

Maarten Vanden Eynde - The Art to Remember

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On entering the exhibition *The Art to Remember*, you first see a reflection of yourself, vaguely mirrored in the perfect symmetrical stone tool called *We Made It!* (2024). With some help from digital digits and modern 3D scanning and printing technologies, humanity finally achieved symbolic perfection, like a score repeated quadrophonically. All four quarters are the same. The work marks the beginning of the evolution of external memory devices, which started 2,5 million years ago with the first stone tools, and at the same time, the end of that evolution as we are on the verge of being able to internalize memory extensions through DNA computing and implantable wetware computers. Some walls are painted in striking colors throughout the exhibition to emphasize specific colorful works and, at the same time, enhance the feeling of a museum visit. Museums are historically storehouses of memories made to remember, preserve, and present cultural and natural treasures and curiosities. At the same time, they are instrumentalized to narrate certain parts of human history and obscure or erase others. Using these historicizing communication means is a conscious choice to generate the feeling of visiting a museum, be it a contemporary art museum or a natural history museum, while telling some stories, like the extraction of raw materials or the invention of binary code, differently.

A Chain of Events (2021) is snaking on the floor in front and forms the spine of both my Ph.D. research project *Ars Memoriae, The Art to Remember*, and this exhibition. It strings together various human inventions that use different materials and techniques to deal with the same or similar methods of storing, communicating, and trading commodities and information. The work visualizes the interdependent connections between the subsequent use of materials by creating a tangible, tactile, and visual chain of chronological utility. Following the breadcrumbs of material manipulation, the series *Future Flora* utilizes topographic maps of mining areas in D.R. Congo as copper circuits on which seeds that were collected from a specific location are placed as electronic components, like resistors, capacitors, and microchips. *Future Flora: Fungurume* (2022), for instance, consists of a topographic translation of a copper mine in Fungurume, D.R. Congo. The map was transferred onto a PCB and decorated with various seeds and grains collected around the mining area by the international CopperFlora Project, which, for more than ten years, has focused on the conservation, restoration, and taxonomy of the copper-cobalt flora in Katanga, D.R. Congo. *Future Flora: Manono*, measuring 162 x 162 cm and focusing on the largest lithium ore reserves recently found in D.R. Congo, was also made in 2022 and is presented on a dark green wall.

Together, the seeds and the PCB mimic a lukasa or memory boards like those used by members of the Mbudye association in the Kingdom of Luba (now part of D.R. Congo) in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These ingenious analog computers function as archives for the topographical and chronological mapping of political histories and are a means of remembering important people, places, and mythical migration routes. The seeds are organized in relation to the graphic outlines of the mining concession and evoke the memory of seed collection, preservation, modification, and militarization. At the same time, they act as a backup for rare plant species that sometimes grow only on one specific hill or valley due to the high percentage of certain minerals and metals in the soil. Theoretically, they can recreate the original fauna and flora when the mining activities have ended, just like nothing happened. Next to merging two systems of knowledge preservation (the organizing of seeds in patterns and the mapping of mining activities through copper circuits of computers), the series *Future Flora* is a cybernetic reference to the faulty and misleading idea that ecosystems function similarly as machine systems and can be brought back to a state of balance or equilibrium after disastrous disruption, like open pit mining.

This self-invented technique to mix man-made patterns, like the petroglyphs in the caves at Fontainebleau in France, which was one of the geographic focus areas of my Ph.D, with more natural surroundings, was also used for the series of works called *Game Changer* (2021-2022). By merging the technology of making PCBs for computers and scratching patterns for calculating, communicating, or remembering information in Mesolithic times, I examined how these patterns or templates might have been used as a score or game board. *Damnatio Memoria* (2020) is an enlarged copy of the first monolithic silicon integrated circuit chip, invented by Robert Noyce in 1961. It references a modern Latin phrase meaning ‘condemnation of memory,’ which indicates that a person or event is to be excluded from official accounts as an act of historical negationism. The copper circuit drawing looks like a blueprint of an ancient native American temple complex or the map of an elaborate tunnel system under an existing building. It was made as a special edition that accompanied my first monograph, *Digging up the Future*, and recalls that forgetting is an integral part of remembering.

Histories of Memories (2022) is shown on a light blue wall and consists of various elements representing the history of external memory devices. They tie together old memory systems and techniques like storytelling, binary coded beads, shells, and Lukasa memory boards with contemporary memory devices like telephones, silicon-based microchips, printed circuit boards, and fiber optic cables for high-speed trading. They are part of what is called media archaeology, which, as Jussi Parikka described, “not only becomes a method for excavation of the repressed, the forgotten, or the past but extends itself into an artistic method close to DIY culture, circuit bending, hardware hacking, and other exercises that intervene the political economy of information technology.” (from *A Geology of Media*, 2015. University of Minnesota Press). All the elements are stacked on top of each other, like geological layers of subsequent technological inventions. They are enclosed in a circular frame under a plexiglass dome, resembling old convex Magellan mirrors, or witch’s eye mirrors, as they were called in Northern Europe during the Middle Ages, in which you could see yourself and your surroundings, although slightly distorted. In this case, I used the largest cover of a CCTV spy cam to link with our obsession to look into the past and possibly the future. Seven different *Histories of Memories* are made, although only two are shown here, referencing the largest and most powerful Magellan Telescope, which is under construction and will be operational by 2030. It will use seven gigantic convex mirrors of 8,4 meters in diameter each to peek in space and hopefully answer the most pressing questions of all time: Where did we come from? And are we alone in the Universe?

1001 Mermaid Tears (2022) is a giant snow globe or magic crystal ball filled with 1001 plastic pellets that complement the foretelling gesture in spherical symmetry. These virgin plastics, or nurdles, are nicknamed “mermaid tears” because roughly 1400 billion are spilled yearly during transport (for crying out loud...). They are the first form of everything made of plastic, the primordial eggs out of which all our plastic consumer goods hatch. Coming straight from the petrochemical plant that produced them, they end up in the world’s oceans before even being used once. The fairytale of plastic throwaway products, marketed as the savior of humanity in the middle of the 20th century, turned into a never-ending nightmare. Plastic debris is now the most common surface feature in all the oceans worldwide, and not a single beach is plastic pollution-free. *1001 Mermaid Tears* is a sarcastic reference to the predicted future and a beautiful and telling souvenir of the past. Shaking this time capsule for the future creates a micro gyre in the water and makes the plastic swirl around, but contrary to an actual snow globe, the particles don’t fall but float on the surface when the water calms down.

The Gordian Knot (2023) consists of colorful insulators and enlarged resistors firmly connected with thick copper rods and cables. Massive electricity cables and pipes, as well as natural lianas and other cables and

ropes, create a sizeable spherical knot that is impossible to take apart. The work symbolizes the complex story of energy generation, transmission, and storage in the context of a green fossil fuel-free future while at the same time referencing Schopenhauers *Weltknoten*, or “world-knot,” a metaphor he used to describe the *mind-body* problem. *What All The World Desires* (2022), a collection of 30 paintings, tells the history of energy. It is made in collaboration with Lubumbashi-based Congolese painter Musasa. Each panel, roughly the size of A4, represents a vital material, phenomenon, animal, invention, or technology related to energy production and storage. There are vertical, horizontal, and diagonal connections between the images, and visitors can imagine shifting them around or flipping them over like in a *Matching* game or a *Memory* game.

Behind the fake wall in the room, a purple glow radiates. *The Points of No Return* (2021) is made of melted uranium glass shaped like stalactites that become fluorescent green when exposed to UV light. The title references the alternative time scale Before Present or BP¹ (sometimes mentioned as Before Physics). Year 0 is 1950 in the BP time scale, and it is instigated by the artificial alteration of the proportion of carbon isotopes in the atmosphere by nuclear weapons testing, making carbon dating after that time increasingly challenging. There is no way back. *The Points of No Return* is both daunting and scary but also festive and nightclub-like: a final party, a last toxic dance before the lights go out...

Remembering and commemorating can also take on a more ludicrous or surreal form from a speculative far-future perspective. A humoristic cabinet of curiosities, or Wundercabinet, is creating a welcome break in this chain of events that can sometimes be heavy and taxing. *Chihuahua Footprints Discovered!* (2021) is a future fossil footprint, with the perpetrator still in place, frozen in time. In 2018, a wolf was spotted in Belgium again for the first time in over a century when She-wolf Naya crossed the Dutch border into the Belgian province of Limburg. Since then, the wolf has not disappeared from the news, and its presence continues to stir the imagination. We now know that the wolf was the first wild mammal to approach humans and was slowly domesticated into the dog that is now, for many, man's most loyal friend. The variety of species is almost inexhaustible through cross-breeding and breeding programs, of which the Chihuahua is the most extraordinary result and the furthest removed from its original ancestor, the wolf. It has become a familiar status symbol to a host of Hollywood stars, from Britney Spears, Madonna, Mickey Rourke, Marilyn Monroe to Paris Hilton, whose Chihuahua named 'Tinkerbelle' was by far the most famous, wearing clothes from Dior and Louis Vuitton and owning a \$325,000 doghouse. *Chihuahua Footprints Discovered!* was an intervention in the collection of the Gallo-Roman museum in Tongeren, Belgium, and includes both a stuffed Chihuahua attached to one of the custom-made dolls that represent prehistoric people and a slab of concrete in which the same dog left some distinct footprints. The taxidermic Chihuahua looks at the *Taxonomic Trophies* on a dark blue wall. This ongoing work consists of a growing collection of branches from all over the world, saved and presented as endangered or extinct species. They have been *hunted* and gathered during work periods, residencies, exhibitions, or holidays abroad since 2005. They question values and status symbols of power and financial means while confirming our insatiable desire to accumulate and collect. This iteration of *Taxonomic Trophies* (2020 - 2024) only includes trophies collected during my Ph.D.

On a small pedestal, *Blombos Time Ball* (2023) is tidying up the exhibition. This relatively small work comprises jetsam and flotsam found around Blombos cave in South Africa, which I visited in the framework of my Ph.D. research project and where the earliest traces of symbolic thought and expression were found. It is inspired by *Ititamats* or *counting-the-days* balls, that the women of the Yakima and Klickitat people, Native

¹ BP is mainly used in archaeology and geology and increasingly in other sciences that want to abandon the baseline denotation of a year 0 referencing a particular religious figure (AD = anno Domini, BC = Before Christ, or BCE = Before Common Era) as is used in Julian and Gregorian calendars.

American tribes based primarily in eastern Washington state, use to register essential events during their lives. The monthly menstrual cycle was indicated by straightforward knots, making it easy to count backward to determine when something happened precisely. In contrast, special events, like marriage, children, and moving house, were indicated by adding a unique pearl, a different rope, a stone, or a shell, depending on the symbolic meaning. Consequently, they could unwind their life story while recounting everything that happened from birth. The time balls were buried with the maker after death, symbolically and semantically linking to the human expression *being at the end of the rope*.

Memory of Man (2022) is a massive Lukasa-inspired analog computer hanging on a Bordeaux red wall and combines different historical techniques to externalize memory, from magnetic core memory to Congolese memory boards. The scratches and cuts on the large marble slab are traces of the previous use as a cutting table in a stone factory, and they reference the seemingly random graphic doodles found worldwide in caves and on portable stones and bone fragments. What meaning they have, if any, or how to *read* these abstract symbols might be impossible, much like most symbolic and abstract scripts.

The series of works, *Tenerife Tech* (2023-2024), combines the early computer technology of weaving ferrite rings with copper wires to create magnetic-core memory and the lace-making technique called Tenerife, which involves stitching and knitting threads, usually in the shape of a circle, giving it the name of *Spider Lace*, or *Sun Lace*. The origin of this knitting technique remains unknown, but it appeared for the first time in European paintings from the 16th century. The Spanish spread it during their colonial expansion, including The Canary Islands, giving it its current name: *roseta Canaria*, or *roseta de Tenerife*. It was traditionally made with silk or cotton, but when the Belgian Sisters of Charity of Jesus and Mary from Ghent arrived in the late 19th century in what was then known as Congo Free State (now D.R. Congo), they forced children to copy Tenerife lace in local materials like raffia and tree bark. They learned the Tenerife technique on the Canary Islands, a regular stop from Antwerp in Belgium to Matadi in the Congo Free State, and introduced it in the early mission schools. It was initially presented as a form of *civilizational reform* to turn young Congolese girls into morally well-behaved Catholic housewives until it grew into a massive industry for tourist souvenirs. *Tenerife Tech* is made with copper wires to connect with the copper circuits or veins that are part of every electronic device and with D.R. Congo, the largest copper producer in the world, for a long time during Belgian colonization in the 20th century. It is laced with ferrite rings, resistors, capacitors, silicon microchips, and trade beads to reconnect with the colonial legacy of lace-making but also the historical importance of binary code invention in Africa and the role it played in the externalization process of memory throughout human history.

This brings the exhibition full circle, returning to *A Chain of Events*, weaving in and out of historical references related to remembering and forgetting. At the same time, it introduces the last work that is part of my final presentation of my Ph.D., which is presented in the entrance hall of KMD, Møllendalsveien 61, 5009 Bergen. *Fat Man 3D* (2022) is a copy in bobbin lace of the atomic bomb, code name Fat Man, that was dropped on Nagasaki, Japan, on 9 August 1945. The work is produced with the help of 3D bobbin lace expert Rita Van Cotthem and laces together the interlinked histories of cotton and uranium in an immersive and explosive installation. Don't forget to go and have a look! — Maarten Vanden Eynde, 2024

This exhibition is made in cooperation with the Faculty of Fine Art, Music, and Design. It is part of Maarten Vanden Eynde's artistic result for the degree of Philosophiae Doctor (Ph.D.) in Artistic Research at the University of Bergen. His Ph.D. was embedded in the *Matter, Gesture and Soul* NARP project and was supported by SapienCE at UiB.