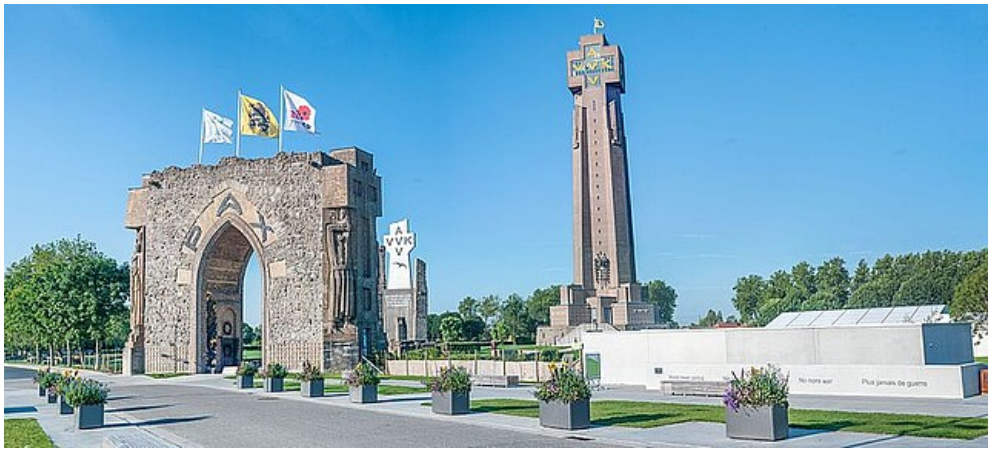

The Yser Tower (IJzertoren) with the Peace Gate (Paxpoort) to the left (2015)
Author: Lemandros, Source: Wikimedia Commons https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AIJzertorenPanorama.jpg

Facing a Difficult Past? The Yser Tower in Dixmude, Belgium

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Cultures of History Forum, published: 16.11.2016

DOI: 10.25626/0056

"No more war" is the message the Yser Tower Museum in the small Belgian town of Dixmunde tries to convey. It seems as if this war museum which showcases the atrocities of the First World War at an authentic site would like to be a museum for peace. Yet by opting for a pacifist narrative the museum bypasses the complex history of the site itself. It avoids any in-depth discussion about the controversial history of the Yser Tower and its role in the efforts to construct a Flemish nation.

Recommended Citation

Maarten Van Alstein: Facing a Difficult Past? The Yser Tower in Dixmude, Belgium. In: Cultures of History Forum (16.11.2016), DOI: 10.25626/0056

Facing a Difficult Past? The Yser Tower in Dixmude, Belgium

In Dixmude, a provincial town in the remote western corner of Belgium, a bulky cross-shaped monument, the Yser Tower, rises up on the banks of the Yser River. Built on the site of once ferocious battles, the tower houses a permanent exhibition on the Belgian–German front during the First World War. The museum clearly has a message to convey. Visitors who fail to notice the catchphrase "No more war", inscribed not only on the foot of the tower but also on the walls of the newly built entrance pavilion, can't miss this pacifist message while visiting the permanent exhibition. By presenting the First World War as senseless violence and horror, the museum hopes to induce in visitors an awareness of the value of peace. It is not unique in this respect, and is certainly not the only war museum that would like to be a museum for peace. More noteworthy here is the fact that by opting for this pacifist narrative the museum tends to bypass the complex history of the site itself. It avoids any in-depth discussion about the controversial history of the Yser Tower and its role in the efforts of the broader Flemish Movement to construct a Flemish nation. Thus, the museum not only misses opportunities to provide a critical public history of Flemish/Belgian twentieth-century political history, it also tends to obscure the more sensitive and thorny aspects of that history. This is made all the more problematic by two decrees of the Flemish Parliament, in 1986 and again in 2011, recognizing the Yser Tower as a "Memorial of Flemish Emancipation and Peace".

A Short Walk from the River to the Tower

Attentive visitors to the site, however, cannot fail to notice that the Yser Tower is more than merely a former battlefield. Indeed, visitors making the short walk from the river, where the entrance pavilion is located, to the tower that houses the museum are confronted with an abundance of Flemish-nationalist and Christian symbols: a Pax Gate with Catholic crosses and Flemish lions; a crypt where war heroes of the Flemish Movement[1] are buried; a huge white cross with the inscription "Here lie their bodies like seeds in the sand, hoping for the harvest, O Vlaanderland"; and, of course, the imposing tower itself, topped by a huge cross bearing the letters AVV-VVK ("Everything for Flanders, Flanders for Christ"). Visitors hoping for some clarification of this complex political symbolism they encounter upon entering the permanent exhibition will have their patience tested, however. Instead of learning about the site and its history, they are immediately immersed in the gripping story of the outbreak of the First World War.

"What Remains of Life? What Remains of the Land?"

The permanent exhibition of the Museum at the Yser takes up 15 floors of the 22-story Yser Tower. The central thread of the exhibition is summarized in the catchphrase "What remains of life? What remains of the land?" written on the walls of the entrance hall of the tower. With the first part of the phrase the curators aim at presenting an exhibition about the human side of war. The museum-makers were emphatic about not wanting to build an exhibition focused on weapons, uniforms, and military tactics. Instead it wanted to show how trench soldiers and refugees experienced this gruesome war. The undertones of the exhibition are clearly pacifist here, although the curators endeavored to tone down all too explicit pacifist references and slogans. The second part of the catchphrase ("What remains of the land?") refers to the impact of the war on the surrounding landscape. According to the museum brochure, it also refers to the impact of the First World War on twentieth-century Belgian politics (e.g., the rise of Flemish political nationalism in the aftermath of the war). As I will argue below, the museum does

not succeed in achieving the ambitious goal of addressing this history.

Building an exhibition in a 22-story tower with very limited space is not easy. The curators had to make choices, and did so sensibly. Each floor is dedicated to one single topic or theme: the outbreak of the war, the German advance and occupation of Belgium, the refugee crisis, the battle of the Yser in October 1914, daily life at the front, industrial warfare, occupied Belgium, life behind the front, returning home after the war, memory and trauma, and the history of the Yser Tower and pilgrimages to the site over the course of the twentieth century. The rather daunting floor-by-floor visitor's route is interspersed with various opportunities to engage with the history of the war in less conventional ways. While most floors are aimed at a cognitive experience (reading texts, analyzing newspapers and maps, etc.), other parts of the exhibition appeal to visitors' emotions and empathy or provide a more hands-on experience. Floor 15, for example, tries to give visitors a sense of the oppressiveness and threatening atmosphere of trench life. Visitors are led through a labyrinth of dugout-like corridors with black walls, floors and ceilings, while occasional flashes of light break the spell of darkness, with gruesome images in light boxes depicting the bodies of dead soldiers. Floor 13 is entirely filled with artillery shells on wooden racks. Beneath every shell is the name of a fallen soldier, with the day of his death, but no mention of rank and nationality. And floor 9 is dedicated to a work of art by Peter Jacquemyn. Black and white drawings on the walls represent the difficulties and problems soldiers faced upon returning from the war.

Overall, the curators chose to limit the number of texts, making manifold use of visual materials instead, such as reproductions of newspapers, photographs, maps, and – to a lesser extent – videos. Authentic objects are strikingly rare in the exhibition. But the curators do make frequent use of scenographic installations. In addition to the artillery shells and the dark labyrinth mentioned above, there are two other installations that merit mention. On floor 18, dedicated to the Belgian refugees who fled the rapidly advancing German Army in the early days of the war, the walls – from floor to ceiling – are hung with clothes which, interestingly, are not historical but more modern in appearance. Photos attached to these clothes show the refugees of 1914, thus establishing a link between refugee crises in the past and the present.

Another installation worth mentioning is the "windows of national identity". There are eight of these frames throughout the exhibition, with wooden panels – emblazoned with the flags of the various nations which fought in the war – that the visitor can open. Each of these contains two texts and a number of pictures inside. The idea of the windows is to present two perspectives on a particular story. For example, beneath the Belgian national flag we find one text about Belgian patriotism and another about international socialism. Behind the flag of the German Empire, one text explains how German propaganda portrayed the occupiers of Belgium as benefactors, while a text and a poster on the other panel show how Allied propaganda depicted the Germans as barbarians. The assumption is that these contrasting viewpoints and inherent dilemmas will make visitors think about "national identity". The messages in these windows are actually rather complex, however. The links between historical instances presented in the panels and the more abstract concept of national identity are not always easy to follow. Moreover, the texts themselves are not always as clear and succinct as they could be. It remains an open question whether the majority of visitors will grasp the intention of this exercise. The avowed purpose and set-up of these windows outlined in the museum brochure is not much help here either. The explanation provided tends towards the theoretical and is probably too complicated for a general audience. In other words, while the basic idea of the windows of national identity is good and rather original, their practical implementation might not have the intended effect.

A Compelling Visit?

Overall, the curators' approach has resulted in an aesthetically attractive and subdued exhibition. The risk of content-overload has effectively been avoided – no small achievement given the almost impossible task of making an exhibition in a tower with considerable space restraints. Some of the scenographic installations are quite impressive. At the same time, however, the curators missed a number of opportunities to make the exhibition more appealing to a wider public. Compared to the "IPOP-model" developed by the Office of Policy and Analysis at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the permanent exhibition of the Museum at the Yser does not seem to address a sufficiently wide variety of visitor preferences. The IPOP-model distinguishes four primary interests of museum visitors: ideas, people, objects, and physical experiences. Empirical research on the model shows that most visitors are drawn to all four of these experiential domains, albeit to varying degrees. One of the four preferences appears to be dominant in most visitors. What's more, the evidence suggests that exhibitions strongly appealing to all four visitor typologies – that basically leave out no one – will be very popular with visitors.[2]

Measured against this model, the Museum at the Yser seems to mainly work with ideas and hands-on experience. It is striking that the museum exhibits just a handful of authentic objects, whereas personal stories or testimonies in the form of texts or (re-enacted) videos are all but absent. The lack of personal accounts and eye-witness testimonies, an established museum practice for attracting the interest of visitors, suggests that the Museum at the Yser is not a "polyphonic" museum. On the contrary, the exhibition is quite traditional in that there seems to be only one narrative voice underlying it. Moreover, it never becomes clear in the exhibition who is actually doing the talking. This lack of a diversity of perspectives, combined with a rigid floor-by-floor-route and the fact that the museum offers few opportunities for visitors to deepen their knowledge on topics or questions they find particularly engaging, makes the overall museum experience a rather passive one. In a number of instances visitors are indeed challenged to think for themselves, but the overall emphasis is on consuming the information offered. In other words, visitors are expected to swallow wholesale the exhibition's master narrative of the First World War and the museum's message on the value of peace. All in all they are not encouraged to actively lend meaning to the histories and topics addressed by the museum.

Bypassing Complexity and Avoiding Sensitive Issues

But perhaps even more conspicuous is the exhibition's failure to engage in any profound way with the history of the site itself. The exhibition merely scratches the surface of this complex but interesting past. Thirteen of the fifteen floors comprising the permanent exhibition are dedicated to the First World War. Only on the last two floors does the exhibition begin to explore the history of the site itself. Floor 8 deals with the construction and symbolic nature of the Yser Tower. The tower was constructed in the 1920s by the Yser Pilgrimage Committee, an organization founded by war veterans of the Front Movement. During the war this association of flamingant soldiers had contested the Francophone dominance in the Belgian Army and, more broadly, in Belgian society. Floor 7 then gives an overview of the pilgrimages held at the site from the early 1920s to the present. From the 1930s to the 1980s, the Yser pilgrimage was the biggest recurring (in this case, yearly) political mass manifestation in Belgium (see below).

At this point the exhibition encounters serious problems. It is simply impossible to narrate the complex history of the site in the limited space – two compact floors – the museum allots it. The Yser Tower and the pilgrimages to it have played a prominent role in the broader Flemish Movement and its efforts at constructing a Flemish nation. This interesting and rich history is complex and also controversial. In

many respects the history of the Flemish Movement can be seen as the struggle for the emancipation of Dutch speakers in a state that was long dominated by Francophone elites. At the same time, the language and national question have been – and remain – a highly divisive issue in Flemish/Belgian politics. One might think that all of this would serve as the ideal starting point for an interesting and relevant history exhibition. The Museum at the Yser, however, almost totally ignores this history, thus failing to grapple head on with a number of sensitive issues. Knotty issues such as collaboration with the Nazis by a significant part of the Flemish Movement in the Second World War are hinted at but never really elaborated upon. Again, two compact floors are completely insufficient to explain the complexities of this history. Furthermore, the manner of presentation on these two floors remains quite cryptic. It provides little context or explanation about the links between the pilgrimages and the broader history of the Flemish Movement. The exhibition therefore fails to offer clues allowing visitors to think more seriously about this complex history. The presentation on the Yser pilgrimages, for example, consists mainly of a series of posters with little explanatory text to accompany them. Its location at the end of an already exhaustive museum tour make it likely that many visitors will merely give it a cursory glance or skip this part of the exhibition altogether.

A More Profound Sense of Place and Time

To understand the museum's seeming reluctance to talk about this difficult or "challenging" chapter of history[3] as well as what makes it so problematic, it is useful to take a brief look at the Yser Tower's history and the current context in which the museum operates.

The Yser Tower and the Yser pilgrimages have played an important but not uncontested role in the twentieth-century political history of Flanders and Belgium. On the one hand, the tower was the most important lieu de mémoire of the Flemish Movement, specifically of the Catholic and Flemish-nationalist strands of that movement. At the annual pilgrimages on the banks of the Yser River, memories of both world wars were kept alive. The First World War was commemorated in terms of the sacrifice of flamingant trench soldiers for the Flemish cause as well with regard to the pacifist slogan "No more war". After 1945, the pilgrimages also provided a space to honor the memory of Flemish nationalists who had collaborated with the Nazis or fought with the Germans on the Eastern front. In the course of the twentieth century, moreover, the Yser pilgrimages became one of the main political battlegrounds of the Flemish Movement. Flamingant war memories were mobilized for the political struggle within the Belgian system and its demands for equal rights for Dutch speakers, autonomy for Flanders, and amnesty for collaborators. Due to this combined heritage of Flemish militancy and collaboration, many on the left and Belgian patriots came to view the tower as the symbol of a detested Flemish-nationalism.

From the 1970s onwards, while Flanders gained more autonomy as a region within the Belgian state, the Yser Pilgrimage Committee increasingly established closer ties to the Flemish authorities. The tower, for one thing, was increasingly reliant on subsidies to support its maintenance and operation, particularly the former, which was no small financial burden. For another, and more importantly, in 1986 the Flemish Parliament passed a decree proclaiming the Yser Tower to be a "Memorial of Flemish Emancipation". The decree was not unanimous, however, and did not enjoy the support of all political parties. Liberals and socialists voted against it, mainly because of the tower's Catholic symbolism. Hence ambitions to redefine the Yser Tower as the symbolic foundation place of the Flemish sub-state were frustrated from the very start.[4] In 1997 there was a subsequent move to invest the tower with a more official status. Despite some resistance – again from liberals and socialists – parliament integrated the Yser Tower in

the curricular objectives of the Flemish primary school system. All pupils had to know that the Yser Tower was a "recognized symbol of the Flemish Community", alongside the Flemish national anthem, flag, and holiday.

These closer links to the government compelled the Yser Pilgrimage Committee to come to terms with some of the peculiarities of its memorial culture, most notably with the way collaboration during the Second World War was still being memorialized by the tower. These efforts led to strife and schisms within the Yser Pilgrimage Committee. A radical wing split off to organize an alternative pilgrimage. This cleared the way for the remaining members of the organization to forge ahead with a new, progressive political course. Although the peace message of the Yser Tower was often overshadowed by the nationalist political platform throughout the course of the twentieth century, pacifism had always been part of the committee's discourse. From the late 1990s on, the emphasis on peace has only grown, gradually claiming a near dominant status in the activities around the Yser Tower and pushing other themes to the margins. There are a number of reasons why this happened. First, since the 1990s, the Flemish Movement as an extra-parliamentary movement began to lose its mass appeal. Second, when Belgium became a federal state in 1993, many flamingants felt that their main political goal had been achieved. Thirdly, by focusing on the value of peace some protagonists hoped that the Yser Tower might shed its tainted, collaborationist image.

The Yser Tower as a "Memorial of Flemish Emancipation and Peace"

The Yser Tower has meanwhile grown less controversial in Flemish politics and society. When in 2010 the tower was at risk of losing a substantial part of its subsidies, the Flemish Parliament offered assistance. Most recently, parliament passed a new decree on the Yser Tower, this time almost unanimously, recognizing the tower as a Memorial of Flemish Emancipation and Peace. The old controversies and quarrels over the Yser Tower (for example between the left and the right, between Belgian patriots and Flemish nationalists, or between those who sympathized with the resistance and those who sympathized with the flamingants who were punished after the war for their collaboration) did not flare up with the old intensity. In an atmosphere marked by pragmatism, parliament decided to consolidate into one framework the subsidies for the maintenance of the site, the socio-cultural activities around the tower, and the museum on "WWI and the Flemish emancipatory movement" – as stipulated in the decree. In return, the Yser Tower museum was expected to professionalize its work and adhere as best as possible to the quality standards of other Flemish museums. It would go beyond the scope of this article, of course, to discuss in any great detail the ins and outs of the Flemish "memorial decree" of 2011, which certainly raises some difficult questions. On the other hand, with the decree now explicitly stipulating a series of quality standards, government subsidies might serve as an incentive for the Museum at the Yser to start working in the spirit of critical public history – in other words, to become more polyphonic and not shy away from complex and sensitive issues.

The Need for Critical Public History

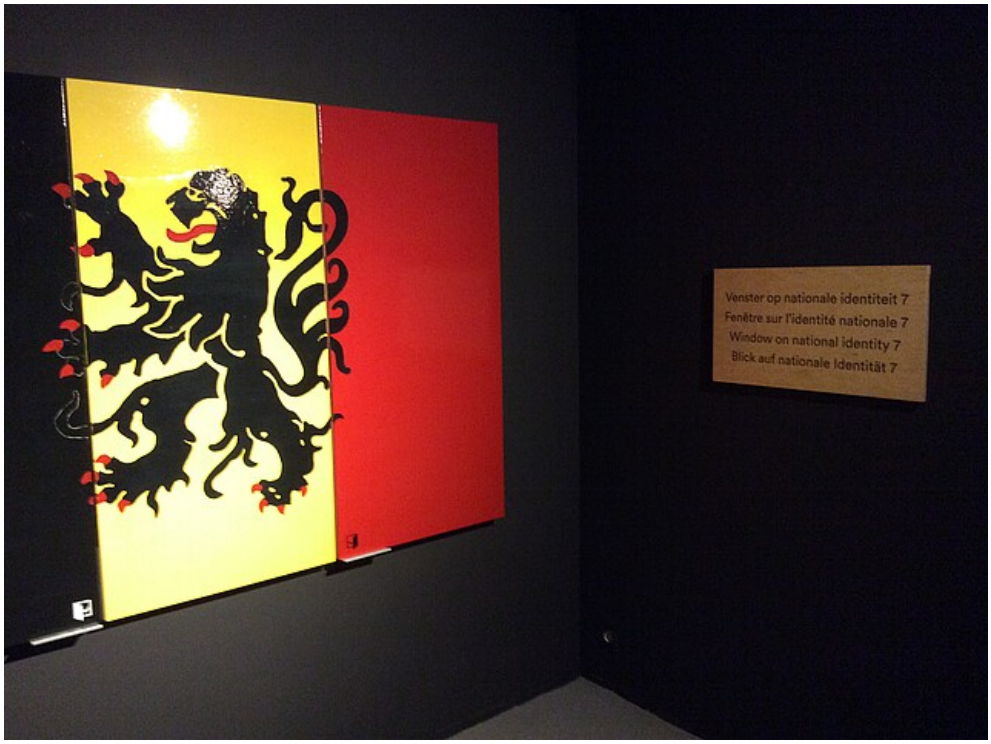
Between 2011 and 2014, the Yser Tower received government subsidies for a complete overhaul of its permanent exhibition. The old exhibition in the Yser Tower dealt mainly with the history of the Flemish Movement and its political struggles. This met with a lot of criticism, however, for its lack of critical distance. In effect, the exhibition expressed a one-sided, unreflective, and teleological narrative of "Flemish emancipation", which was clearly problematic. The museum seemed intent on avoiding this

kind of criticism with its new permanent exhibition. The problem is that it simply omitted the history of the Flemish Movement and the national question in Belgium altogether, choosing to focus instead on the First World War and peace – more popular and "safe" topics of discussion. The results of these choices were outlined above. The new permanent exhibition is unsatisfactory because it fails to address the history of the site in a critical way. It also fails to discuss the history of one of the most divisive issues in Flemish/Belgian politics.

The current exhibition in the Yser Tower ultimately smacks of "narrative fetishism"[5]. The narrative the museum seems to adhere to so dearly is that, given the Flemish Movement's difficult and conflict-ridden past, it is time to close that chapter of history and return to the more "pure" origins of the Front Movement, namely, the pacifist cries of "the Flemish trench soldiers". This explains the museum's strong focus on the story of the First World War and the "No more war" slogan. Underlying this (obviously mythical and homogenizing) reading of history is an attempt to seek closure for a difficult chapter in Belgian history. It seems to express the hope that the Yser Tower might ban the ghosts of this divisive (perhaps even traumatic) past and offer the chance of a new beginning. Though this explanation might sound a bit too psychoanalytical, it is nonetheless pertinent as it helps to explain why the museum focuses so one-sidedly on the First World War. Sensitive and divisive histories, however, are stubborn and unruly, and not so easy to 'close' or block out. The Yser memorial site with its nationalist and Catholic symbolism is a constant reminder of these histories. Ultimately the question is whether safely stowing away a difficult past should be the ambition of a public history museum at a heritage site such as the Yser Tower.

Footnotes

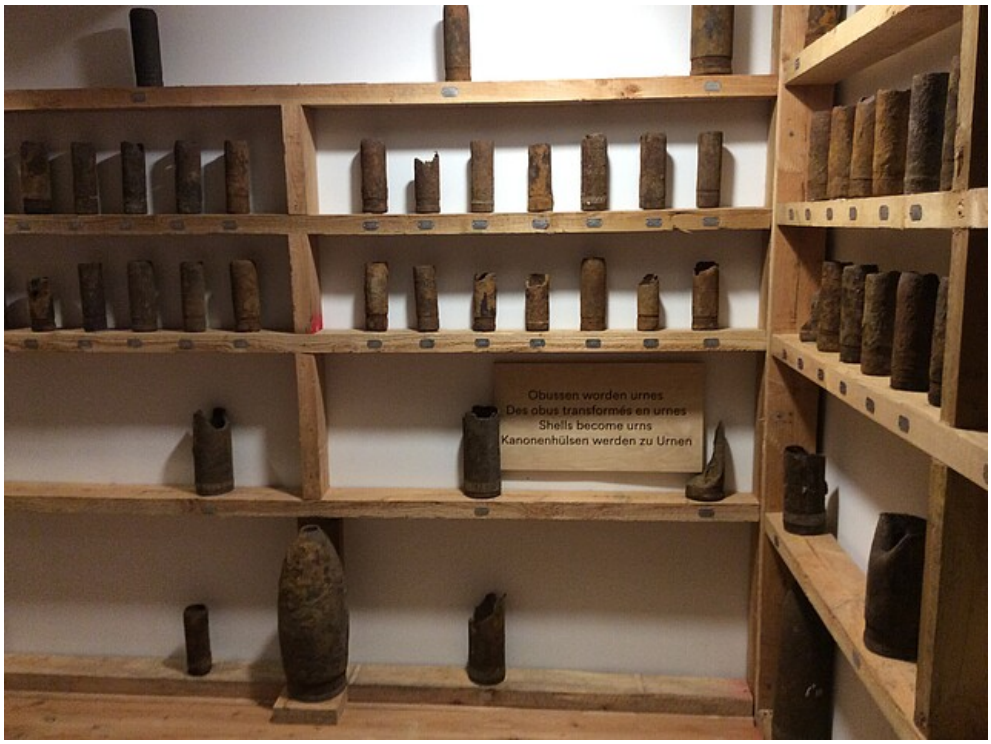
1. The Flemish Movement is the nineteenth- and twentieth-century nationalist movement that strove for political and cultural equality for Dutch-speakers in Francophone-dominated Belgium and for political autonomy for the Flanders region. The movement was never homogenous. Political parties and civil-society organizations were both active within the movement, whereas moderate and radical flamingants alike operated under the wings of the movement. Some flamingants wanted a federal Belgium, others desired separatism and an independent Flemish state. The First World War was a watershed moment in the history of the Flemish Movement, as the war facilitated a breakthrough of Flemish political nationalism.
2. Andrew J. Pekarik, James B. Schreiber, Nadine Hanemann, Kelly Richmond and Barbara Mogel, IPOP: A Theory of Experience Preference, Curator: The Museum Journal 57 (2014): 5-6.
3. Jenny Kidd, ed., Challenging History in the Museum: International Perspectives, Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2014.
4. Bruno Benvindo and Evert Peeters, Scherven van de Oorlog. De strijd om de herinnering aan de Tweede Wereldoorlog, 1945- 2010, Antwerp: De Bezige Bij, 2011, p. 14 and pp. 146-147.
5. Benjamin C. Brower, The Preserving Machine: The 'New' Museum and Working through Trauma – The Musée Mémorial Pour La Paix of Caen, History and Memory 11 (1999): 79-80.



"National Identity"
Author: Maarten Van Alstein

"Refugees"
Author: Maarten Van Alstein

"Scars"
Author: Maarten Van Alstein



"Shells"
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