

Portfolio

A Future History of the Present

Thomas Bellinck & Sébastien Hendrickx

Editorial note: the text below is a reworked and edited rendition of the artist talk in interview format between theatre maker Thomas Bellinck and his dramaturge Sébastien Hendrickx during the Contemporaneities symposium.

Thomas Bellinck (TB): To allow for a higher degree of improvisation, we've decided to stage this artist talk as an interview.

Sébastien Hendrickx (SH): An interview based on a set of pictures. As a starting point, I suggest a close reading of this picture of one of the first spaces one encounters when visiting *Domo de Eŭropa Historio en Ekzilo (Domo)*, your futuristic-historical museum about life in the former European Union, presented for the first time in 2013. In what way does it blend fiction and reality, as well as different times and spaces?

TB: This “blend,” as you call it, is something that is present in *Domo* on many different layers. Fiction is first of all present in the way the work is framed. In order to present *Domo*, we thought up an imaginary group of people — the “Friends of a Reunited Europe” — who supposedly built it. Nowhere within the museum is it explicitly mentioned that I, together with others, have built it. Then, we also have a level of fiction which is more formal, in the sense that a lot of the images and objects we present in the museum do not exist and are our own fabrication. At the entrance, there are more or less four spaces that function as a kind of “prologue” to the exhibition. The design of the fourth space is loosely based on the porch of the Ho Chi Minh mausoleum in Hanoi. On the left-hand side, you have what I call “The Beginning of the Beginning,” which is actually a photograph of the signing of the Treaty of Rome in 1957, which is one of the first key moments in the establishment of the European Union. On the right-hand side, you see “The Beginning of the End,” a picture representing the accession of Montenegro, Scotland, Serbia and the Republic of Upper Macedonia to the European Union in 2020, which is actually a very cruddy, photoshopped image. So, when entering the museum, you stumble upon this sumptuously decorated, deep blue wall, with a historical document on the left-hand side, a counterfactual picture on the right-hand side and in between this gilded, ceremonial gate, which



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looks like the entrance to a mausoleum. And we present this wall as a kind of outtake, an *objet trouvé*, or found object, the front of which, much like the swing doors and the pictures, we cover in plastic. This is something that comes back again and again throughout *Domo*: we try to confuse the visitor, in the sense that the museum looks as if it is still under construction, about to be renovated, or actually falling apart. I think this confusion, embodied in this spatial prologue to the work, is a good metaphor for the European Union as well: it is not always very clear at which of the three stages it actually is.

Although at certain moments we do “predict” the future and project what is going to happen to the EU — I have to admit that I sometimes got it wrong but I will definitely come back to that later on — there is actually not much fiction on the level of the factual information we provide on the EU. The funny thing is, because we try to confuse spectators a lot on so many other levels, people start doubting the real stuff that is in the museum. This is also something we try to work on. It reflects on our historical amnesia: lots of people who visit *Domo* do not really know their own history that well, which makes it kind of easy to confuse them about it. So, quite often, people think that the things that are really true are completely fictional and the other way around.

SH: As a visitor to *Domo*, you get transported to another time, but it is never really clear where we are in time. You say that it is what will remain of the House of European History, funded by the European Parliament, in fifty years time, but you never mention exactly where you are as a visitor. But then, the official language in the museum is Esperanto, which is something old-fashioned, you could say. It is as dead as the egalitarian and universal idea that it once expressed. And also, consider what *Domo* looks like: I don't know what a museum will look like in 2050 or 2060, but I don't think it will look like this. *Domo* looks rather old-fashioned. So the question is: why did you not go all the way? Why did you not try to show some holograms or some virtual interactive displays? Why did you choose these specific aesthetics?

TB: It really depends on how you interpret what that means, “to go all the way.” It is certainly true that we never clearly indicate at what point in time you're visiting *Domo*. But we do give some subtle references: in an introductory text we casually refer to the “Second Interbellum” as the era of the visitors' grandparents. So, in a way, we simultaneously situate the visitors as grandparents in the historicized present and as their own grandchildren in the presentified future. When you're



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talking aesthetics, there are several reasons why *Domo* really looks like this. First of all, to me, it's really a museum about the present. It's not a museum about the future. I didn't want to try to imagine what the future would look like, since the future is really a pair of glasses through which we try to scrutinize the present — which makes a big difference, I think. Secondly, the reason why *Domo* looks the way it does — you call it “old-fashioned,” I'd rather call it “poor,” perhaps — is also because we try to establish this kind of post-apocalyptic atmosphere. To me, it has the aesthetics of, say, a Baked Bean or Lawnmower Museum, of this kind of museum that is usually built by one person on a very tight budget — someone who, in this case, has tried to scramble together the pitiful remains of the House of European History. *Domo* was very much inspired by one of my favorite one-man museums, namely the Museum of the 1989 Revolution in Timișoara, Romania. It is an absolutely fantastic museum; I recommend everybody to go visit it. It was set up by this one guy, a veterinarian, who, at some point, abandoned his job and ran off to Timișoara to go fight in the revolution. Ever since, he's been collecting stuff on the revolution. Just like our “Friends of a Reunited Europe,” the collector didn't really have a comfortable budget, and has really quite literally had to glue — sometimes conflicting — things together and display them in this dilapidated building. A visit to his museum actually starts with one room where you have to watch a self-made film, explaining why God picked Timișoara as the place to start the revolution, which I think is very interesting, because it immediately, very clearly presents you this hyper-subjective point of view. In any case, I guess it's no coincidence that to plenty of visitors *Domo* is reminiscent of Eastern Europe. Even though that's probably also the case because to many the former Eastern Bloc is the only example of a European cultural sphere that collapsed during its lifetime.

The most important is that with this style and with the use of Esperanto, I try to create a historical distance to the present. In order to do this, I thought it would be much easier to transport people into some kind of unknown future time by appealing to a certain aesthetics that they are somehow familiar with, rather than start dabbling in holograms and the like. Such a sci-fi approach would have directed the gaze too much to the future, creating a different focus with less temporal layers. In addition, the Esperanto gives you the feeling of being somewhere in Europe: you recognize the language, it really looks European, but at the same time it is foreign. While “Esperantists” (i.e., people who speak Esperanto) would say it is universal, it is actually quite Eurocentric. So, even

though every European can understand a few words, she or he never grasps the complete picture — which is also a good metaphor for the European Union.

SH: With this next picture, I want to ask you about the theatricality of *Domo*. There is this bourgeois notion of theatricality that links theatricality with the construction of an illusion, which, you could say, has culminated in cinema, and nowadays in video games. We also find it in the trend of experiential, immersive museums. Well, in the case of *Domo* we can also see something that tries to create an illusion, by making present-day objects look older. A big difference, of course, between these immersive museums and your museum is that yours is not a museum providing illusions but the museum is the illusion itself. So, I was wondering how you would describe the specifics of theatricality used in *Domo*.

TB: Instead of "theatricality," I prefer "performativity," because to me, *Domo* is much more performative than a theatrically scenographed exhibition. We appeal to the physicality of the visitors, who from regular spectators grow into performers activating the installation with their presence. My hope is that they become what I like to call "minds on legs," rather than just passive consumers. We only allow one person every five minutes to enter the museum, so usually you're entirely left to your own devices. We do this because we want to give the audience the feeling that they're completely on their own in this dusty museum about something called "the European Union." The experience becomes a very physical one: you walk through a lot of empty, desolate, dusty and decaying rooms, and it is often very boring. Theatricality often involves a certain degree of spectacularity and *Domo* is very non-spectacular and in that sense, I would say it is rather non-theatrical. We do not use any moving images or sound recordings. As a visitor you don't get a lot of impulses. Instead, there is a lot of text to read. Because of this absence of different stimuli, the visitor has to develop a different focus. People read and reread everything; they even try to read all the bloody labels in Esperanto. This non-spectacular dimension also induces a different experience of time, a different kind of visiting duration. Sometimes I have couples visiting *Domo*. Obviously, we separate them, because we need the five minutes in between every visitor. And I have this bar at the end of the exhibition, where I serve post-apocalyptic comfort drinks. It sometimes happens that, for example, a guy comes in, orders a vodka, and starts drinking. After like three shots of vodka, he gets very worried, because his wife is still not showing up, and he goes to look for her in the empty hallways. Half an hour later, she comes out. This guy is totally worried and he freaks out and goes like: "Where the hell have you been?"



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And the woman basically replies: “Thank god, this was the first time in my life I could really take my own time to visit a frigging exhibition” (laughter). I mean, we really leave it up to the visitors to take duration into their own hands.

As you say, *Domo* is not only a performative but also an immersive installation. But its sense of immersion is very different from, say, this Great War Museum I used to visit, where they had a reconstructed trench you could walk through. There were always lots of school kids running through it. In the trench you could hear gunshots and sound recordings of people going “Aaaaaaaaargh. Oh, my god!” At the end of the trench I once heard a kid shout: “Let's do it again!” I cannot really imagine that this is the feeling you wish your visitors to retain after they've visited the museum. The argument that is often used in this kind of experiential museums, is that visitors have to “feel,” “smell” and “touch” history. According to this idea, such experiences will give the audience a completely different, more “authentic” impression of history. But I think, if that's what you're aiming at, you should maybe also consider lowering the room temperature to a few degrees above freezing point, hiding chunks of fetid, rotten meat and having trained rats nibble at the kids' toes. I think this WWI-trench looked more like a movie about the Great War than the Great War itself. The way we tried to build *Domo* has a different attitude towards the notion of immersion. For one, we also try to involve “unattractive” elements, such as solitude, confusion, obscurity, fear, smell, etcetera. As far as the latter is concerned, apart from the damp smell that emanates from most of the venues we select anyway, we play around with the smell of decaying objects and pack-loads of hidden mothballs.

SH: So you do. Let's move on to the next image.

TB: OK, this is actually an image I usually never show, but I decided to do so today.

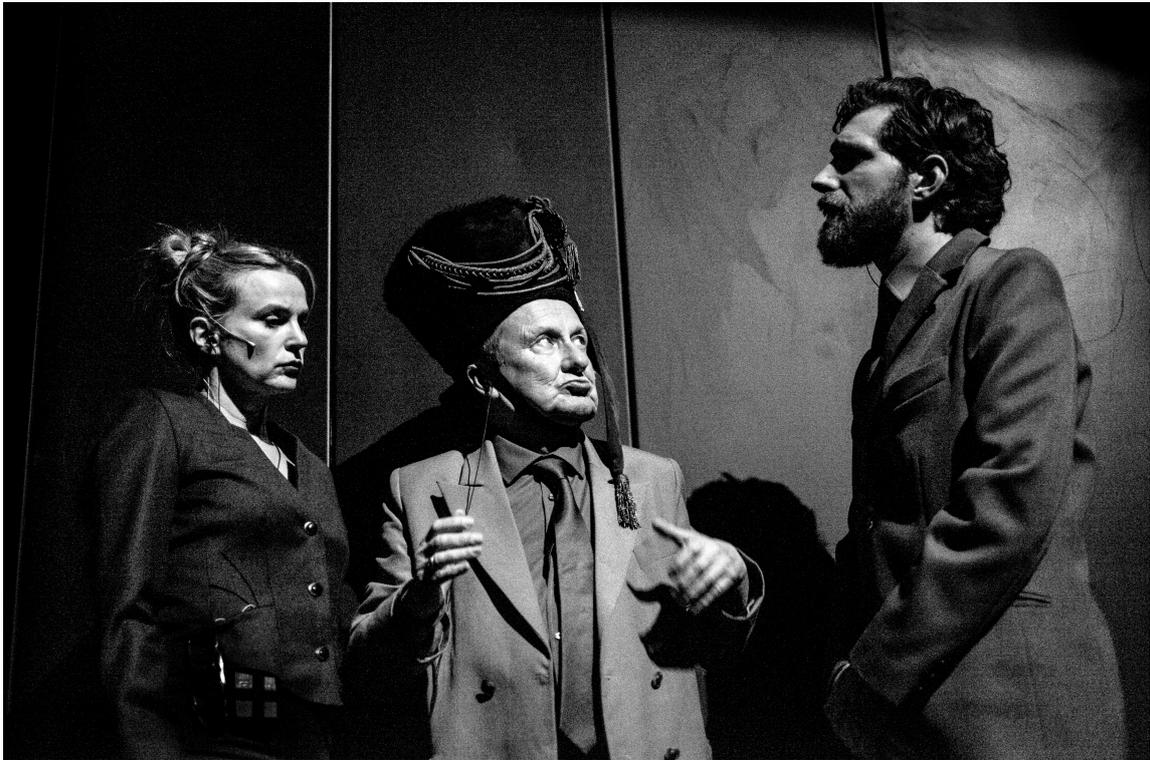
SH: This is the closing scene of your theatre piece *Memento Park*, which premiered in February 2015. In *Memento Park* you used the same strategy as in the museum project, historicizing the present. It was a piece about the commemoration of World War I, which, in Belgium, is something of a hot potato between the linguistic communities. In *Memento Park* you staged all kinds of people who were in some way connected to the commemoration of World War I and its commodification by the commemoration-industry, merchants, re-enactors or local politicians. Their voices were juxtaposed with the voices of people connected to contemporary warfare, like military advisors, ISIS insurgents



Photograph (c) Stef Stessel

or Syrian refugees. The performance evoked the question: how will we commemorate our contemporary wars? It is clear that in the piece you took a critical stance on the commemoration industry, but it could also be regarded as something that takes part in the commemoration, in an alternative, more critical way. Could it be regarded as an alternative way of commemoration?

TB: Sure, I think we could regard this as an alternative way of commemorating, even though I never intended it to be. I'd rather think of the performance as a "commemoration of the commemoration." Somebody recently used the word "pre-enactment" when we were talking about *Memento Park*, and I kind of liked that one, because parts of the performance indeed attempt to stage the future commemoration of our warlike present. But, not for a single moment in the performance do we attempt to commemorate World War I. Even the piece as a whole does not try to relate directly to World War I. The whole project was about scrutinizing the commemoration industry and specific groups that use history in order to make a claim on the future. Because I think that some of the mechanisms that are clearly visible in this commemoration share certain characteristics with the mechanisms that ultimately lead to conflict. I am not speculating about World War III or anything like that, but, unintentionally, local and geopolitical tension have started to surface in the way Flanders commemorates The Great War, and in the claims it makes on history in the process. Flanders was criticized a lot on an international level for the way it was trying to market the commemoration of a global conflict as a regional tourist event, without consulting specialist historians or joining forces with the Federal or Walloon authorities. I believe, if you really want to know what war is like, you should just ask the people involved. And they are actually right here today. There is one specific scene in *Memento Park* where I tried to deal with this issue: during the creation process of *Memento Park* I attended an Armistice Day ceremony together with my long-term artistic collaborator Jeroen Van der Ven, who was performing in the play. I was really surprised at how white and local this commemoration was. The age of the people commemorating, and what and who precisely they were commemorating tells a lot about the status of commemoration today. But during the event, there was this "funny" thing that took my attention. The commemoration took place in front of the grave of the Unknown Soldier, in the city centre of Brussels. On the other side of the road, there was a demonstration going on of Afghans who had not been recognized as war refugees and for months had been demanding the right to asylum. The police had kind of blocked the road between the commemoration,



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which was supposed to be serene and peaceful, and the shouting Afghans who were denied their right to reside in this country. I thought that was truly one of the most striking images of how this commemoration functions and does not function, of how inclusive and exclusive it is at the same time. So we tried to show that paradox in *Memento Park*.

SH: The well-known practice of “re-enactment” not only inspired you to create *Memento Park*, you also implemented it as a concrete tool for your actors. Their text was based on video footage and interviews you did with re-enactors, historians and politicians. Following the principles of “verbatim theatre,” the lines the actors said were literal fragments of those interviews and the actual recordings were fed to them through earphones. They were imitating these voices as exactly as possible. The play was thus a montage of very small re-enactments of these interview moments — including the “ers” and “ahs” and the moments when the interviewees stumble over their words. Why do you want to make this clear distinction between the “fictional” and the “documentary” value of the text material? Why was it so important to accentuate the documentary provenance of things like the actors’ words?

TB: I would not really say it was important to me to distinguish the fiction from the reality, because, I think, we really mix those on multiple layers. But anyway, for the actors, this approach was not that obvious. Jeroen can tell you all about how prescriptive this is for an actor. It is really taking away all timing, freedom and rhythm. But the reason why I really wanted to work with earphones and this idea of re-enactment, is because it allows for an on-stage “discourse analysis” of sorts. The method in a sense allows me to decontextualize specific speeches and discussions that are taking place in very different public contexts, on television and elsewhere. When you decontextualize these speeches and discussions, re-edit them, and show them in a theatrical setting — including lighting and costumes, you re-listen to them. You hear what is said differently. I do not only want people to hear what is said, but also how it is said. I think this “how-things-are-said” is crucial. The way people stumble, hesitate, repeat things, slow down or take a break, often reveals much more about the subjects and the subtext than what is literally uttered — especially with this kind of “explosive” material. This was of crucial importance to me: decontextualization on the one hand, and depersonalization on the other hand. For example, we took quotes from a famous right-wing, nationalist and separatist Flemish politician, but we did not try in any way to make the actor look like him. We did not try to refer to his name, or to

make clear that it was this specific, real-life guy who was talking. As we were aiming at commemorating the commemoration, we decided to perform our quotes as part of a script to some kind of ritual. Especially the first part of the performance is almost like a liturgical ceremony, which, in a way, is also all about re-enactment, because you hand down what has been said a hundred times before and you repeat the same old texts. I like the friction between the classical idea of liturgy and people who are stumbling and not exactly getting their words right, between the very informality and the formality of rituals.

SH: You are currently working on a project together with filmmaker Moon Blaise, called *The Miracle of Almería*. You are making a movie about the town of Almería in the south of Spain and are again exploring how past, present and future are intertwined.

TB: Well, actually, we recently decided to turn it into three movies. The trailer we are showing now is actually for part one, which features a visit by a General Franco impersonator to a home for the elderly, many of whom grew up during the Spanish Civil War. Let me first shortly frame what we're trying to work on in *the Miracle of Almería*.

Almería is a region in southern Spain, which is a junction of industrial agriculture, ecocide and mass migration. These global forces interact locally in a very strange way and director Moon Blaise and I wanted to address their complex concurrence, but we soon found out that it was very hard to say anything that has not already been said about these issues. There are many classic movies about industrial farming and exploitative labor conditions. In the sixties, for example, for *Harvest of Shame*, documentary filmmakers interviewed migrant workers about the harsh labour conditions in the south of the US. There are a lot of parallels to be drawn between the living and working conditions of workers on the Florida plantations and the situation of migrant laborers in Almería. For us as Europeans, it is very hard to say anything about it — not just to say something new but also to say something that would not reflect on our own position as filmmakers with a certain background. The fruit and vegetables grown in the region of Almería are the ones we buy in supermarkets here in Belgium. In order to deal with this element, we tried to look for a different way of creating a documentary. This is also the moment we realized there is a huge problem with documentary film making. “Documentary film,” as it has been developed in the last decade, has taken a lot of elements from the “fiction film” in the sense that



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documentary films try to tell a story with characters and a plot line. These characters are often objectified, unaware in what kind of movie they are playing. They are just filmed while they share their story and they are pushed into a very passive role. In my opinion, this is a very violent procedure. When we started to work on *The Miracle of Almería*, we tried to look for a different way to work with the local inhabitants that wouldn't convey how we see the region, but how they see it. This approach led to us finding frictions between how we see it, how they see it, and how we can juxtapose several conflicting views in one movie. For the first part of *The Miracle of Almería*, which really deals with the history of the region and the Franco regime, we decided to work with people from homes for the elderly, because they are pioneers of the region who turned this patch of wasteland into the goldmine that it still is today. These people have a very optimistic reading of their own local history, referring to it as "the miracle of Almería." Their unique selling point, the combination of plasticulture, cooperativism and labor exploitation, is now being exported to other regions in the world, amongst others to Mexico and to China.

SH: In the movie, you use re-enactment, but while you usually employ this technique within the walls of the theatre, here you use it in the public space. What did this produce?

TB: We came up with the idea to use re-enactment not as a final result (because we didn't want to (re)present the history of the region as such), but to use re-enactment as a means to interact with the people who wish to collaborate. By using re-enactment as a method, we turn these local people from passive characters into active collaborators or participants. This proved particularly successful when we tried to re-enact Franco's visit to Almería. In reality, Franco came to the region several times, but in the memory of the elderly, these visits had blended into one glorious entry into Almería. So, rather than working on the official history, we decided to work on their memories of those events. We worked together with them and tried to find out what a scene might have looked like in their different recollections. The re-enactment is not THE re-enactment of Franco's visit but it worked as a catalyst for something new. In the trailer you see Franco, who is played by a guy who works as a nurse in one of these homes for the elderly, arriving. But the scene really kicks off the moment the elderly participants all start discussing his costume, his voice, and they start directing him, as well as each other.

SH: This seems similar to the way in which Joshua Oppenheimer worked with his collaborators in his film *The Act of Killing*, when he asked perpetrators of the killings during the dictatorship in Indonesia to re-enact and re-imagine their own past actions?

TB: Yes and no. Of course the creation process of *The Miracle of Almería* bears resemblance to *The Act of Killing* or the movies of the English filmmaker Peter Watkins. But there are crucial differences. *The Act of Killing* is an amazing movie, but in my view, it is extremely manipulative. Director Joshua Oppenheimer takes an outside perspective and he has this very cathartic kind of way of trying to reveal the criminals and shove their misdeeds in their own faces. It leads up to this moment where one of the former murderers in a very animalistic way almost throws up when watching himself re-perform his own brutalities. During the process of *The Miracle of Almería* we realized that we are as much entangled in the problematic situation of Almería as any local inhabitant. There is almost no way I could cook supper without buying their produce. So I cannot take the outside position, as Oppenheimer does. I cannot take a distance and make a film about how I think they are wrong or right. Many of the elderly “pioneers” we work with have experienced the atrocities of civil war and have lived under the Franco regime. Their one generation shift from rags to riches really defines their relationship with the migrant workers, creating a very specific kind of balance. It is a very complex situation. That is also why I thought it was very important to show how this region came about, together with them. In the second episode, we work more closely with some of the laborers, reconstructing race riots that took place in 2000. In the third one, we try to bring all the different stakeholders together — legal as well as illegalized. But that's a different story.

SH: Let's turn to the last question and back to your museum project *Domo de Eüropa Historio en Ekzilo*. It premiered in 2013 and recounted the story of the European Union from the perspective of a faraway future. In that history you situated the end of the European Union in the year 2018 – in 2013 the near future and today the very near future. Everything that happened after June 2013, when the work was first presented, was by definition speculative fiction. Of course, we are now in 2016, so a lot of things happened which you did not predict. Also, some objects that were in *Domo* have acquired a completely different meaning nowadays, when you see Angela Merkel as a lemon juicer here.

TB: You can still buy this thing online for about twenty Euros. It's fantastic!



Photograph (c) Jeva Griskjane

SH: You have restaged the project several times since 2013 and to resume it not only made it travel through time, but also from one space to the other. We first presented it in Brussels, right in the European quarter, after that in Rotterdam and Vienna. Now we are about to present it in Athens, which, of course, has a very problematic relation with the EU, and in Wiesbaden. Do you adapt *Domo*? And in which ways do you adapt it to the current situation?

TB: There are several levels of revision or adaptation. Firstly, there is the level of speculative information, which I adapt constantly, from the names of future European Commission Presidents and the next European Parliamentary Election results to the further course of the Caliphate Wars and the eruption of the first Pan-European Pogrom. Things shift so quickly these days; it's easy to predict some general tendencies, but the details are another matter altogether. Clearly, we get those wrong all the time. Funnily enough, I often get belated reactions from people who send me an email two years after their visit, saying: "It's all happening, it's all coming true." I find this very intriguing, because I wonder what it is that is coming true. The present? Secondly, there is the level of geography, the countries and cities where we present the museum, their history and relationship with the EU. Initially we designed *Domo* rather generically to be set "somewhere in Europe." But as we started traveling, we soon discovered that things that work in Brussels, do not necessarily elsewhere. So long, universality... I remember for the first version we were looking for some kind of "patron saint" for the museum, a historical founding father who possessed all the necessary mythological qualities but had sunk into oblivion. We picked Otto von Habsburg, the last crown prince of the Austro-Hungarian Empire turned trailblazing MEP. And we painted him a nice, saintly gilded icon. And in Brussels and Rotterdam that functioned really well; people often thought he was completely fictional. But then in Vienna heated debates erupted. After the First World War Otto and his family had been exiled from Austria. Our translator told us for the Vienna version we were legally bound to drop the "von" in "von Habsburg." Of course, I'd anticipated some excitement, but who'd have thought that as soon as his gilded icon went up the wall, hardcore monarchists would also start visiting the museum. At the bar they confided to me that the EU's current woes could only be overcome by the restoration of the empire.

SH: I remember you saying that your views on the EU have also changed a lot since 2013. Maybe that is also something important to bring up?

TB: Yes, absolutely. That's yet another level. The position of the EU in the mind of a lot of people has really shifted between 2013 and right now. I have the impression there's another kind of debate going on; people seem to be much more aware than before. And then, as you say, there's me. I really no longer agree with a lot of the interviews I gave about the project back in 2013. I'm always having a hard time when a theatre or a festival is presenting *Domo* and quoting my words from 2013. Of course, I really meant what I said back then, but I simply no longer think the same. For example, in 2013, I repeatedly said in interviews that I really wanted to trigger in the audience this kind of sensation of going to the funeral of an acquaintance that is actually not dead. The museum, I said, 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. Looking back on all the overlapping crises of the past few years and the way EU institutions and member states handled them or did not manage to or blatantly refused to handle them, I think this no longer holds true. I think, right now, I would rather describe *Domo* as my reply to Gramsci when he said, and I'm paraphrasing: "a crisis is the moment when the old is dying and the new cannot be born." Even though we can't seem to let go of it, the old is dying beyond all doubt. 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, in order to move on and go to the next level, so the new can be born at last.

