their absence in the imagery of the official histories. On the other hand, the focus on the oral testimonies can be read as a reaction against the dominant imagery in the West of refugees at risk, in despair, in need, praying for help. As Bellinck explains in the performance: if you want to make a museum of human hunting, who decides what stories can be heard? What images can be made? Who composes these images and for the benefit from whom? Uttering such reflections in a museum-like-set up highlights again the power mechanisms at play in the construction of an exhibition. Paintings, busts, sculptures, or dioramas are often created from the perspective of the conqueror, not from the perspective of those conquered. Such hierarchies are inevitably reflected in how discourses take shape trough the scenography of the museum.

But Bellinck's critical appraisal in *Simple as ABC #3: The Wildhunt* is not limited to the museum and its apparatus. Flanked by the bust of Aristotle, Bellinck addresses the audience with an exposition on Aristotle's *Politics*, wherein he sets out the idea that some are born to govern, and others are born to be governed. His ideas on natural subjection, as Bellinck argues in the performance, shaped Western civilization, and underpinned the colonial project, imperialism, and slavery. Bellinck stipulates Aristotle's influence on how we tell stories and how these stories shape our world. The arousal of fear and pity are key ingredients in the Aristotelian tragedy and determined the blueprint on how stories are told, and to certain extent, how images are constructed in the West. By listening only to the stories and anecdotes narrated in different languages, *Simple as ABC #3: The Wildhunt* counters the excess of dehumanizing imagery representing precarious situation of people at risk. Instead, the testimonies of the refugees reveal the gradual process of dehumanization as they experience on a daily basis. But with each testimony being a variation on the same theme – people on the run, being hunted by others – the repetitivity becomes a challenge to keep your attention as a spectator. While listening to the stories, one hovers between being in a theatre space and an exhibition space. The lack of the classical dramaturgical ingredients of pity, fear, or catharsis confronts the audience with the influence on our reception of stories of these conventions we are accustomed to when being in the theatre space. The absence of visual stimuli to create an image based on the oral testimonies illuminates how our attention wanes, as in a museum, and how we quickly we have the desire to move on to something else. What this ambivalence in *Simple as ABC #3: The Wildhunt* articulates is the urgent call to reflect on *how* to tell these untold, inconvenient, ignored, or invisible (hi)stories, even more then whose stories should be told or be on display. It is the charting of these blind spots, as highlighted in *Domo de Eŭropa*, that is reiterated in *Simple as ABC #3: The Wildhunt* and continues in the current phase of Bellinck's *Simple as ABC*-series.

A final example to illustrate Bellinck's critical and speculative approach toward the scenography of institutions is his most recent installation *Simple as ABC #6: The Antwerp Museum of Human-Hunting* (2021) (figure 6). In this sixth and more modest part of his series, Bellinck draws upon the architecture of a St. Dominicus church in Antwerp by using the confessional chair as a booth to listen three testimonies.[3] The confessions are taken from interviews and conversations Bellinck had over the years with high-ranking border managers working in EU institutes and agencies. As the original audio recordings cannot be used, each conversation was carefully reconstructed in verbatim style. The interviewees expand on the new technologies deployed to trace, to hunt, to catch and control refugees at the borders of the EU. One border manager talks about the technological innovations on the level of scent-tracking of humans. Whereas dogs were partnered up for centuries to hunt preys, the EU devoted 1,835891€ to SNOOPY, a research project that developed a portable electronic nose as an artificial alternative to dogs. Another border manager talks constantly about 'data subjects' instead of humans, people or refugees. He explains how people are coerced to give their fingerprints upon their arrival in an EU country and how these are stored in the EURODAC database.

Listing to these verbatim style testimonies seated in these confessional chairs one is summoned to listen to what is said but even more to listen how it said. The tone of one's voice, the hesitations, the stumbling, or the speeding up of one's stories often reveals more about one's relation to the sensitive subject matters discussed by these border managers. What stands out on the one hand is the familiarity and the normality in the way they talk about their work. When you hear them talk, it is as if they can't estimate the impact of what they do as someone who contributes to an organization that tracks, captures, and controls people at risk. On the other hand, one senses bits of hesitation in their voice from the moment Bellinck points to the dubious ethics of their work. It suggests that these people do know what their work entails and how it contributes to the dehumanization of refugees but for some reason they are restrained to speak up. Within the setting of a confessional seat, the testimony becomes a confession. But a confession on what? And to whom are the confession addressed? Bellinck juxtaposes the dehumanising mindset and discourse uttered by those in charge of the EU-mobility policy with a place rooted in catholic notions of compassion, sanctuary, and salvation. Notions that are expressed in churches, celebrated in museums, and turned into guiding principles for the formation of the EU and the values it conveys and promotes. As in *Domo de Eŭropa*, an information panel is hanging next to the curtain of the confessional seats. They provided information on the genealogy of human hunting, the use of dogs in the

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[3] *Simple as ABC #6: The Antwerp Museum of Human-Hunting* was one of the contributions to the group exhibition *Radically Naive / Naively Radical* curated by Joachim Naudts in Kunsthal Extra City (Antwerp, Belgium) from May 7th 2021 – November 11th 2021. Other participating artis were: Ben Benaouisse, Seyni Awa Camara, Saddie Choua, Helga Davis & Anouk De Clercq, Vesna Faassen & Lukas Verdijk, Iman Issa, Léonard Pongo, Egon Van Herreweghe, Gert Verhoeven, Katarina Zdjelar

hunt for people and the history of fingerprints. With the installation framed as *Simple as ABC #6: The Antwerp Museum of Human-Hunting*, a similar distance to our present as in *Domo de Eŭropa* is created through the manipulation of the conventional means of an exhibition. As in *Domo de Eŭropa*, it is as if we are removed in time from the ongoing situation as sketched on the information panels and told in the verbatim confessions. Presented in a church that has become an exhibition space suggests that the events, situations, and facts uttered by the interviewees belong to a past.

In search of potential histories

Although the museum as an institution and the politics of collecting, storing, governing, and exhibiting objects are subject nowadays for a vast number of critical and crucial surveys, it seems as if, when it comes to the design and infrastructure of an exhibition, a similar expansion of design in exhibition-making practices is less prominent as was the case with design and the notion of 'expanded scenography' in the field of theatre. Many of the ongoing debates on the collections of ethnographic or national museums are concerned with the ontology of objects, works and artefacts exhibited, the provenance of the objects, the politics of selection and presentation and the kind of epistemologies produced by certain modes of display. Encouraged by reflections of performance theory (Von Hantelmann 2010; Rebentisch 2012) or philosophy (Latour 2005), there is a growing attention for the performativity and agency of artworks, objects, and the constellations they are presented in. But these deliberations end when it comes to the infrastructure of an exhibition or museum, i.e. labels, display cases, pedestals, mannequins, stuffed animals, frames, cabinets, dioramas, or the exhibition space's spatial dramaturgy.

The works of Thomas Bellinck explored here in this text illustrate how longstanding conventions, techniques and instruments of displaying objects and events in the context of an exhibition and museums are by no means innocent, neutral or unproblematic. What Rachel Hann's notion of scenographics helps to reveal here is the critical and speculative potential of scenography in directing 'towards a methodology for investigating the place orientating techniques and political narratives that culturally position bodies and peoples within a spatial imaginary of world' (2021: xvii). 'To study scenographics', Hann concludes, 'is to study how world imaginaries are encountered through material cultures' (2021: xviii). Whereas Hann's notion was productive to explore *Domo de Eŭropa* and parts of the *Simple as ABC*-series, art historian Astrid von Rosen points at the potentiality of 'scenographics' for art historians and the study of art history. As von Rosen argues and as the work of Bellinck exemplifies, scenographics can help to exposes the ideological charges and normativities underpinning the presentation of art and articulate the critical complexities of felt, situated and bodily experiences of art and multisensory cultures (68-69).

In her book *Potential History: Unlearning History*, political theorist and photographer Ariëlla Aïsha Azoulay tracks and explores the imperial foundations of knowledge and the role institutions as museums and archives played in the imperial modes of ordering time, space, and politics. She compares moments in history where things, people, events, or facts were removed, suppressed, ignored, or made irrelevant by dominant discourses with the closing of a camera shutter. Once the camera shutter closes, the picture rolling out of the camera will be obtained and presume to exist, the rest is erased. Azoulay thinks about imperial violence in terms of the operation of a camera shutter. As she explains: 'it means understanding how this brief operation can transform an individual into a refugee, a looted object into a work of art, a whole shared world into a thing of the past, and the past itself into a separate time zone, a tense that lies apart from both present and future' (6). The camera made some worlds visible and acceptable, other worlds were destructed. As demonstrated by Bellinck's *Domo de Eŭropa* and the *Simple as ABC*-series, the same process of transformation takes place when an artefact is placed behind glass, a picture is framed, or an event is restaged in a diorama. As the lens of the camera, the scenography of an exhibition helps to obtain a sharp, legible, and precise depiction of what is at display. Once something was framed or locked up behind glass it is shut of its origin. Whereas pictures, in Azoulay's words, create and at the same time neglects worlds, the same partition takes place in the way objects are arranged and framed.

By the eerie temporal distance created in *Domo de Eŭropa* and *Simple as ABC*-series to our present, Bellinck evokes a situation wherein it seems possible to undo, to use Azoulay's words, the violence of the camera shutter. By exhibiting and musealizing our present as if it belongs to the past, he invites the spectator to reflect on how this could be undone and what other outcomes could be possible. Azoulay's notion of 'potential history' reverberates in Bellinck's work. In what she defines as 'potential history', one does not solely tell and recognize the imperial violence. Potential history, as Azoulay notes, is 'a deliberative attempt to pulverize the matrix of history, to disavow what was historized by making repressed potentialities present again with the fabricated phenomenological field of imperial history, present to be continued' (288).

Azoulay distinguishes her notion of potential history with what is known as counterfactual history and alternative history. Whereas alternative history strives to replace a dominant historiography and to ascribe a certain cohesiveness to the history they seek to counter, potential history avoids such a cohesiveness. 'The point [of potential history]', Azoulay argues, 'is not giving a voice to a silenced past and making the invisible visible but releasing the past from its "pastness" and letting it assume the vitality of what has always been there' (350). Counterfactual history evolves around "what if?"-questions and suspends the consequences of a major event to open it up for a variety of new possible outcomes to take place. "What if?" is a powerful query but a common mistake made by these counterfactual histories, according to Azoulay, is that it is often limited to 'the expression of

the imagination of an individual historian, dreaming about changing history retroactively, while ignoring concrete aspirations shared by different groups and people who resisted imperial violence' (352).

Although this "what if ?"-question is deployed as a premise for *Domo de Eŭropa* and the installations from *Simple as ABC*, Bellinck does not fall in this trap because some of the events that take place on the European continent, as addressed in his work, are not fully part of the past. The rise of anti-EU-sentiments, the waning belief in democracy, the hunt for illegals or the growing gap between the wealthy North and the poorer South of the EU are examples of situations, developments and events that already started, still happen today but not necessarily have to continue tomorrow. What Bellinck provokes through the manipulation of the museum's scenography is an urgent call to reflect on how we want to remember our present time in the future. As a continent where the technologies were perfected to prevent people from participating in society? As a continent where corporate interest outweighed the protection of the environment? As a continent where people with no official documents are forced to do jobs Europeans longer want to do? Or as a continent that achieved after successive crises to restore the trust in the EU and its institutions by privileging care for its people and environment instead corporate interest and political agendas?

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Captions:

Figure 1: Thomas Bellinck - *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo* (2013 – 2018). Photo © Stef Stessel.

Figure 2: Thomas Bellinck - *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo* (2013 – 2018). Photo © Danny Willems.

Figure 3: Thomas Bellinck - *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo* (2013 – 2018). Photo © Stef Stessel.

Figure 4: Thomas Bellinck - *Simple as ABC#1: Man vs Machine* (2015). Photo © Phile Deprez.

Figure 5: Thomas Bellinck – *Simple as ABC#3. The Wild Hunt* (2019). Photo © Georges Salameh.

Figure 6. Thomas Bellinck - *Simple as ABC #6: The Antwerp Museum of Human-Hunting* (2021). Photo © Miles Fischler.