

DECORATELIER

INFINI 1-15

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DE NIEUWE TONEELBIBLIOTHEEK

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prologue

A middle-sized théâtre à l'italienne. Worklights and houselights on. The audience enters the building through a gate at the back of the theatre, crossing the empty stage to reach the seats, either on the parterre or one of the three balconies.

Scenographer Jozef Wouters is on a chair in front of the stage, accompanied by the dramaturge Jeroen Peeters, who places images on a projector. The first image shows a cartoon of a wolf blowing a pig's wooden hut to smithereens.

jozef Good evening. My name is Jozef Wouters, I am the scenographer of Decor-atelier. This is Jeroen Peeters, the dramaturge, and on behalf of the entire Decor-atelier we'd like to welcome you to the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels.

We have the chairs. We have the shape of this auditorium. We have the proscenium arch. points behind him at the proscenium And also, we have the architecture of this stone building, and its specific location on this square that was once a harbour in the middle of a city that is often hard to understand.

But on top of all that, before we show our collection of fifteen *Infinis*, there are one or two things I would like to tell you, things which I believe could help to focus your gaze on what you'll be seeing in the course of the next few hours.

During the first discussion of this project two years ago – I was at a table with the artistic board of the Royal Flemish Theatre – someone said that instead of referring to this building as a fortress, I should rather think of it as a covered square. Just before that comment, someone else at the table had said that it would be good if I would do a project in this house.

A square. A house. What sort of a building is it that wants to be both a house and a square? How can we imagine such a place?

The scale model of the latest renovation of this building, now ten years old, is made of Plexiglas. It's completely transparent.

The YaŞıl Teatr or 'Green Theatre' was built in the mid-1960s in Baku in Azerbaijan: an open-air theatre where at the time of the Soviet regime 2,500 people could watch concerts and plays against a background of trees, a bay, the sea and a setting sun. But at the end of the 1990s, a cardboard factory was built just behind the stage. So when it came to renovating the theatre recently, it was decided that an artful wall should

be built at the back of the stage. A sort of permanent scenography, mainly there to obscure the cardboard factory from view.

I imagine that, there in Azerbaijan, in a few years' time they will need another wall on the right, and then one on the left, and eventually a roof, a foyer, a vestiaire and a façade with busts of famous Azerbaijani playwrights.

I think we attach too much importance to the open-air theatres of classical antiquity. I think we should look more closely at the development of covered theatres, at the centuries of building, of searching for ways to accommodate a large number of people under the same roof without columns obstructing the view and without daylight and noise disturbing the concentration. Seeing all the effort that went into ensuring that, tonight, we can all see and hear more or less the same thing, one suspects that a building like this never really had the desire to be a square. And that this roof and these thick walls are here for a reason on this square in this city, today.

Two years ago I set up my atelier here in the props room on the fifth floor of the stage tower. points upward behind him They had to move a few halberds and swords and other props to make room for my working table. After a few months of wandering around, seeing shows come and go every week,

I realized that for this project I would have to do what the Italian scenographer Servandoni had already tried at the beginning of the eighteenth century.

In 1737, Giovanni Niccolò Servandoni, writing about his first ‘Spectacle des Machines,’ said that he wanted to free scenography and painting from the yoke of their sisters: poetry and dance. The king of France had given him the use of a large theatre in Paris and that is where he began to work on his great dream: theatre shows consisting only of scenography, only décor. For his first show he decided to paint a set based on a painting of the interior of Saint Peter’s Basilica in Rome. Just that.

It was his intention, Servandoni wrote, that people who didn’t have the money to go to Rome could nevertheless marvel at this feat of architecture. For his second show he decided to introduce greater variety, so he made seven different décors appear and disappear one after the other. This was not a great success, and Servandoni died bankrupt. His obituary noted his exceptional talent as well as his difficult character.

Three hundred years after Servandoni we have live streaming and virtual reality and Ryanair flies you to Rome and back for 19.99 Euros, but in the centre of Brussels there is still a building, which, despite having been altered and renovated three times, still looks more or less like the theatre in which Servandoni worked. A building that

enables you to shut out the city and shut in a select audience that focuses its attention on a stage where the same questions can still be asked: how can we imagine space? How can we collectively imagine a place in which – at this very moment – we are not?

Scenographers like Servandoni, as well as Carlo Galli da Bibbiena, Albert Dubosq and, of course, Anna Viebrock, have always travelled a great deal in search of inspiration for their sets. I love the idea that, historically speaking, a scenographer needs these two things most of all: walking shoes for inspiration, and, afterwards, a paintbrush with a long stick to paint her or his impressions on giant canvases.

Because I had called myself a scenographer for ten years but never learned to paint, I took lessons with Monsieur Thierry Bosquet, a retired scenery painter, almost eighty years old, who spent much of his life working for La Monnaie opera house. Monsieur Bosquet talked about vanishing points and illusions, and he taught me to use that brush with the long stick.

I didn't put on the walking shoes. I decided to stay here, in the Decoratelier, and to invite correspondents: artists, theatre makers and journalists. We told each of them about Servandoni and asked them which décor we could build for them.

Which landscape would you like to present in this theatre today?

We gave one restriction. We will only show décor. Only space that refers to other spaces. Only scenography that wants to be a bridge between here and there.

This is a presentation of the collection of the fifteen resulting *Infinis*. You can think of it as an essay; the essay, which the philosopher Bart Verschaffel describes as a search for

a place where a timid subject can appear.

The essay, Verschaffel continues, is to science what the painter is to the architect. The comparison makes me think of scenography, with its ephemeral spaces in wood, fabric and paint, as a form of space that, even more than architecture, is able to search and hesitate and adapt.

When an architect visits his building site there is no space for doubt, while here at the Decoratelier our correspondents and builders have continued to negotiate until just before the presentation – until today actually – about the spaces we are now going to show. puts down the microphone, then realizes he forgot to say something

One more thing. It is important to say that when the door at the back of the stage opens during one of the *Infinis*, this is purely out of technical necessity. It is never our intention

to reveal the square and the city behind that door, as if they are more real than what is happening in here.

Scenographer and dramaturge remove the small projection screen, walk towards the left and the right of the stage, respectively, move the side panels of the proscenium about one meter inward.

michiel soete –
infini #3: seldom real

Worklights on. Heavy drones and electronic organ sounds. A large grey cloth descends at the back of the stage and is laid out by five technicians.

michiel voice-over

I travelled to the painted desert
in search of an infinite landscape
I discovered it's all about light and colours
and what it does in your mind
But I'm colour blind
This is an impression of what I think I saw
I hope you don't see the same

A semi-transparent screen descends at the front of the stage. When it hits the floor a boom resounds and all the lights dim. An extended play of smoke, coloured lights and ambient sounds unfolds over the course of ten minutes.

Worklights and houselights on. Elevator music. Technical changeover.

jozef parterre What you are seeing now is a changelement. It's a technical changeover from one Infini to the next. We'll have quite a few of these tonight. points behind him at the stage The metal bars that you see going up and down are called 'fly bars'. There are 48 fly bars in this theatre that can go up and down individually. Over the past two years, when we were talking about this project with the correspondents, we would often say that we wanted to turn this building into a giant book of 48 pages, one for each fly bar. All fifteen correspondents would get three fly bars to hang something on. We imagined an audience that would come in here to read this book of spaces page after page.

A changelement like this is an excellent moment to stretch your legs. You can walk around and you can talk. There is water available in the water fountains here on the both sides of the parterre. If you want to go outside at some point, that is not a problem. There is a door over here that takes you right to the street. points to the right That's also where you'll find the toilets.

The bar on the square outside is open the whole time, and if you want to come back in, this blue bracelet gets you in at any time today or tomorrow.

Maybe it would be good to have no fixed seats, so you can choose to sit wherever you like and even change your

viewing position during the show. points up My favourite seats are on the second balcony. The parterre is not necessarily the best place to sit but that's for you to decide.

Houselights dim.

sis matthé –
infini #6

The port of Antwerp, depicted in linear perspective and painted in three plans onto cloth by Thierry Bosquet. Atmospheric lighting suggests the course of a day.

sis first balcony, cour You don't know me, Thierry. I've been sent by Jozef to see if any of the backdrops you painted are still in the port of Antwerp. You do know Jozef. He took scenic painting classes from you. You are a master of perspective and vanishing points, Thierry. That's what Jozef says. I don't know you, but I looked you up and I know that you have a prolific career as a scenic painter behind you, that you live in a setting in Uccle, behind a façade that suggests little grandeur but is an ode to beauty.

I don't know exactly what Jozef wants with your backdrops. La Monnaie opera house has dismantled sets stored in containers in the port of Antwerp. Isn't that strange, Thierry?

Is that perhaps just the cheapest way to keep something safe? To me the port seems like the edge of a cliff and it's just a matter of waiting long enough until the limestone crumbles off by itself. Until the containers fall and break into thousands of unrecognizable pieces.

Until rain gets inside or they're broken into, containers getting accidentally damaged. They call that a stay of execution. Living on the edge.

I'm on the train from Brussels to Antwerp. Keep your eyes open, Jozef said, so I'm taking notes. I'm addressing them to you because otherwise I can't write, Thierry.

Otherwise

my text would be balanced on the edge of that same cliff from the very start. I'm guessing that I'll be encouraged by you, at least indirectly. That'll be necessary.

On the train I drifted in and out of an uneasy sleep. I know what's coming now. I know the lingering headache. It'll disappear after another night. The pain is a punishment for not following the day's rules. Stay awake, always stay awake.

The sunlight in the station is surprising. The rubber handrails of the escalator are almost too hot to hold. They run a bit too quickly, so I'm leaning over by the end. A booming voice spouts arrival and departure information in unmeasured sentences, combinations of places, times and standard phrases. The voice sounds surprised, it slows and accelerates at the wrong moments, and it changes pitch a number of times per message. In the station hall everyone looks into the distance. It's my first time here.

To my shame, I know the Antwerp station primarily from the book *Austerlitz* by W.G. Sebald, Thierry. In the book, after his arrival at the station, the narrator tries to find relief for his headache in the Nocturama of the nearby zoo.

I consider doing the same thing, as a cure for my own headache, but the admission ticket for the zoo is too expensive to ignore the absurdity of the situation. I decide not to take the re-enactment of the book too far and to spend my money on a painkiller in the pharmacy in the station. It's a reasonable decision but it feels like betraying what could have been a beautiful story, an interruption of a literary pain that would gently subside in the dark of the Nocturama, healed by the nocturnal gaze of slender lorises and Senegal bush babies.

In the underground parking garage I rent a bike with seven useless gears. On the bike I feel lethargic. A sign next to the road tells me that my speed is eleven kilometres an hour. Because I'm under the speed limit I get a smiley in return, but that's not how I feel. At this rate it'll be two hours before I reach the containers.

I just met some dockworkers, Thierry. By chance, in fact. I was standing next to my bike looking at the directions I had printed, when

a group of dockworkers passed by.

‘Lost, buddy?’

He’s hoarse. I barely understand him.

‘I have to go to Nieuwe Westweg. Any idea?’

‘Ooh, that’s still far. A bit further to the right, over the bridge, straight to the end of the road, and then to the left, and keep following. Right?’

He looks at one of his buddies, who nods.

‘With the bike it’s probably still forty-five minutes,’ replies another. He’s also hoarse.

‘Are you all hoarse?’ I ask.

‘That comes with it. We yell all day from the bottom of a ship to the shore. No high-level talk, mostly just “Stop, stop, stop!” Our voices can’t take that much abuse. We all suffer from it. Leon Square Head over there once lost his voice for two weeks. And Less over there too.’

‘And that’s his twin brother, More. He even had an operation on his voice. That didn’t help at all. Only a few of us don’t suffer. They yell and scream all day without getting hoarse.

But I can count those guys on the fingers of one hand.

Nico the Microphone, Johnny Megaphone and Ahmed the Loudspeaker. That’s it. No one else. Fat Napoleon, Big Flute, Chic Willy, The Head, The Millionaire.

Problems, all of them. Vocal cord nodules.

In the late shift there’s a dockworker who sang in a rock band in his free time. He had to stop. It didn’t make sense

anymore. Always hoarse, lost voice. It didn't work anymore.'

I have an idea, Thierry. In a remote mountain forest in northern Oaxaca in Mexico and on La Gomera, one of the Canary Islands in the Atlantic Ocean, they use a whistled language to communicate across long distances. Make no mistake, Thierry, not like the birds, not the impolite whistling at a person as if at a dog, nor whistling at women. No smoke signals, but a very subtle, refined form of whistling, a whistled language in which whole conversations can be conducted. It's a higher form of language, an abstract language, just as abstract art comes after figurative art. Do you understand that, Thierry, that the farmers in Mexico and the islanders in the ocean are more advanced than we are? They don't even have to use words.

Don't whistle out of context, Thierry, that's the golden rule. A Mexican farmer who whistles to his colleague in another cornfield proceeds from one important rule: don't whistle out of context. What you whistle has to do with where you whistle. Every sentence contains the place where it is whistled. Here. Here I am whistling. No philosophical reflections but things such as: 'Come up the hill.' 'Should I come to you?' 'What are you doing over there?' 'What are you going to do tomorrow?' 'I'm

not going to do anything at all; I'm just going to sleep a bit.'

You can't whistle the language very far, but far enough. Far enough is the future here, Thierry, in the port.

I'm in the training room for dockworkers.

With a proposal. Two birds with one stone, Thierry. I protect the whistle language from extinction and the dockworkers from voice problems. Step one, Thierry, is complete.

This has to work.

I've just spoken to the boss. Zamenhof is his name. I proposed that the dockworkers be trained in a whistle language of their own, that perhaps some villagers from La Gomera be flown over at the expense of the port office to teach all the dockworkers to whistle, so they can exchange ideas with one another without becoming hoarse, without any equipment.

I know someone we can ask. Guaire, for example, the little boy who didn't want to whistle and cried but at the age of fourteen appeared to be the best in the class and went on to master the language so well that today even the birds listen. Three times a day, from a hilltop on La Gomera, he whistles a chapter from one of the highlights of Canarian literature, something from Benito Pérez

Galdós for example, whose book *Tristana* was filmed by Luis Buñuel with a magnificent Catherine Deneuve in the leading role. In the movie Deneuve evolves from two childish braids into an impressive woman with a false leg, which was not lost on Hitchcock – he couldn't stop talking about *Tristana's* false leg when he met Buñuel at a party in Hollywood. When I think of Deneuve, Thierry, I think of *Tristana*, who opens her robe on her balcony, a deadly grimace on her face, and shows her perfect, maimed, naked body to the mute Saturno, the boy who is hopelessly in love with her.

Zamenhof winks and nods. He's understood, Thierry. It'll change everything. This way, we'll save the whistle language and the dockworkers from extinction. I stand up, write my contact information on a piece of paper, shake Zamenhof's hand, and go outside. Triumphant, jubilant inside, victorious, glorious, elated. The triumph, Thierry, lasts until I'm outside and see that my bike was stolen.

The transition from biking to walking is abrupt. It takes a while before my sight is sharp again and then suddenly I'm looking through another lens, through other eyes. The slowness is frustrating, the detail boring. Every step is a standstill. When I walk, I see myself, I split in two.

Imagine that you're walking on a plain but the plain is not visible, Thierry. That it continues to go on but at the same time keeps itself hidden. That fences are constantly moved as

I walk to give my presence a form, to encircle my movement. Everything is open, unclear. The bike paths are so wide that I can't walk on them because I'm constantly looking behind my back nervously to see if a car hasn't accidentally turned onto the bike path.

Travel and lose theories. That's the foundation. Being on the move and losing everything that you had before in exchange for uncertainty and doubt. I'm just throwing some balls up in the air, Thierry, and then looking to see if they bounce or roll or drop dead like stress-balls in the beach sand.

I have no idea of this place, I can't put it in my hand like a stone and turn it around in changing light and say marble, granite, porphyry, quartz or lapis lazuli or emerald or pyrite or even jeremejevite or painite. I don't know anything about stones, Thierry, but I have a theory. I miss altitude here. This isn't a place because there's no altitude. Everything runs here, but on and on, as if it's one flatland, an average American city without the downtown skyscrapers. If there's one thing that I can deduce from all this, it's that a place is vertical, that a place is determined by the vertical plane tangent to

the horizontal plane. That's where it happens. You get nothing imagined in one plane. Vertical elevation is necessary, walls.

The shifting heaps of containers are the pixels of a screen. The port can only be understood from the air, but I'm walking on the image and I can't get it into focus. If I would ask you to paint this place, to make this place into a scene, then you would only really need to paint the floor, Thierry. That's how flat it is here, that's how horizontally everything runs here, but on and on.

I'd like to break a lance for vertical elevation. Who still breaks lances nowadays? No one, Thierry. And what's broken nowadays if lances are out of style? Bread?

I don't know what I'm talking about. I seem always to be running away from myself, from the place where I am. I'm just a helper, Thierry. I still have to find my bearing. I bare my heart in exchange for applause.

Something very remarkable is going on in the deserted parking lot of a closed car factory. The weeds shoot between the concrete slabs and delineate the empty parking spots. Weeds are a tribute.

BOGU4121620, BOGU4121636, BOGU4121641, BOGU4121657, BOGU4121683, and so on.

That's them, Thierry. Those are the numbers of the containers that have your backdrops. I have them. They're a bit farther to the left, behind a long hangar.

Apples and pears in a bowl, a perfect still life. The fruit is rotten at the bottom, Thierry, but you don't see the bottom and that's why I'm telling you about it. Everything is going wrong here, we're giants with clay feet, paws in the water, doomed to perish. Apologies for the tone, but I can't do this. I'm too young for this. I came here to look for a simple backdrop in a container, quickly back and forth, a routine job. And now I'm standing here.

In this bottleneck, where the water from the sea seeps in one direction like sand in an hourglass only to be turned over and make the reverse movement, time itself squeezes through a gate and back again. A whole world in containers and back out again. How many containers would be needed to store the whole world, Thierry?

I've made a decision. I'll give these notes to Jozef, and you, Thierry, make a scene out of them. Can we agree on that? I didn't come here to look for backdrops. I understand that now. Keep your eyes open.

I see a frame with left and right walls made of containers that stretch into the depth. The containers are stacked four high and are numbered. The colours change. Some containers are new, most are corroded.

All of them are sealed. Right in front of me, between the containers, is an empty square of rough concrete, sixteen meters wide, like a clearing in a forest. I measured it, Thierry. I lay on the ground here. I laid myself down eight times to measure how wide it is here.

I hadn't thought of a folding ruler. The containers are six meters long and two and

a half meters high, once my height plus

a long and a short side of the paper on which I am writing this description. That's how

I made my own human scale. It must have been a strange sight, but I have no audience here.

On the square, a plant shoots through

a crack in the concrete, yarrow I think, with clusters of small white flowers. Right in front of my eyes a butterfly flutters through the air. It lands on the plant. It's almost

unbelievable. Right in the middle of the image, on the horizon, is the nuclear power plant in Doel, the dwindling village. Two steaming cooling towers keep the image alive, behind the towers the last pink glow of the setting sun. It's almost an idyll, Thierry, a snowy village in a valley that suddenly appears after an icy cold mountain

hike, the smoke from the chimneys that betrays wood fire and people, a low evening sun through the trees.

Outside the image are wrecked cars and ripped open, dented containers. They also forgot to bury the electric wires here.

A tangle of wires lies open and exposed above ground.

Don't forget that this is a rudimentary place, Thierry, so if you paint it, if you make a scene out of it, will you try not to add too much refinement? Can I ask that of you?

anna rispoli –
infini #9: intervallo

Technical changeover. Worklights and houselights on.
Classical harp music, known from Italian television as
'Intervallo della RAI'.

After a while the mobile phone of Sourour, one of the
technicians, rings. A cloudy sky, painted on cloth, slowly
appears above Thierry Bosquet's landscape with
containers.

sourour picks up her telephone Hello?
on the phone in Tunis farouk
farouk
sourour
farouk
sourour
farouk
sourour
farouk
sourour
farouk

The surtitling panel comes in.

sourour What can I say. I'm trying to survive.

Everything's been different here for a while.

farouk That's good. Nothing ever changes here... I don't know when I'll be fated to leave Tunisia again.

sourour What, you want to try and leave again by boat?

farouk It will soon be the right time. Last time there were 45 of us in a small boat and they caught us because the GPS had fallen in the water thanks to the idiot who jumped for joy when he saw the Italian coast. God might have wanted it to happen that time. How did you travel?

The music fades away. A cloth painted with a large still life of grapes and other fruits descends, cutting into the scenery, leaving only the containers in the foreground visible.

sourour I flew to Serbia legally and then began my illegal journey. I looked for

a people smuggler, but he was slow, so

I decided to do it my own way. I took my phone and used Google Maps and crossed

the Hungarian border on foot, dressed like a tourist. It was July.

farouk Really? Did you buy postcards in the service stations?

sourour No, just SIM cards. A smuggler was guiding me by phone: 'You see the tall oak? Take the path on the left.'

At the abandoned truck, cross the stream.’ This is how I crossed the border.

farouk What’s Belgium like?

sourour Well, it isn’t what I expected:

a big country where everything would be easy. I’ve been here almost a year and I still haven’t done anything.

farouk Don’t you have papers yet?

sourour Sure, my status is that of political refugee. I showed them the photos and all the evidence. I don’t need to tell you how nice the police are in our lovely country.

farouk I thought you left because of the Salafists, not because of the police.

sourour My problem was that people didn’t like me going out with girls. They attacked me several times and when I made a complaint the police turned against me.

So I told the media what was happening and found myself sentenced to fourteen years in prison for denigrating the honour of the country...

farouk Are people looking for you in Tunisia then?

sourour Yes. I can’t go back there.

farouk Shit. There’s no solution here. I just need to get out!

sourour But what will you do when you come to Europe?

farouk My French uncles told me they will find a solution. All I have to do is to come to Europe and everything will be sorted out.

sourour It'll take time to sort out your papers, to find somewhere to live...

farouk No worries, I've still got time. I am still young. If not I'll find a nice blonde girl in Europe. Can't you switch on the video? Perhaps there is one in the theatre...

sourour No, the projector's not plugged in.

farouk Pity. In any case you can give my name: Farouk 'Maraja'. Everyone in the Medina knows me. Everyone knows that one day I'll get to France, God willing of course. The Eiffel Tower, the Champs Elysées, a Range Rover and a blonde on my arm...

That's France!

Three technicians remove the containers.

sourour We are in Belgium here, not in France. And, you know, not all European women are blonde. You like to play with colours, my friend!

farouk No, really! My uncles are going to find me a woman to marry, as friends, or I'll pay her.

sourour Are you going to let her dress in a miniskirt and wear a bikini?

farouk If she wants to help me get my papers she can go out naked in the street.

sourour But then why don't the same rules apply to a Tunisian woman?

farouk I really don't see myself in Tunisia anymore. I will marry a foreigner.

sourour Women are the same everywhere.

farouk I stopped everything two years ago.

All I'm doing is waiting to leave for France. I've loved France since I was little: the World Cup, the Euro Cup... Since Tunisia stopped playing in the nationals, I've supported France. Paris Saint-Germain.

sourour But what are you going to do over there? I'm legal and I have a degree and I've been looking for a proper job for almost a year...

farouk Don't worry! I'm going to work, do anything, whether it's haram or halal I'll do it!

sourour I sometimes just dream of going home... It's not exactly paradise here, you know. There are horrible people, injustices.

farouk When you are in the shit you need to choose how you die.

The painted still life with fruit goes up. The cloudy sky reappears.

sourour Well, you never know what might happen. Last month I was attacked in front of my house. A guy who

didn't like me being different. He followed me with a broken bottle in his hand. This happened for three days in a row. Six stitches one day, twelve the next.

farouk Who is this bastard?

sourour A Tunisian. I went to the police station to file a complaint and all they said was: 'You'd better move'.

While the classical harp music swells, another cloudy sky slowly rises. It occupies the entire view of the stage.

Suddenly the music stops and the cloudy sky drops. The cloth remains on the floor.

chris keulemans –
infini #2

chris parterre Jozef said: ‘There is a beautiful contradiction between the city and the longing for a view. They cancel each other out. Why haven’t there been more cities built like a gallery, an open-air amphitheatre?’

‘Yes’, I said, ‘that would be good.’ I was thinking of Algiers, Trieste, Beirut.

He told me that once, in Firenze, the painted backdrop of a 16th century theatre showed an idyllic landscape showing Firenze itself.

A striking image, I thought, and still true today: in the theatre, the city enters to look at itself.

But if that is the case, what do we see?

A painted backdrop does not change.

The self-image of a city, its collective consciousness, does. It changes every time someone arrives or departs.

That is why I went and talked with six people who grew up somewhere else and now live in Brussels. Which images had they brought with them, and how do those find

a place next to, behind or above what is already here? Is there suddenly a desert around the corner, can you see the ocean beyond the skyline, where does life on the 80th

floor go when there are no skyscrapers here, can you trust those age-old walls not to be bombed away tomorrow?

I spoke with
Catherine Montondo, who grew up close to Niagara Falls,
Kito Sino, who grew up in a Syrian village and later lived in Moscow,
Mohammed Hammad from Nablus in Palestine,
Leah Marcus from Long Beach, California,
Serge-Aimé Coulibaly from Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso, and
Alan Yussef from Qamishlo in the north of Syria.
Special people, all of them.

Before I started out, I was convinced: these newcomers always take their own urban experience with them, which they add to the collective here, thus changing our consciousness of the city.

The six conversations turned out to be very honest and personal. All the people I spoke with immediately understood the question. But they came up with answers that I had not expected.

And yet, I remain convinced: Brussels changes along with the arrival of memories of mountains, oceans, deserts, war and skyscrapers.

The next question was: how are we going to visualize this? Could we present the images that these six people have brought to Brussels from Nablus, Long Beach, Bobo Dioulasso and all those other places here in this theatre?

In such a way that all of you here, in your gallery seats, just like the citizens of Firenze back then, would come and look at your own city, the city you recognize but slightly altered?

‘Yes’, Jozef said, ‘no problem.’ He’d already made a couple of phone calls. Here, on a huge blank canvas, we could show the whole city in 3D. His designer told him that you can download the complete city of Brussels for just \$250. The next step would be to insert the images of our newcomers into it. In order for you to see: the desert in Schaerbeek, the ruins at Montgomery, the skyscrapers in Uccle.

But my conversation partners were not really talking about spaces. The talks focused more on behaviour. They were about sleeping on the roof in summer nights, having dinner in the streets, staring at invisible walls, cycling along the beach. In their stories it is not the space itself that changes, but how people make their way around in it. And so we chose for the imagination, not for the image itself.

We are offering for you to listen to the stories of Catherine, Kito, Mohammed, Leah, Serge-Aimé and Alan. You will hear their voices as if you're walking in the street and catch some lines of people passing by. We have eight wireless headphones here. points to the left In a minute, I will hand these to eight people in the front rows. These headphones contain the thirty minute audio edit I made with Nienke Rooijackers from these six conversations. Fairly associative, quite ephemeral and sometimes truly surprising. You may listen as long as you like, two seconds or twenty minutes, and then you can pass the headphones on to your neighbours. A white wooden screen lowers onto the stage. In the meantime, the spectacle here on stage will continue with completely different things. The *Infini* of Arkadi Zaides is already being prepared. When the headphones reach you and you choose to put them on, you will hear voices that, who knows, might correspond for a moment with whatever you are seeing here in front of you. And if you do not want to be distracted while watching, you can simply pass them on. My only request: do not leave the headphones lying somewhere unused – and we'd rather that you did not stick them in your bag. Here they are. I hope they will help you look at the city of Brussels differently for a moment or two. Enjoy.

The headphones are handed out on the parterre and the
three balconies.
Worklights out.

arkadi zaides –
infini #1

Houselights at 35%. On a wooden screen of 8.20 x 2.80m, sitting at 5.20m from the front of the stage, a panoramic black and white photograph of a landscape appears. Rocks and stranded rubber boats take up half the image in the foreground. Behind that, a calm sea; and on the horizon, hills and a clear sky.

The photograph shows the coastline at Mantamandos, the closest point between Turkey and the Greek island of Evros. It was taken on the 15th of August, 2015. Every day, approximately 1,500 migrants enter Europe through this port.

After barely ten seconds the image jumps. It now shows only sea, hills and sky in a grainy close-up. Then, the edge of the image comes into view, briefly, as well as the small, white hand-tool of Adobe After Effects.

Another jump, even closer. Starting at the edge, a cursor places a yellow, dotted line along the horizon, zooming in so close that the image is hard to discern from the grain of the pixels. Several minutes later the dotted line results in an arbitrary yet clean clipping of the hills taken from the image. Then the hills are masked in a black plane, outlined in a yellow dotted line. This operation of selection and erasure is repeated with the

sea, the sky and the rubber boats, in the course of the next ten minutes.

Blackout.

Worklights and houselights on. Elevator music. Technical changeover.

The screen is pulled up. Four technicians use the entire stage to lay out and fold up the lingering cloth with the painted cloudy sky of Anna Rispoli's *Infini #9*.

A white backdrop comes in at the back of the stage. It turns blue as the projector is being adjusted for video projection.

Worklights out.

benny claessens –
infini #15

Side by side, two giant backdrops descend onto the stage, showing two snapshots of a bay at Tossa de Mar in the Costa Brava: generic vacation images in bright colours, lifted from the Internet.

After barely a minute, swift as a butterfly, the cloths go up into the air again and disappear, leaving the stage empty.

Blackout.

jisun kim –
infini #11

A landscape is projected on the white backdrop at the back of the stage. A bird's eye view of a big city at night, with misty mountains in the background. As the sun rises, the image becomes clearer. We are in the virtual world of an online computer game, looking out of the window of an apartment in a skyscraper.

Text overlays the image at irregular intervals as other players exit:

Plice.Chenxi.CN left
zhanshenlinhui left

natsu4021 killed Derrickvidk
natsu4021 is a psycho

Deepbreaths520 left

sujie11220 killed natsu4021

why

he is my frind
friend

why you kill him

BlueFIAME9413 died
Derrickvidk left

Flyercn left
BlueFIAME9413 left
FIB_90521 left
Mr.AnsarDin left
natsu4021 left

TongStark left
sujie11220 left
Cavalierpoon left
Zhouritianxxx left

Jump cut to a TV screen. A news story appears onscreen as a series of texts, overlaying a commercial:

ECONOMIC NEWS:

A survey asked young people aged between 20 and 34 about their ideal vision of the future, and 42% of them replied:

Collapse, a new beginning

THE COLUMN:

The ways people want to deal with the world have changed from a fundamental feeling of helplessness.

The image cuts away from the TV and briefly reveals the apartment before returning to the cityscape.

As the exclusion and powerlessness from it become deeper and deeper, resetting the world completely seems to be the only way;

not because it is realistic, but because it becomes the only thing that can be imagined.

The image fades to black.

wim cuyvers –
infini #8

Worklights and houselights on. Technical change-over. Two technicians install a large roll of paper centre stage and attach the end of the paper to a fly bar.

jozef parterre In 1919 the Austrian engineer and scenographer Hans Fritz made a scale model of his ‘Würfelbühne’, an invention that would turn the world of scenography upside down. The idea is simple: Fritz designed a set of wooden volumes, a box of bricks and cubes and beams, which had to be copied exactly by all theatres in the whole of Europe. Some sort of alphabet of space. All scenographers all over the world would then make their set designs with this brick alphabet, with the result that every theatre could build every possible décor and theatre companies would never have to take their décors with them anymore. It remained a scale model only.

And yet I can understand Fritz.
The desire of scenography seems to be a desire for
collectivity,
a collective language,
collective space,
and a collective gaze,

directed at a collective vanishing point,
like in a painted perspective
that is the same for the whole auditorium and
that looks as realistic to the spectator seated furthest to
the left as it does to the one seated furthest to the right.
The auditorium as one giant eye.
Scenography as a space that catches a great number of
sightlines and makes them converge at one single point.

I'm telling you all this because the next *Infini* is the one
by Wim Cuyvers. Wim used to be
an architect and now he devotes his time to working in a
forest. He is also a writer. He lives and works in France
and is not present here tonight. When we asked Wim
which landscape he wanted to show in this theatre, he
wrote
a text. A text in which he evokes seven spaces, seven
moments in his life when spaces have touched him
deeply.

Those spaces are: a cave in the Ardennes,
the Acropolis in Athens, the Sagrada Familia designed by
Gaudí in Barcelona, the Seagram Building by Mies van
der Rohe in New York,
Villa Adriana in Tivoli, Casa del Fascio in Como, and an
informal meeting place for sex, in Bucharest.

The text is called 'Common Spaces'. Instead

of being about, this text writes itself around these spaces. You can't call it description, really. Rather, it is a cluster of personal experiences, memories and associations with space that can never be detached from the body and the desire of the protagonist, Wim Cuyvers himself, experiencing the spaces, mostly alone, as far removed from the crowd as possible.

Projected image of a postcard with the inscription 'DUBITO?'. .

Wim wrote to us that he doesn't really believe in scenography. His spaces cannot be detached from their sites. They cannot be represented here on stage. His *Infini*, made of language, even though he doesn't believe in language either, is an *Infini* against his better judgment. A scenography of text, staging the impossibility of language, facing the impossibility of represented space. For Wim only believes in pure space.

In these common spaces that Wim Cuyvers evokes, we're not together, yet they bring forth common actions and behaviour. He writes about that wall we all lean against, about that window we're all looking through.

When, in a minute, we read this text together, a problem will soon occur. Because everyone reads at a different

speed. That's why it's important to maintain an average tempo.

So that one person isn't already climbing the Acropolis, while another is still in a cave in the Ardennes.

Reading Wim Cuyvers' *Infini* will take about twenty minutes, and after that we will go straight into a break.

The bar outside will be open, and we will come out to tell you when the break is over so we don't start again without you.

On stage the fly bar with the roll of paper attached to it, draws slowly upward, thereby revealing the text printed on the paper. The machine continues to pull the paper up at a moderate tempo, aided by the two stage technicians when needed, so that the text unfurls and can be read by the audience. The lighting and sound technicians decide to go for a cigarette break and go outside through the side exit.

The text reads:

I must have been about fourteen or fifteen. A young teacher had suggested an excursion, one Saturday. We were boarders; normally we spent Monday morning to Friday evening at the boys' boarding school. A couple of weeks earlier the same teacher had set off with a small group of boys who were a year above me. He had suggested a trip to a cave – no, not to the Caves of Han, not to a tourist cave; they had gone to a cave where you

had to crawl, where you needed ropes and rope ladders to access shafts. I had been so disappointed that I couldn't go, that I was not allowed to go that first time, and I didn't think there would be a second chance. I thought the bigger boys would be allowed to go but that the young teacher would have long been reassigned by the time it was our turn, or that the school board would think one such trip was enough. But no, another sheet of paper appeared on the notice board announcing the trip. I put my name down immediately and one autumnal Saturday morning we set off in the dark-green Volkswagen van to the Ardennes, an older priest driving, the young teacher sitting next to him. I can still see the motorway stretching ahead

of us way before we got to Liège, a long descent and immediately after that a long climb. The cave we were to visit, the Trou Manto, is in Ben-Ahin near Huy, not that far from where I lived, but those Ardennes villages were so different from everything I knew, so different from where I lived. The Ardennes villages differed more from the village where I lived than my village differed from, let's say, Brussels; that's what I thought then and that's what

I think now, but I still can't say why they are so different: not because the houses in my village were heated with oil, whereas in the Ardennes they burned wood; of course the Ardennes houses were built

of dark-grey limestone with slate roofs, and in my village the houses were built

of dark-red bricks with red clay roof tiles; of course in the Ardennes there are little rivers with rapids and worn-away valleys flanked by deciduous forests and spruce woods, and in my village it was flat, level and only Scots pines grew there; but the difference lay elsewhere. I often wonder if it is the difference between sandy and limy soil. There was no holding back: having arrived at our destination, we got changed pretty well immediately.

Wear dirty clothes or overalls the notice had said and walking shoes or boots; but

I didn't have any walking shoes or boots, and so I wore a pair of ankle boots, but they had thick heels, three or four centimetres high. They were partly orange-brown, partly dark-brown leather.

I remember going to buy them, my mother and I, from the shoemaker's son who had started a shoe shop. My shoes were the village variant of the glam rock boot – this was as far as a goody-goody child could go. My shoes were totally unsuitable for the caves: I felt ashamed of my shoes when we started getting changed. The heels of my shoes got stuck behind the steel cable of the rope ladders and the soles were extremely slippery. My it-doesn't-matter-if-they-get-dirty clothes were a pair of flared jeans and a yellow K-Way raincoat with a thick knitted pullover underneath. When I think back now, the

cave was a small cave: low corridors, a shaft, a couple of small chambers. Throughout the day I was inquisitive and curious about what was to come, and I was afraid: afraid that a stone would come loose from the ceiling, afraid that I would get stuck in a narrow corridor, unable to move forwards or backwards, afraid that I would slip, afraid that my comrades would slip, or that a stone would fall on them. Their shouts and laughter bothered me. I was wet and dirty and I was cold; the floor, the walls and the ceiling of the space pressed against my body, or perhaps it would be more exact to say that my body pressed against the floor, the walls and the ceiling of the space: I inflated my body until it touched the boundaries of the space, until it had become space. It is ridiculous to speak of walls, floor and ceiling: there was no distinction between walls, floor and ceiling: everything was made of the same material, worn away out of the limestone, lime which had deposited itself there and then dissolved, skeletons of animals and plants; my body became a part of them.

We arrived at a shaft some ten metres deep. The young teacher positioned himself right in front of the shaft after he had hung a little aluminium rope ladder from a hook. He knotted some ends of rope as rings around our waists, to which he attached another rope. The rope was red. I will always remember that red rope with which he secured us. One by one the other boys went down. The

old teacher went first. Down below, he untied the rope attached to the ring. Every time there were three boys down there, the young teacher pulled up the rope with the rings on it, so he could put them around the other boys' waists. I was afraid and fascinated by the precision of that repetitive action in that organic space, while I waited for my turn. The small space, the young teacher, his command and skill and love and my fear converged. While I was going down, all I could think about was the rope ladder breaking. I was afraid I would let the wire ladder slip, that my hands would not be able to bear my own weight, afraid that the spokes of the steel ladder would slide, afraid that the hook I had seen in the rock would come loose. Every time I placed my hand on a lower spoke I was convinced that it would slip away from me. I was afraid and it was marvellous, and it was not that it gave me a kick. It was a recognition of something I had never seen before. It was the first time in my life that I knew, that I realized, that a body needs space – not just any space; that a body looks for space, that a body looks for a space. I was quite sure that this applied not only to my body, but was something universal: that everyone needs spaces. Once out of that cave, I realized how much I had enjoyed it; I wanted to visit and explore more caves, but the possibility seemed remote. I couldn't see how the opportunity we had had that day might come along again. On the way back to school in the Volkswagen van, we all

slept. I awoke with a jolt dozens of times, thinking I was falling.

In 1977 I was invited to join a group tour of Greece: Crete, the Peloponnese and Athens were on the programme. Sitting at a street café in Athens one morning,

I heard that Elvis had died. For me Elvis was a fat crooner in a glitter suit, of no importance whatsoever, a farcical figure.

I had studied architecture for a year and failed, but I had enjoyed the year of architectural history lectures from a lecturer who, years later, was run over on a cycling trip in France and found dead at the side of the road. In his lectures he talked at length about the Greek temples in general and the Acropolis in particular. We walked as a group from the place where we were staying to the Acropolis.

I remember the tourist stalls along the way; they made me think of the little stalls in Scherpenheuvel, and I remember that the group leader had an argument at the ticket office, trying to get a better rate because there was a group of us. He made a great fuss and had the last word. There were a lot of people at that ticket office.

Once on site, I tried to get away from the group as quickly as possible. From the beginning, from my first steps on site, so close to the building – actually there was no difference between the rock on which the building

stood and the building; they were one – I was profoundly impressed,

I was bowled over by the space and the city which became a landscape through the building. I tried hard to imagine colours on the building, remembering that the enthusiastic lecturer had told us that originally it must have been like that, but I couldn't manage to construct that image in my head, not while I was standing there. It was the emptiness between the columns, the blue sky between the columns and the black interior of a small space that gave me goosebumps. They came in waves. It was as if I could make them come over me, again and again and at the same time it was as if they came over me without me having any influence at all. I cannot say that it was pleasant.

I spent the rest of the day hanging around in the perfect ruin, in that perfect space. In the evening I couldn't bring myself to speak to anyone. The desire to be in that building again, to go back there was too strong: craving, the sort of longing brought about by the kind of absence that only

a child can feel. Thirty-seven years passed before I returned to Athens. When I step off the bus which takes me from the airport to the city I see the building on the rock in the distance, two cranes towering above it. I don't go to the building immediately. I postpone the visit as long as possible, just as a child will leave

a sweet lying in the cupboard, in anticipation. I try to stay as far away as possible from the building as I stroll around the city, the city ravaged by economic crisis. One sunny morning I finally walk to the Acropolis, the building shimmering in the sunlight, visible from afar. There are many more tourists than there were the previous time. Now they're all equipped with digital cameras. Most hold theirs at arm's length in front of them, and they make hideous movements with their fingers when they want to make the picture bigger or smaller or replace it with another image. They no longer need to ask other tourists to take a photograph of them against the building; everyone takes selfies, looking at each picture they have taken: themselves in front of the building. The building is being restored. Large slabs of dazzling white marble are being placed between weathered, yellowish slabs. There's a couple of workers there, cutting and joining stones. Again I stay until the evening; again I spend a long time leaning against the columns; I look at the vase shape which appears in the negative space between the columns; I look into the black space I still can't enter. But the waves of goosebumps don't come. Not once. The building does nothing for me. Have I become insensitive with age? Or can I no longer see or feel the building because of all those tourists? Or is the problem the bright white slabs that were stuck onto the building like band-aids and make it look more dilapidated than ever? Or is it because I can't forget the

refugees in the parks in Athens? Or the food being distributed by Golden Dawn? Or the thousands of empty shops? Perhaps I'm more moved by the vast emptiness of modern Athens than by the vast touristic perfection of the exquisite ruin.

In the summer of 1979 I hitchhiked to Barcelona. I had just one objective: to visit Gaudí's Sagrada Familia. When looking at slides during art history classes or at photographs in books I had always felt that that building did nothing for me.

I travelled there to be able, finally, to draw a line under it. I was absolutely convinced that caves, many more of which I had visited since that first experience in 1972, and in which I seemed to have found my natural environment, would make Gaudí's building pale in comparison. It was evening when a Spanish truck driver dropped me off in Barcelona. He had first suggested we pay a visit to the whores, but I had declined the suggestion with a laugh. I walked around with my heavy rucksack till midnight, before finally looking for a place among the bushes in a park where I could roll out my mat and sleeping bag. The park was close to the Sagrada Familia. I had already walked around the building and, as I had expected, the building didn't move me: it was imposing, high, but I couldn't seem to see beyond the artificiality of the details.

I had just climbed into my sleeping bag when I was startled by a couple making love a few meters away; in the course of the night I was awoken three more times by other couples, who had all found their place close to where I had found mine.

It must have been one of the first times I slept outdoors in a city. I remember a strong sense of the difference between the motorway and the city: the motorway is calm at night, the city nervous, perhaps neurotic. Next morning I was at the Sagrada Familia by the time it opened.

I strolled around this perpetual building site. I looked at the drawings and maquettes exhibited there. I climbed up into one of the towers, higher and higher; I stood there looking through one of the openings in the building and I saw the building and the city through that unusual hole in one of the walls of the building and suddenly I had goosebumps from head to toe. They came in waves. It was the same sensation as at the Acropolis. And again it lasted a long time; difficult to say how long. It only went away when I turned around, when I left. I couldn't contemplate an experiment: would the feeling come back if I returned to the place with that view? I didn't feel like trying to find out if the current would be restored if I put the plug back into the socket. In the days that followed I visited Gaudí's other buildings in Barcelona. They did nothing for me.

One Sunday morning in the autumn of 1983 I had taken the subway to the north of Manhattan. I was wearing a bright red jogging suit. The air was fresh, almost chilly, but it was sunny. A very fine mist hung over the city, but you could tell it would soon clear. There was barely anyone around on the streets, it is difficult to imagine how empty Manhattan can be.

I skated from Uptown to Downtown in one straight line along the wide boulevards. There weren't many cars. I had a magisterial feeling of going faster than the cars, knowing that I could fall and knowing that I wouldn't fall: not there, not at that moment, in that extraordinary light.

I stopped in front of the Seagram Building, designed by Mies van der Rohe. I had already seen the building a couple of times during my long stay in Manhattan. I had looked at it carefully. Now, I seated myself on a little stone wall a long way from the building, close to the Avenue, just on the square that belongs to the building. There was nobody in the building or on the square. I sat with my head on my hands folded over my knees; my feet, in black basketball shoes, flat on the stone floor of the square. I looked across the square at the building. The city was reflected by the building, lined with reflective glass as it is. I sat there in that ridiculous position, and suddenly the hairs on my arms were standing on end, goosebumps all over my body. As I remember, I sat there

for at least an hour. Eventually, I left, and bought a bagel on the corner of Park Avenue and 48th Street.

I first visited Como in the summer of 1990. I drove into the city, almost passing the building for which I had come: the Casa del Fascio, the Fascists' building, designed by Giuseppe Terragni. I parked the car a couple of streets away. We walked to the building, parts of it revealing themselves as we came closer; and suddenly I was standing on the square in front of the building. I looked at the façade, I saw the mountainous landscape behind and through the building, I looked at the proportions of the façade wall, of the windows, of the shutters, of the panes. I sat down on the stone floor of the square in front of the building, I couldn't possibly have gone on standing, my knees were giving way, I felt tremors all over my body, as with a sudden attack of fever; but

I knew it wasn't an attack of fever, I knew it had to do with that space – or was it my projection onto that space? The building was closed, we couldn't get in that evening in the summer of 1990 and I really didn't mind. I sat there on that square for a long time, I made a rectangular frame with my two thumbs and my two index fingers and looked at the building through that frame, just as children do when they are pretending to take a photograph. I barely spoke,

I couldn't speak. Later on we walked around the building. The spasms seemed to subside. My wife asked why I was in such a bad mood, probably because I hadn't spoken all evening.

In the spring of 1994 we drove out of Rome in an easterly direction. There were four of us in the car. The road leading out of the city made me think of a typical Belgian road, a 'steenweg'. I don't mean a 'steenweg' as we know them now, I am referring to the 'steenweg' I knew as a child, with ancient trees lining the sides of the road, with a ditch on either side of the road, with pebbles in the road's surface: my grandparents used to say 'the pebble' when they talked about the 'steenweg'. In the evening we sat on a wooden bench parallel to the road looking at the passing cars: the Roman highway, the Napoleonic road. Was it that memory that got me in the mood?

I walked through the building, looked at maquettes. I read something in a guidebook knowing I wouldn't remember it,

I walked along the pools and the ponds at Villa Adriana, the villa of the Roman emperor Hadrian. I walked through the gardens, over the dry grass grazed bare by horses or goats, perhaps. I stood outside the building, outside the remains of the building, I saw the skimpy grass, the hard packed ground, the hills, higher than the building: the building doesn't stand on the top of a hill,

doesn't dominate the landscape. I looked through the building, that is to say I knew the building, became aware of the building while I looked at the landscape. My whole body trembled, like it does when you have high temperature, or when you feel very cold and you are exhausted. I wondered what was happening to me. It was not the building itself that made me tremble; it was the landscape, the external surroundings. But if the building had not been there, the landscape would not have had the same effect. Something of Flaubert's 'Je ne peux jouir de la nature que par ma fenêtre' needs to be adjusted: what came over me was not enjoyment, more like a painful recognition. It was not the nature that affected me, but simply the outside space – the defined outside space, defined by the buildings erected there almost two thousand years earlier, but also defined by the animals and people wandering about; defined by the city of Tivoli – called Tibur at the time of Hadrian –, by the hills, by the flat, arid hard ground and the scanty grass, by the banal buildings on the hills.

I looked at this, while I sensed the Villa Adriana behind me. And the window was not my window, not the window of my house – more like our window, a common window, a window I had never even looked through, but just knew was behind me.

I was not overcome by the grandeur of the building, but by the realization that countless people had leaned against the building just like me, gazing at the immediate

and distant surroundings from the pastoral gardens, from the outside spaces which belong to the building, which lie between the building and the surrounding houses on the mountain slopes. Perhaps this feeling was also caused by the buildings and the landscape having been there for such a long time:

the realization that their basic configuration had not changed in all that time. There was nothing exciting in that landscape, only a deep calmness.

A hitherto unknown acceptance came over me there, and sent shivers down my spine.

In 2006, I went to Bucharest with former students, to work on an inventory of the informal use of public space in that city;

I have often worked with students on that sort of inventory. At that time the city had still not recovered from the Ceaușescu regime and was preparing for Romania to join the European Union. Orthodox religion was still a marked presence in the city, and all over the city large foreign investors were at work. Cities in transition have always opened themselves more easily through their public spaces than cities which haven't changed that much. We saw glue sniffers at the entrance to the subway, prostitutes on the ring road, homeless people in the underground corridors of the city's heating system, gypsies who had built their shacks in the empty water reservoir or against hot water pipes above ground

or who lived well-hidden in squats. We went on systematic walks through the city, everyone with the same protocol, everyone collecting the same data. We knew these data were parameters to gain an understanding of public space. I have often studied informal gay meeting places.

I think they are the most interesting public spaces, the most complex. In Bucharest, however, I didn't find a single one in the ten days we spent working there. I felt as if I was losing my touch, my ability to read that sort of spaces. But

I could not imagine that they didn't exist in Bucharest.

The very last day of our stay I got up early, to go and look at another part of the city where no one from our group had been. I walked to an area of large halls, where exhibitions and trade fairs are held. A couple of homeless people were sitting against a wall, drinking and smoking. I found them atypical of Bucharest: elsewhere in the city homeless people had been shy, suspicious and submissive, but here they sat or lay without anxiety or shame. They didn't hide, they lay there as I had seen homeless people do in New York and in Paris, but not as I had seen them in the centre of Bucharest. Close to the halls, there is

a small park with a funfair beside an artificial lake, where I saw parents and children holding hands, licking ice creams. The bright colours of

the funfair contrasted sharply with the delicate green of the park. Children whined, mothers scolded.

I crossed the eight-lane Soseava Kiseleff at the junction with the Boulevardul Expozitiei. I saw a bench I wanted to sit on. Right next to the bench was a rubbish bin and right next to that rubbish bin was a narrow path leading off the Soseava Kiseleff at right angles. I didn't follow the path. I knew what the path was for and how it had come to be there, but I didn't follow it, not yet. First I wanted absolute proof. I walked a little further along the wide road, twenty metres or so, to the next bench. There was a rubbish bin next to that bench, too, and another path leading off the road at right angles, going into the woods behind. A warm glow came over me, I was a hundred percent sure that I had found what I was looking for.

I walked along the path, followed its winding line under the fresh greenery;

the side path where I came out held no surprises for me, nor did the long concrete wall to which the path led, nor the countless condoms and tissues on the ground. I recognized the surroundings as if I had been there often in my youth, and yet it was no homecoming. It was precisely the opposite: it was a return to a place where I went to get away from home. The warm glow that welled up in me when

I found the place made way for a deep sense of ‘commonness’. There was nobody in the place so early in the day, but

I experienced a deep and real wordless, language-less ‘conversation’ between those who went there, between those who ‘made’ the place by walking and standing where their desire brought them, driven by desire on the one hand and by shame on the other, and myself: I, who had never sought out places along the motorway for homosexual contact; I, who would not go back to that place in the evening, but I, who feels those places, who knows those places, places where you go to escape the oppressiveness of the house, to see in those places that you are not the only one who has a need. The constituent parts of that space were:

a concrete wall to lean against, the noise of a road that soothes more than it disturbs, the screen, the safeguard of a few bushes, the traces of those who had been there before – the mud on the benches (they didn’t sit on the seat but on the back of the bench, with their feet on the seat, of course), their condoms, their dirty handkerchiefs, bottles of booze and cigarette stubs, the impression of their handprints and footprints against the concrete wall, like cave drawings, modern-day cave drawings.

The technicians roll up the text, detach it from the fly bar and carry it off stage.

Intermission. Worklights and houselights remain on.
Technical changeover. Caetano Veloso's song 'Maria
Bethânia' resounds:

Everybody knows that our cities were built to be
destroyed

You get annoyed

You buy a flat

You hide behind the mat

But I know she was born to do everything wrong with all
of that

Maria Bethânia, please send me a letter

I wish to know things (...)

jozef wouters –
infini #12

A large, white cloth hangs centre stage. It is an enlarged version of a page from a book. It shows a single sentence, in letters made by hand from strips of black tape:

I believed that I wanted to be a poet but deep down I wanted to be a poem.

The cloth is pulled up. End of the intermission.

rebekka slips onto the parterre and takes the floor

Good evening everybody. My name is Rebekka. Jozef invited me to make an *Infini*, which will be shown later on in the programme. When he invited me, he asked me to bring a space into this space.

I didn't tell him during that conversation – I've never really told him, I'm telling him now – that I really don't know what space is. Or rather: at that point I didn't see the complexity of what Jozef was talking about when he said the word 'space'.

I had no idea what he was inviting me to, and why he was inviting me – a writer – to make something without words, because that was the restriction: we were to make something without words.

But since almost everyone failed at being speechless, Jozef changed the rules. He's very flexible. After all the talk about the impossibility of representing space in language,

I gladly embrace language here, as a possible way of making space appear.

So I took the invitation to bring a space into this space, which, at that point, mainly meant that

I accepted the invitation to accept the complexity of something I hadn't thought of in that way.

I went to America. Not in search of space.

I went to America on a quest for forgiveness.
I wanted to know what forgiveness is and if it actually exists. But because of the space-time continuum we live in, there were deadlines (and promises to keep) and this meant I had to come back from America with a space. (Forgiveness and space had to be thought of simultaneously. But I'm not sure if that's the reason they seem the same to me. I am pretty sure that in some vocabularies there is no distinction between the words for forgiveness or space.)
(We're not supposed to know that at this stage.)

I went to America and after a thirty-six hour ride on a Greyhound bus, I found myself sitting in the basement of a black church –
the church was white, most of the people were black – in Charleston, South Carolina, United States.
I was attending bible study, wanting to understand what forgiveness is. But I was constantly thinking of space.

Exactly six months earlier a shooting had happened in this basement.

A white boy came in there, attended bible study, waited till it was over and then took
a gun out of his fanny pack and shot everybody in the room.

The nine people who were shot were lying in

a big pile when the concierge found them. Everybody assumed they must have been singing a song in close harmony when they got shot.

I was there because I'd heard that the families of the people who were shot forgave the boy who did it. I wondered how.

In that basement I sat next to a woman, and next to her was an enormous cake.

It was made in the shape of the church we were sitting in. The woman was big and white, just like the cake, just like the church.

She said that the shooting had transformed her in ways we could never imagine, had touched her in ways we could never imagine.

She tried to find a way to show the church how much this shooting changed her life.

She made a cake, in the shape of the church.

It took her three whole weeks and it was finished just a couple of days before the cake would begin to rot.

She had won a prize with it.

The cake had a big, baked garden around it and in the garden were nine marzipan Christmas trees, one for each person that

got shot. And on the Christmas trees were nine doves, one for each person that got shot, nine candy canes, one for each –

The woman stood beside the cake, looking at it as if she had just given birth to it, and she started crying. Black mascara-filled tears dripped down her cheeks and dropped onto the doves and dripped down the Christmas trees.

‘I’m so sorry,’ she said, ‘I’m so sorry.’

She was referring to the spoiled doves, but for a moment I thought she was talking about everything.

You know – everything – the everything that breaks your heart when you hear even the slightest thing about it.

(Charleston was the place where all the slaves were brought before they were distributed across the US.)

She scratched her white belly and walked away from the cake, as if she could still harm it.

‘The lights in the Christmas trees aren’t edible, by the way,’ she said, still crying.

At this point, everybody was crying. Everybody was staring at the cake. I was thinking of the leaflet on the front door of the church with a quote from James Baldwin:

‘If you’re a negro in this country and somewhat conscious, you’re in rage all the time.’

I cried while someone tried to clean the doves.

Someone suggested we should take a picture of this moment.

We all got up from our chairs, and surrounded the woman and the cake.

I smiled and hoped no one would post this online somewhere.

I hoped this moment wouldn't reappear somewhere public, because of everything (the basement/ the shape of the cake, the colour of the frosting/ the Jesus-is-my-saviour thing)

(I had the feeling that people would assume

I agreed with everything that was happening in that moment, if they saw that I was in a picture of it)

(as if the moment was contaminated and I could 'catch it')

(my everything seemed so small compared to this basement).

I imagined everybody I knew seeing me at that moment, seeing me smile at a camera, in a space that was entirely made of plastic except for the cross.

I imagined everybody I knew seeing me: the people with whom I talk about terrorism, and about our taste in people, books, ways of mourning.

My friends who are right and are filled with words to explain why.

Who would say that a cake is not enough.

That you can't forgive on behalf of the dead.
There has to be real remorse for forgiveness.
If Jesus has something to do with it, it's not real
forgiveness.

Someone said we should move the cake to the altar,
because that evening there would be
a service for the victims; it was exactly six months since
the shooting.

Seven of us carried the cake and placed it next to the
bishop – flown in from Los Angeles for the night. He
wore a monumental purple gown.

Everyone sat down, and he lifted up this gown, revealing
black shiny shoes with red socks.

He looked at them as if they were his little dogs. After a
long silence, this is what he said:

'I am standing on holy ground. This place was built by
slaves and the children of slaves who were burnt on this
piece of earth. On their ashes the church was rebuilt
again. Their children sang on this piece of earth. Places
of deep, excruciating tragedy have the potential to
become holy.'

Someone played some blues chords on the piano after
that sentence, which made it seem like he was right. The
space was built in such a way that you could hear people
crying at the back.

‘I am not saying this church is holy,’ he continued. ‘It’s not the walls that are consecrated. Not even this cross.’ He dropped his gown. ‘We are standing on a graveyard. This is charnel ground. I mean, holy this piece of earth. Holy the hands that buried the slaves. Holy the way someone opened the door to the basement with a bucket and a mop and started to sweep the place up. Holy the bucket with blood and bleach and tears. Holy the song someone sang while carrying the dead out. Holy kindness. Holy grief. Holy this cake. Holy this cake. Something made this cake, and it is the same something that rebuilt this church, that opened the door. And it is the same something that eventually gives birth to us, again and again.’

‘We will eat this cake after the service, because after today it will go rotten. And I swear to God above, that everything holy goes rotten if it stays the same for too long. And I don’t know what will happen after that. I don’t know how many of us will die, will have to die, until we find a tragedy that is big enough to fit us all. That can embrace or enclose us, like arms. And I don’t know if, then, we’ll be able to lead our lives in the invisible spaces that will be left once the dead are taken away. Amen.’

He started to sing Silent Night, and everybody joined in. I was standing next to an old black woman with grey hairs growing from a birthmark in her neck. She seemed a lot older than the civil rights movement.

We started to sing Silent Night and I sang off-key.

She sang with me, she sang my second voice.

I thought, if you can make a song out of forgiveness, it would probably sound like this:

two people off-key, in close harmony.

My heart was pounding as we sang, as if someone had given me a newborn bird to look after. My heart reminded me of a YouTube clip I once saw, of two people making love in an MRI scanner. A researcher wanted to know the position of the penis during coitus. So he asked people to have sex in an MRI scanner. The clip was about thirty seconds long and it was breathtaking. Not because you could see people having sex, but because you could see their heartbeat while they were having sex. You could see how fast both their hearts were going when they started kissing, and when they touched each other's shoulders. It seemed like their hearts couldn't keep up with themselves, and the people inside the MRI scanner couldn't keep up with their hearts.

The bishop said a lot of things that sounded as rotten as the cake would soon be, as if Jesus had invented forgiveness, and I don't know why, but for a fraction of a second, I saw everything in that church as if through an

MRI scanner. Like people had no outsides, only luminescent bones, blue lines and a glow-in-the-dark pounding bulb. Like everyone and everything – even the cake – just consisted of their insides.

At the end of the service the bishop started to break up the tiny baked crucifix from the garden of the cake, and to divide it in little parts.

Coffee was served. People came forward and started breaking up the cake and eating it.

I didn't eat the cake.

I went outside.

All the people I know walked with me in my head and kept talking to me.

In the end I said to them – yes, a cake is not enough.

Forgiveness is not enough.

But nothing is enough.

Even if she'd make a cake that would be big enough for a whole family to fit inside, for the entire world, a cake bigger than the church, it wouldn't be enough.

Because nothing is enough.

The bishop said that he wasn't afraid to admit the cake made him cry.

He said it reminded him of all the people who give their lives to do something that is not enough.

And I didn't know if he was talking about the woman
with the cake
or Jesus.

pauses, looks around The reason I'm saying this is...
Well, to avoid any misunderstanding. You all probably
passed by the table with the scale models. she fetches two
small scale models from the table next to her and holds
them up And thought that these two were scale models of
churches. Whereas in fact,
this is the scale model of a church,
and this is the scale model of a cake
that was made in the shape of a church.

Worklights and houselights dim to black.

thomas bellinck –

infini #7: simple as abc 1: man vs. machine

A large LED display with red lettering descends, coming to a halt in mid-air at the front of the stage. In the dark theatre, only this hovering text seems to exist.

WARSAW, JULY 2015

OUTSIDE, ON THE PLAC EUROPEJSKI,
IT'S 35°C

We hear the audio recording of an interview. In the background, the constant clamour of construction works. The recording is of poor quality. Luckily, the LED display appears to show the verbatim transcription of the interview.

kaja

It doesn't matter where the Agency is,
because it's a...

Here is just where information comes in.

This is where the information...

information is analysed.

This is where the big databases are
and are being worked on.

You will see.

It... it's the data about the inc...

this is the incident.

The incident was:

there was a search and rescue, you know,
57 migrants were rescued off a fishing boat.

That's the incident.

That's the data that comes in here.

I think we need to go upstairs, so...

so maybe you... it's better.

thomas

And... and if we're talking
about automatic border control,
but also surveillance,
what is being developed right now that is,
for example, new technology or...?

kaja

I don't know.

I know that automatic bord...

automated border control is not new.

We see that there are more and more.

I mean... more... if we travel, you know...

through airports,

we see less people, more machines.

There are also... there are also computers

that er... are being tested to ask questions.

To actually interview you

while you cross the border.
I don't think they've been...
This is all in a testing stage, but they...
We have...
There are machines... who while...
they watch you
while you answer a series of questions.
And they draw er... yeah...
they draw conclusions.

thomas

And... and how does it work, like...?

kaja

Int... artificial intelligence.

Patterns.

They pick up, you know...

A machine...

Humans are very good at some things
and machines are very good
at other things.

And a machine might be a lot better
at picking up the tiny signs
that might indicate that you might
not be telling the truth.

Er...

thomas

But doesn't it do away with, for example...
just because...

kaja

They are not being used;
they are being tested.

thomas

Yeah... yeah, exactly, but... but... I mean,
you could detect that a person is lying,
but then that doesn't mean you can detect
why he's lying, for example.

kaja

Yeah... yeah... no...

then the human comes in.

But they are... but there is... there is...

We already have a possibility of creating
software and algorithms and machines
that can do some of the interviewing
instead of a...

But this is... this is tested.

This is not something...

thomas

And this would, for example, be...

kaja

Pretty cool tests...

THOMAS LAUGHS UNCOMFORTABLY

thomas

But how... I mean... I mean...

This is then something
that is introduced as a first step
and then if...

I don't know... I... how...
how I should imagine it.

kaja

It's not being introduced now.
Now it's... it's being tested, you know.
How well the machine does
and how well a human does.

You know...

You have the same person
go through a machine
and another person go through a...

I think we had a story about it...

Yeah, I think I can... er...

when we finish, I will...

We...

I think we wrote about it on the website...
on the testing...

thomas

OK.

kaja

I think last year we had a story about it.
Because they were testing it at one of
the airports, I think er... in Romania.

KAJA MUMBLES INCOMPREHENSIBLY
WHILE BROWSING THE AGENCY'S WEBSITE

kaja

...

Er... 'people smugglers'...

MORE CLICKING AND MUMBLING

kaja

...

'Spotting deception', there we go.
Man against machine.

thomas

It's funny how they even design like a...

kaja

Yeah, you can do whatever, you know...
You can do whatever you want.

But it's on the website under er...
under 'feature stories'. Yeah?

thomas

And I also heard some talk about er...
the development of what they call
an 'artificial nose'.

Which could help spot stowaway migrants,
for example.

Is... is that something
that is being developed here or...

kaja

Oh, about artificial nose I have not er...
heard er...

thomas

OK.

kaja

But there are a la... a number of projects.

And I know that there was one er...
that er...

I remember something about
the artificial er...
artificial er... nose.

But the...

What was this proj... project about?

thomas

There were different tests...

kaja

Oh, detecting people.

thomas

Yeah, about detecting people...

kaja

What they do er... they have a er...
When they're looking for these so-called
'clandestine entries',
the border guards have er... CO2 detectors.
They use CO2 detectors.

thomas

OK.

kaja

And er... small ones.
And that usually... helps.
They... because they are, you know...
Heartbeat detectors.
And CO2 detectors.
If you're looking for people.

thomas

And how...

how does the technology get developed?

Is it because at some point over here

somebody has an idea or is it on demand?

Or how does it... how does it start?

kaja

I think there's a...

I mean, I'm not a specialist in this area,

but I, you know...

It's... somebody might have an idea

and present it to those they might er...

believe er... might be interested.

Or those who might be interested

might be communicating

that they are looking for something

of the sort, you know.

For... for example, how do you...

How do you survey er... a border

that is a heavily wooded area?

How do you deal with the foliage?

You know...

How... what...

how are you going to detect?

You can have different, you know,

tripping, you know... wires

and devices and stuff like that.

But... it... just it's... these are challenges,
because borders are different and...

And how much... of course, you know,
there's the question of money.

How much money do you want to spend
on a particular er... technology?

Er... so er... it... it really depends.

I remember we had a conference here,
not this year, last year,
when we invited the European projects
that deal with border control
and border surveillance.

And there were a number...

I remember that... a...

I remember guys from the UK
with the artificial nose, I think.

But, you know, I don't remember the...

I remember talking to the guys
and finding it quite interesting.

Because it's also, you know,
quite important for drugs and...

The audio recording buzzes with the sound of mobile
phone interference.

KAJA'S PHONE RINGS

kaja

God, I'm sorry.
I have to take this.

As Kaja picks up the phone, melancholy circus-like music fades in. With the brass section seemingly responding to Kaja's every sentence, the ensuing telephone conversation adopts the air of an uncanny comedy routine.

KAJA STARTS TALKING IN POLISH

kaja

...

... dobra...

THOMAS DOESN'T SPEAK ANY POLISH
HOWEVER, HE KNOWS 'DOBRA' MEANS 'GOOD'

kaja

...

MORE POLISH

kaja

...

... dobra...

'GOOD'

THOMAS TRIES TO LOOK OUT
OF THE WINDOW
BUT A SCAFFOLDING
IS BLOCKING THE VIEW

kaja

...

MORE POLISH

kaja

...

... dobra, dobra...

‘GOOD’

As soon as Kaja puts down the phone,
the soundtrack falls silent. Somehow,
it leaves the impression that the orchestra has not
stopped, but is merely holding its breath.

kaja (WHISPERS)

I’m sorry.

thomas (WHISPERS BACK)

That’s OK.

kaja

I think we need to go upstairs.
So maybe you... it's better...

The orchestra now erupts into a boisterous, infectious parade march. The surging music soon drowns out the voices of Kaja and Thomas, who continue their conversation, unperturbed.
The LED display starts to float upwards.

kaja
Sorry about the music.
It tends to grow louder
as the elevator goes up.

thomas
What is it, Shostakovich?

kaja
No, Schnittke.
Postmodernist polystylism.

thomas
Sounds eerie.
kaja
Thank you.
It's called 'Katz-und Maus-Spiel'.
I don't like it,
but I like the title.

It adds a touch of drama.

While the LED display is steadily rising, some sort of colossal box rises from the orchestra pit at precisely the same speed. Light is pouring out of the orchestra pit, spilling onto the hitherto dark stage. As the box heaves into view, inside, we can gradually discern a modular ceiling, built-in lights, registers, fire sprinklers, the heads of four people and the top half of a video wall, displaying what appear to be colour-coded maps and a live newsfeed. It is difficult to keep following Kaja and Thomas' conversation, as the LED display is about to vanish into the stage tower.

kaja

It is said that of all the forms of hunting,
manhunting is the most exciting.

But to be perfectly frank, that's... I don't...

It's all quite dull, really.

We just make the yellow dots green.

thomas

The thrill of post-panoptical surveillance.

kaja

Hence Schnittke.

Sometimes we play Górecki too.

But only because he's Polish.

Rushing towards a grand finale, the parade march booms through the auditorium. By now, the rising box's contents are almost completely visible. On the left-hand side, we see a magnetic whiteboard that has been sawed in two, in order to fit into the box, which needed to fit the orchestra pit. On the whiteboard, a poster that says: 'KEEP CALM & VALIDATE'. Just as we realize we are looking at a life-size replica of the European Border and Coast Guard Agency's situation room in Warsaw, the music stops abruptly. Blackout.

Worklights on. Technicians and extras clear the stage.

rebekka de wit –

infini #13: until we find a tragedy that is big enough to fit us all

Worklights and houselights on. One by one, various set pieces descend onto the stage, are detached from the fly bars and then carefully assembled by five technicians. The result is an oversized cake in the shape of a church, its spire just out of reach for a tall person. Slowly, the light fades to blackout. The sun seems to be setting.

Worklights and houselights on. Elevator music. Technical changeover. Technicians clear the stage. The gate at the back of the stage is opened. The cake is rolled out of the theatre onto the square outside. A passerby looks in just before the gate is closed again.

rimah jabr –
infini #5

Empty stage with a white backdrop. An enlarged copy of ‘Bosco di Palme’ by Carlo Galli da Bibbiena descends, occupying the entire stage.

It shows three endless colonnades of palm trees, their canopies tightly interwoven and animated by a lateral play of light and shadow. The perspective drawing is divided across thirteen separate sheets of paper, held in place by thirteen fly bars. The scenery suggests an infinite view.

rimah on an audio recording
Nablus, July 22, 2015

Dear Jozef,

Thank you for your letter. Since I received it I’ve been thinking more about the video and the model of the tunnel, even though I still love the drawing. Here are my answers to your questions.

You ask me why I chose a tunnel as the space to talk about people being stuck. For me, it is not only about being stuck in a place; it is also about being stuck in time.

Outside of Palestine, time seems to be running normally. But here, if you juggled the passages of my life into the different times in which I've lived, not a lot would change. I can see myself as a child living the second intifada, and I can see myself as a grown woman living the first intifada. Everything I've written for theatre has been about the feelings or minds of people stuck in a situation.

Now I remember a fly stuck inside a window. She tries to flee. Her small brain, her short memory helps her to forget where she has already tried to find an exit, so she might try the same spot many times in five minutes. We also forget, and we also keep on trying, hoping that we will find the exit from our situation... I see many dead flies in between two window frames. They keep on moving until they are dead.

Why is the tunnel important as a landscape? Being underground is a different feeling, the same feeling you have when you are late and you are on a different level, a different rhythm to the rest of the world... When you are late and you run to catch your appointment you are actually running to catch up with the time that you've missed, which is something that will never happen. This is what I feel about Palestine: we will never be able to catch up with the time we've missed, I've

always felt we are late and that we have our own rhythm, which is caused by the situation of being stuck. Even our steps are different. The transport we use works this way – you drive, you stop at the checkpoint, you wait, you drive, you stop at the checkpoint, you wait.

And then people invented another way to move between cities: in 2002 we called it ‘iltifafy’ – which means meandering, which means driving around and in between cities and villages through mountains, using animals between two spots to be able to continue your trip while avoiding the checkpoints, and this works like the system that ants use. So you spend your day waiting, stuck, you’ve lost a lot of time that you’ll need to catch up with. How can you recover the time you lose on checkpoints or ‘iltifafy’? – you never will.

So why tunnels? The limit of the ceiling in the tunnel makes you feel heavy. I don’t have an explanation for this at the moment, but I feel like the whole world is sitting on my head. Again: a different world, a different rhythm to the people above ground.

The idea I have in mind is not about being stuck in one place or one memory or one period; it is, for me, about being stuck in life, in a life that was chosen for you ever since you were born. So it is about the hope of finding the

exit that you might find in this tunnel. You don't see the end of it, you don't know how far you are from this end, or how far you are from the exit, so you go on but you are not sure...

In Bibbiena's drawing you don't see an end – it is open to question, it is more confusing than the images of tunnels I sent you. You think you are out or free but you are probably not – which is the general feeling in my country, where there is a lot of confusion, where no one has a clear plan, where, when you talk about plans, people laugh. Explaining this, I will have to use big words... but practically it is not easy to have a plan, and even when things become better, you are just used to improvising, and the system we have is an 'improvising system' which affects people so they don't believe in planning, as all their plans are dropped for one reason or another, so they cynically laugh at you when you talk about plans.

Even on a personal level, you might plan to visit a friend, and suddenly there is a curfew, so then you have to postpone. It is like your time is frozen for a while, and again, you lose grasp of your plans, or of the time, even though it is running normally outside your world.

One by one, starting at the back of the stage,

the thirteen plans move upward and out of view. The illusion of infinity dwindles, and a few minutes later only an empty stage remains.

Bibbiena's drawing reminds me of a time in the past when people didn't know that the earth was round and they wanted to reach the end of the earth. Maybe it is the story of the human being...

Sometimes I think this feeling of being stuck is more general than I believe. Maybe it is not my feeling as a Palestinian who has lived through intense experiences – and I mean, also, intense in information: intense feelings and intense shocks. Maybe many people have the same feeling. Maybe it is the formative experience of every creature, from when we are inside our mother's womb, inside a sack for nine months, more or less. Sometimes I think that this feeling is that old.

I like the illusion in Bibbiena's drawing.

When I look at it I think of the illusion of our existence as human beings. The drawing reminds me of the question: is everything we live... are all the problems and feelings and ideas we have... are they real? Personally I prefer to think this: that nothing of what we live is real. It gives you hope and lightness.

I find this a smart way to keep your brain from collapsing.

If you look at the illusion, the feeling of being stuck and confused will suddenly disappear.

I feel that each small line in the drawing is part of the same line, that if I pulled at the edge of it, it would come undone like a knitted pullover unravelling to a single thread, and that I would be walking in a blank space after a while.

Maybe I've been straying from your questions, Jozef. I'm afraid that we're going wider than we need to for this project. If you have more questions, you can write to me.

Best wishes,
Rimah

Blackout.

begüm erciyas –
infini #10

Houselights on. A fully lit empty stage framed by black curtains. A small white panel appears, hovers in mid-air. It reads:

If money enters the room, the spirits leave.

jeroen parterre ‘If money or cameras enter the room, the spirits leave.’ Elsewhere it is said that they generally take up refuge in ‘mountain strongholds, whirlpools, and clouds.’

When we got in touch with the choreographer Begüm Erciyas, in search of a landscape, she was working in Montreal, Canada. There, she was looking into anthropologists’ reports about gift economies and potlatch ceremonies, which have survived through the colonial past of the country to the present day. Where do these ceremonies take place?

This question spurred her interest in ‘places where convictions seem to be of another kind.’ What do these places look like?

She wrote to us that, ‘no documentation of any scenery was specific enough to really matter. So, I have no actual landscape to bring into the theatre.’

Here at the Decoratelier, we insisted, having become curious about these ‘places where convictions seem to be of another kind.’ Maybe they’re not very concrete, but they triggered our dialogue: ‘Would it be possible to take a leap of faith and speculate on how the theatre itself could travel to such a place? How can we go from here to there?’

Her reply was that perhaps we should focus on the journey rather than the destination, and proposed using the Bol – this very theatre space, that is – as a vehicle for travel. ‘Could you make the Bol move?’

After a few more months of experimentation, fantasies of giant marble roller coasters, and the construction of yet more scale models,

we think we’re now ready for the adventure.

Begüm Erciyas couldn’t be here today, but she sent us some instructions and wishes us

a good journey. I’ll read her score to you. unfolds a piece of paper

You are seated inside a theatre hall called Bol. If you look at it from the right position it does indeed look like a sphere.

The Bol is placed inside the larger building of the Royal Flemish Theatre. This building is deeply rooted in the ground. It rests on a concrete foundation.

To go anywhere, the Bol has to come loose from the rest of the building.

It has to carefully lift off from its current position, slow down when it reaches the ceiling, then increase power until it breaks through the roof, out into the open air.

Now, imagine this movement.
Imagine us going up.

High sound as if from a large engine. It is abruptly cut off after a few seconds.

Did you have the sensation of lifting off a bit? Don't worry if you didn't. This was just a small test. In a moment you are going to take off for real. We are going to take off for real – each and every one inside the Bol. For this we need your collaboration – your willingness to suspend your disbelief and any doubts.

Embrace the Bol as your vehicle for the journey.
Expect it to start moving in a moment.
Suspend your convictions.
Think of it as a rite of passage.

This will increase our chances of landing in a new landscape.

Are you ready? looks around and addresses all the spectators seated on the parterre and the three balconies
Let's take off!

The houselights dim. High sound again. The panel and the black curtains on stage sink to the floor, followed by all 48 fly bars and the sets attached to them. The theatre does indeed take off. Through a window at the back of the stage we see the square, then the roofs of buildings, and then only clouds, which appear to be sinking as well: cumulus clouds and cirrus clouds, marvellous white clouds reminiscent of dragons and other fabled animals, grey dust in a bright red atmosphere... until high above the clouds, the theatre comes to a standstill again at the square.

Blackout. A technician closes the window shutters.

Worklights and houselights on. Organ music. Technical changeover.

All the 48 fly bars and the sets attached to them go up and out of view.

The technicians prepare for a total blackout in the theatre. Windows and doors are closed. Cracks, holes and light spills are detected and sealed. On the parterre, the lighting and sound technicians cover up all their equipment and then disappear under a black cloth. The houselights and emergency lights are switched off. Other technicians inspect all the exits to cover up even small LED indicators with black tape.

The worklights dim gradually. A white cloth replica of Saint Peter's Basilica comes down and collapses onto the stage. A technician attaches a black cube measuring 1.5 x 1.5m to a fly bar.

The Basilica flies upwards and out of view again.

It is followed by the black cube, barely visible in the ever dimming lights, which disappears into the dark stage tower.

michiel vandevelde –
infini #4: annex

Blackout. Silence.

voice-over A glitch. A black box. An obstruction in the void. A box in a box. A space representing other spaces: a tunnel, a forest, a data centre, a wall, the desert, a harbour. Outdoor space. Memories of landscapes you were once part of, or memories of landscapes were you have never been. The black hole. Superseding all imagination. A negative space. An anti-landscape.

The image: the only thing capable of denying nothingness is also the gaze of nothingness on us.
The image is light.
Nothingness, immensely heavy.
The image gleams.
Nothingness is that thickness where all is veiled.

In 1977, human history reached a turning point. Material landscapes, as we used to know them, disappeared. They were not destroyed by an apocalyptic event, but were transferred to another dimension: dissolved, transformed into ghosts. The human race, misled by new kinds of immaterial landscapes made from deceptive

electromagnetic substances, lost faith in the reality of life, and began to believe in nothing but the infinite proliferation of images.

1977 was the year when material landscapes faded, transmigrating from the world of physical life into the world of simulation and nervous stimulation. This year was a water-shed moment: from the age of human evolution, the world shifted to the age of de-civilization. What had been built through labour and social solidarity began to be dissipated by a rapid and predatory process of derealisation. The material legacy of the modern conflictive alliance between the industrious bourgeois and industrial workers was sacrificed in favour of the immaterial nature of digital networks.

In the second decade of the twenty first century, post-bourgeois dilapidation took the final form of a financial black hole. A drainage pump started to swallow and destroy the product of two hundred years of industriousness and collective intelligence, transforming the concrete reality of social civilization into abstractions – figures, algorithms, mathematical ferocity, and accumulations of nothing.

The seductive force of simulation transformed material forms into vanishing images, submitted visual art to viral

spreading, and subjected language to the fake regime of advertising.

At the end of this process, real life disappeared into the black hole of the digital. What is not yet clear is this: what happened to subjectivity, to sensibility and the ability to imagine, to create and to invent? Will human beings be able to come out of the black hole, to invest their energy in a new creative passion, in a new form of solidarity and mutuality?

At the moment, it is impossible to say – we don't know if there is hope beyond the black hole, if there will be a future after the future.

Imagine you are falling. But there is no ground.

Paradoxically, while you are falling, you will probably feel as if you are floating –

or not even moving at all. Falling is relational – if there is nothing to fall toward, you may not even be aware that you're falling. If there is no ground, gravity might be low and you'll feel weightless. Objects will stay suspended if you let go of them. Whole societies around you may be falling just as you are. And it may actually feel like perfect stasis – as if history and time have ended and you can't even remember that time ever moved forward.

As you are falling, your sense of orientation may start to play additional tricks on you.

The horizon quivers in a maze of collapsing lines and you may lose any sense of above and below, of before and

after, of yourself and your boundaries. Pilots have even reported that free fall can trigger a feeling of confusion between the self and the aircraft. While falling, people may sense themselves as being things, while things may sense that they are people. Traditional modes of seeing and feeling are shattered. Any sense of balance is disrupted. Perspectives are twisted and multiplied. New types of visuality arise.

A black box. A black hole. A black space.

A box in a box. The concept of the concept. Nothingness. Non-knowledge. A concrete abstraction. A landscape that eats itself.

A landscape that explodes.

Once it was said that there are no shadows in a black space. Now the black space has its own shadow, its dark twin: a box in a box.

A hole in a hole.

A narrow horizontal stripe of bright white light, exactly fitting the width of the theatre, illuminates the technical bridges high above the parterre. The bundle of light moves forward, slowly scanning the space. After the bridges, it lights up the proscenium, then sinks down along the back and side walls of the stage until it reaches the floor. Then it creeps all the way to the front of the stage.

Blackout.

rodrigo sobarzo –
infini #14: ne†

Track 16 on monitors; fade in front speakers over 30”. Ambient music wells up at the back of the stage and moves towards the auditorium. The sadcore song ‘Ghostrider’ by Yung Lean.

Houselights to 35% in 10”. HMI 400 Watt cour to 100% in 0”. The light reaches its full intensity after ca. 3’.

After 10” cue 190: FB25 to 2,5m; FB32 to SHOW position; FB1 + FB18 to FRIEZE position. Two blue fabrics of Gitex Plaster Reinforcement Mesh come down on two chromed fly bars.

After 2’ (music: ‘Total eclipse my heart is grey, ice, blood all on my face’) cue 191: FB25 up at P0,1.

Two fluorescent tubes at the back of the stage to 100% in 10”.

When FB25 on 6,000 start cue 192. Cue 192: FB43 down at P0,4. One white fabric of Gitex Plaster Reinforcement Mesh comes down to SHOW position.

Cue 191 stops at floor.

After 4’: music out.

Silence.

Cue 193: FB32 down at P0,1.

Cue 194: FB25 + 32 + 43 + 1 + 18 + 34 + 44 out of SHOW.

After 7’20” : blackout.

migrating texts:

serge-aimé on an audio recording available via wireless headphones I come from a peaceful place. Everybody moves only when they absolutely have to move. The stupid and interesting thing is that the city doesn't change. There is no evolution. The lives of the people change, of course, but not the city. Everybody knows each other, everybody goes to see each other, just to say hi. All the city is about connections to people. The houses are not so important.

alan One beautiful image that makes me nostalgic is thinking of how people slept outside during summer nights, in the courtyards or on the rooftop. In my hometown the houses were low and flat. You could see and hear the neighbours. And the music, when people had something to celebrate, like a wedding or a birthday. Sometimes horrible and annoying, of course, but sometimes very beautiful too. Different parties at the same time, so it was hard to say who exactly was getting married to who, but somehow you knew.

catherine The water marks the place with its presence. When it falls over the rocks it's so majestic. It's so massive that it looks slow, and it's very graceful. Nothing can stop it, nothing can alter it, it's absolute. And at the

same time it's very humble, because it's water. It makes its presence known, in my memory, it's something that imposes itself just because it's there.

leah I really miss the car culture of California. There's a sense that you can get in your car and go anywhere you want and it's the open road mentality. I was expecting that here, because all the countries are so close together, but in fact I found it's kind of difficult to get from one place to another. Sometimes the trains don't go the way you want and it's not eight lanes of freeway going 70 miles an hour. It's more narrow and closed. I miss that big sky feeling of California when you're on the freeway. The whole world is open to you, you can go anywhere. Drive across the desert or along the sea.

serge-aimé When you want to go to meet people here you don't meet people. You can go to a café. But there, you're even more alone. The best way is to go with someone. You start to talk with someone, immediately the first question is: what do you want from me?

mohammed When I'm not feeling good, when I'm frustrated, disturbed, I like to discharge this negative energy by walking the streets of Brussels. I walk to this very open view next to the Palais de Justice. It looks down on the whole city, the centre and the extended centre laying down beyond that panoramic view. Without really thinking, I tend to walk to that place. Just to see this sea of houses.

I sometimes stay in silence, sometimes take a couple of pictures.

catherine The park has nothing to prove, nothing to resist. It's actually quite welcoming, you can be however you want. It has this timeless neutrality. When I go back to my house, I keep this inside. To the time before I had a past and future. A fun, innocent state where you can play, and there's nothing before and nothing after.

serge-aimé Brussels is different in the sense that nobody owns the city. You have Walloon, Flemish, a lot of Arab people, the Congolese who have a small part of the city. Everyone is trying to find their comfort zone, so they don't care if you're trying to find your comfort zone. Everybody is busy finding their place. It is a city for everybody.

kito Brussels is not gigantic either. The architecture helps. Everything is so small. When everything is small, you feel that you can change it. I can create something in this corner, in that corner, whenever I want to.

leah And then I thought: could you find some pleasure in the now and what you're doing, and being outside in the sun. That's helped a lot. Because in fact: what is the hurry? I'm retired, I have time to do laundry and hang it on the line and enjoy the smell. So I do need to slow down and enjoy what's possible. And learn from the people that live here to slow down and talk and have a coffee and not be in such a hurry.

mohammed In Palestine I lived with a huge physical barrier, the wall, that limits all of our movement. Now I am in the land of liberties and freedom, but in a very unexpected way, I face another kind of wall in front of me – non-physical, non-tangible, I cannot touch it, but it's limiting all my life-activity. I am in a waiting-process for the necessary papers, so I cannot work. I cannot leave the territory, because it's not legal.

Back home I dealt with an occupier, who didn't care about my human presence. Here I'm dealing with a much more developed, sophisticated authority, that does care about your human existence. That's why it was a bit shocking to find this huge barrier here, in the middle of Europe.

serge-aimé Boulevard Anspach, I don't know if it's for summer or forever, they make it into a pedestrian place. I was there, it was amazing – suddenly it became a human place. You get the feeling humans are taking the place over again, instead of making prisoners of ourselves. Just to see the centre of Brussels. People sit on a bench, other people play music. The city becoming a living place. Not the place that is eating us, swallowing us. We are taking our places again in the city.

Infini 1-15 by Decoratelier opened
on 13 May 2016 at the KVS in Brussels
during the Kunstenfestivaldesarts.

Decoratelier:

Artistic direction: Jozef Wouters

Curator: Dries Douibi

Dramaturgy: Jeroen Peeters

Production management: Celine van
der Poel

Production assistance: Catherine
Vervaecke

Technical direction: Menno Vandavelde

Stage management: Niels Antonissen

Wood workshop: Siemen Van Gaubergen, Tim
Vanhentenryck, Samuel Verdonck

Metal workshop: Tomislav Ruzic

Paper workshop: Dareen Abbas, Ine
Craenhals, Lila John, Kwinten Wouters

Cloth workshop: Heidi Ehrhart, Nathanael Van Hoecke,
Pascal Windelinckx

Painting: Thierry Bosquet

Digital image editing: Stijn Maes

Graphic design: Ward Heirwegh

Scale models: Maurane Colson, Hanne
Van Den Biesen

Stage: Jimmy De Boelpaep, Laurence
De Lafontaine, Fik Dries, Pablo Perez
Chris Reijnen, Sourour Schallewaty
Fly system: Christophe Geens
Lighting: Ken Hioco, Dimitri Stuyven
Sound: Max Stuurman, Diederik Suykens, Marie
Vandecasteele
Video: Donald Berlanger
Surtitling: Inge Floré
Administration: Karolien Derwael,
Sara Verhaert (Klein Verzet)
Thanks to Nienke Scholts, Leen
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Patrick De Coster.
Production: Mennomichieljozef vzw
and KVS
Infini 1-15 was realized with the support of the Flemish
Authorities.

Arkadi Zaides

Infini #1

Created by Arkadi Zaides

In collaboration with Yuval Tebol (photography), Daniel Landau (video)

Local coordinator Lesbos: Efi Latsoudi

Duration: 13 min.

Arkadi Zaides is a choreographer.

Born in Belarus in 1979, he emigrated to Israel in 1990, and is currently based in France. His work examines the ways in which political and social contexts affect the physical body and constitute choreography.

www.arkadizaides.com

Chris Keulemans

Infini #2

Created by Chris Keulemans

In collaboration with Serge Aimé Coulibaly, Mohammed Hammad, Leah Marcus,

Catherine Montondo, Kito Sino, Alan Yussef

Audio mix: Nienke Rooijackers

Recorded in July 2015

Duration: 30 min.

Chris Keulemans (1960) is a writer,

moderator and cultural organizer based in Amsterdam.

Michiel Soete

Infini #3: Seldom real

Created by Michiel Soete and

Marlies Jacques

Music: Michiel Soete

Crew Arizona: Tony Lee, Dean Taylor, Scott Thybony, Michael Vincent

Inspired by the work and writings of

James Turrell

Thanks to Sara Sampelayo, Bas Devos,
Mathijs Soete

Duration: 12 min.

Michiel Soete (1986) is a performance
maker and musician based in Brussels.

Michiel Vandevelde

Infini #4: Annex

Created by Michiel Vandevelde

Feedback: Dries Douibi

Texts: Franco 'Bifo' Berardi, Jean-Luc
Godard, Hito Steyerl, Eduardo Viveiros
de Castro and Michiel Vandevelde

Duration: 8 min.

Michiel Vandevelde (1990) is based in Brussels and works as a
choreographer, dancer, editor and curator. His artistic work consists of
actions in public space, performances and installations.

www.michielvandevelde.be

Rimah Jabr

Infini #5

Created by Rimah Jabr

Text and performance: Rimah Jabr

Image: Carlo Galli da Bibbiena,
Bosco di Palme (1754)

Digital image editing: Afreux and
Stijn Maes

Lighting design: Ken Hioco

Thanks to Bruno Forment

Duration: 9 min.

Rimah Jabr (1980) is a Palestinian
playwright, theatre director and
writer based in Nablus and
Toronto.

Sis Matthé

Infini #6

Created by Sis Matthé and Jozef Wouters

Text and performance: Sis Matthé

English translation: Trevor Perri

Set painting: Thierry Bosquet

Lighting design: Ken Hioco

Printed with the generous support of

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Thanks to Bruno Forment, Hennie van Osch, Paul Adriaensen, Julia Akkermans

Duration: 17 min.

Sis Matthé (1980) is a writer and musician based in Antwerp.

Thomas Bellinck

Infini #7: Simple as ABC #1: Man vs. machine

Created by Thomas Bellinck

Field research: Thomas Bellinck and

Jozef Wouters

Music: Alfred Schnittke, Clowns und

Kinder (1976), Märchen der Wanderungen (1982)

Thanks to Grégoire Chamayou and

Ewa Moncure

Duration: 10 min.

Thomas Bellinck (1983) is a Brussels-based artist. He has created several documentary plays which address different types of systemic violence, and has built a historical-futuristic museum about life in the former European Union.

www.thomasbellinck.com

Wim Cuyvers

Infini #8

Text: Wim Cuyvers

English translation: Alison Mouthaan

Graphic design: Ward Heirwegh

Duration: 22 min.

Wim Cuyvers (1958) is a speleologist, architect, writer and forester. Since 2009 he has devoted his time to a single non-project: the Montavoix shelter in the forest next to Saint-Claude, France.

Anna Rispoli

Infini #9: Intervallo

Created by Anna Rispoli

Performer Brussels: Sourour Schallewaty

Performers Tunis: Farouk 'Maraja' Ouerghi, Houcni Jouini, Yosri Saidi

Made with backdrops from the stock of

De Munt/La Monnaie (painted by Patrick Van Tricht: Nature morte d'après Abraham Mignon)

Music: Intervallo della RAI (Pietro

Domenico Paradisi, Toccata in La maggiore per arpa, 1754)

In collaboration with Dream City – Multidisciplinary Biennial of Contemporary Art in Public Space (Tunis)

Thanks to Lilia Benromdhane, Aya Rebad, Béatrice Dunoyer, Hamza Bouzouida, Franky Goethals, Alexandra Houbrechts, Nathalie Salaméro, Atelier Peinture Théâtre de la Monnaie

Duration: 10 min.

Anna Rispoli (1974) is an Italian artist based in Molenbeek. Her research revolves around a multiplicity of mental landscapes: from the fictional images created by distance, forced proximity, or longing, to the oriented projections of city branding.

Begüm Erciyas

Infini #10

Created by Begüm Erciyas and

Jozef Wouters

Presented by Jeroen Peeters

Soundscape: Matthias Meppelink

Illusion machine: Menno Vandevelde, based on a drawing by Denis Diderot

Digital image editing: Stijn Maes

Duration: 7 min.

Begüm Erciyas (1982) is a Turkish choreographer based in Brussels. In her work, the stage is often a setting for games of replacement, imagination and belief.

www.begumerciyas.com

Jisun Kim

Infini #11

Created by Jisun Kim

English translation: Kyunghoo Lee

Duration: 5 min.

Jisun Kim (1985) is a South-Korean artist based in Seoul. She has an interest in social systems, cultures and no man's lands: multi-layered spaces created between laws or norms, the physical borders between countries, and marginalised spaces in real and online worlds.

Jozef Wouters

Infini #12

Created by Jozef Wouters

Text: Jaime Gil de Biedma

Duration: 5 min.

Jozef Wouters (1986) is a Brussels-based scenographer. He designs and negotiates space in various contexts and constellations.

www.jozefwouters.be

Rebekka de Wit

Infini #13: Until we find a tragedy that is big enough to fit us all

Created by Rebekka de Wit

Text and performance: Rebekka de Wit

Scale model: Maurane Colson

Thanks to all the people at the Mother Emanuel Church in Charleston, USA

Duration: 7 min.

Rebekka de Wit (1985) is a writer and theatre maker based in Amsterdam.

Rodrigo Sobarzo

Infini #14: Ne†

Created by Rodrigo Sobarzo

Music: Yung Lean, Ghost rider (2015)

Duration: 7 min.

Rodrigo Sobarzo de Larraechea (1982) is a Chilean choreographer and performer based in Brussels. His work has a strong interest in materiality and subcultural production, and seeks to invite viewers to participate in visual introspection

Benny Claessens

Infini #15

Created by Benny Claessens and Jozef Wouters

Duration: 2 min.

Benny Claessens (1981) is an actor and director based in Ghent.

Decoratelier is an ongoing and constantly evolving project by scenographer Jozef Wouters. Founded in 2014 to develop the project *Infini 1-15*, it now is both a workshop (located in an old factory in the Brussels canal area), and a motley group of artists, builders and thinkers. Decoratelier aims to function as an accessible studio for artists and set designers, where there is also room for cross-disciplinary collaborations, social experiments and audiences.

About this project, Jozef Wouters says:

‘Decoratelier is a space that accommodates the various forms of collaboration and labour inherent in my work. Space is tested, and conversations take place in wood, iron and cardboard. It is a permanent place within the constructional quest for constantly changing spaces in which art, thought and artisans can meet.’

www.jozefwouters.be

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www.damagedgoods.be