The University of Leuven has launched the project MindMates, which seeks to combat a worrying trend in mental health problems among students in higher education.

In the autumn of 2014, the Student Health Centre at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) launched MindMates, a peer-supported campaign to promote emotional well-being and suicide prevention among students. The project was recently kick-started by a symposium topped off with concerts by Tom Helsen and Pieter Embrechts, in addition to a string of workshops and other activities. MindMates has caught the eye of the Flemish media and, more importantly, local students. Raising awareness around mental health problems is a crucial first step. At the same time, these efforts also touch upon one of the many paradoxes that surround the subject.

In recent years, we have been served a steady diet of suicide rates and other alarming indications. Despite this level of information, and many a campaign to address the issues at hand, emotional problems remain a taboo in Flanders.

The MindMates homepage introduces visitors to a set of startling figures. A four-year study into the emotional well-being of KU Leuven students shows that one in five struggles with at least occasional depression, and that one out of 10 has thought about suicide. “Our research indicates that there are a lot of emotional problems among students, and that suicidal behaviour is common,” says Marleen Gheldof, a psychotherapist at the Student Health Centre in Leuven and co-ordinator of the new initiative. “We also know that young adults are less likely to seek help than other age categories. All of that creates a very dangerous mix.”

Statistically, students run no higher risk of mental health issues than their peers who aren’t pursuing higher education. In the university’s student newspaper Veto, professor Ronny Bruffaerts of the Research Group Psychiatry put the conclusions of the new results into perspective.

“It’s remarkable how the risk of emotional problems later in life increases as one’s date of birth is more recent,” Bruffaerts wrote. “Someone born in 1980 runs a greater risk than someone born in 1970. This trend continues to rise and is a global phenomenon.” With these statistics in mind, it’s also important to distinguish between being at risk for mental disorder and actually suffering from a mental disorder. Nevertheless, the research once again demonstrated that the situation needed to be addressed. “The MindMates programme has grown out of our desire to do better at preventing suicide and promoting emotional well-being,” says Gheldof. “We all know the figures, but there’s still a strong need to break the silence. We also want students to talk to each other when they’re feeling down.”
The terrorist threat level in Brussels has been reduced from the maximum level of 4 to level 3, in line with the rest of Belgium. Level 3 signifies “a probable serious threat against a person, group or event”. An additional arrest was also made in Brussels late last week in connection with the Paris attacks, and the man was due to appear in court as ‘Flanders Today’ went to press. The detention of two other suspects was confirmed for a month by the court.

The threat alert for Brussels had been at level 4 since a week after the Paris attacks of 13 November. The threat level was maintained while police worked to round up suspected terrorists. The main suspect, Salah Abdeslam, thought to have taken part in the Paris attacks, is still at large. Authorities believed they had sound intelligence of the preparation of an attack in Brussels similar to those in Paris, where leisure activities were particularly targeted. “If someone has been able to remain at large until now, we have to conclude he’s receiving support,” said home affairs minister Jan Jambon.

Police operations – including 16 arrests from 22 searches during the weekend of 14 November – resulted in a major attack being thwarted, Jambon claimed, although the prosecutor’s office has not released details. “These matters are very sensitive, and too many details could put everything at risk,” Jambon said.

It was decided to re-open schools and under-ground public transport last Wednesday. Some schools had planned to take children in despite there being no lessons, but they were ordered to shut down completely. The federal government will discuss the huge economic cost of the level 4 operation at a later date. (See related story, p6)

In the meantime, federal labour minister Kris Peeters has announced that companies in Brussels will be able to claim unemployment for their staff on grounds of force majeure. That allows a company to declare its workers technically unemployed when they cannot carry out their jobs for reasons beyond the company’s control – in this case either because of a lack of public transport or because their children could not go to school. Workers are then paid a small unemployment benefit by the state employment office. Meanwhile, the independent committee that oversees police matters issued a damning report on the force in charge of the Molenbeek commune, where several of the suspects in the Paris attacks are from. The Committee P report described officers as having no contact with the community, not being familiar with certain areas and even demonstrating “anxiety with the surroundings”.

The report was drawn up last year, long before Molenbeek became the centre of national and international attention as a key base for radical Muslims. Committee P criticised the police of Zone West for still maintaining ‘no-go areas’, claiming that the gulf between police and residents is growing wider. The committee suggested more routine police presence on the streets of Molenbeek, including when there are no crimes in progress, and that the force should show concern for the everyday problems of the residents.

Threat level returns to 3
Winter Wonders opens as Brussels’ terrorist threat level is brought back down

According to a report by Flemish daily newspaper De Morgen, the Forensic Psychiatric Centre (FPC) in Ghent is suffering from a shortage of staff 18 months after opening, FPC Gent opened in 2014 as a detention centre for mentally ill prisoners. Until then, prisoners with psychiatric problems in Belgium were housed in ordinary prisons, a situation criticised on multiple occasions by the European Court for Human Rights. One such prisoner, convicted rapist and murderer Frank Van den Bleeken, decided to be euthanised rather than live the rest of his life without treatment. His request was approved but postponed when he was found a place in FPC Gent (pictures). The centre, with 248 places, is now full, but there is a shortage of staff, according to an in-depth study carried out by De Morgen reporter Sara Vandekerckhove. Staff number 207, and their duties include group and individual therapy and administration of drugs as well as everyday activities such as meals, trips outside the centre, administration and treatment reports.

According to staff, the prisoners themselves are feeling the pressure, which runs the risk of a dangerous situation developing. "The moment someone goes off sick or on holiday, we are no longer able to carry out our core tasks," one staff member told the paper. "It’s accurate to say that we sometimes have a shortage of personnel," admits Mia Mol, director of patient care. "At moments like that, the safety of our staff is central. If there are not enough staff to accompany an aggressive patient on an outing, then the outing does not take place." Two more such psychiatric centres are planned for Belgium; an Antwerp location is currently under construction.

Staff shortage at psychiatric internment centre in Ghent
OFFSIDE

OTT with the IV

“A baxter is not a bag of water. It’s mediation with side effects, and potentially dangerous ones.”

A baxter, or IV infusion, is used by hospital staff to administer medication, or simply liquids to patients, and doctors Manu Mahrahn and Niels Van Regenmortel of Antwerp’s Stuivenberg Hospital, indeed launched a campaign around them. Research among 20,000 patients in intensive care units showed that those who did not survive had been administered on average five litres more than those who did.

“There are only three good reasons to employ an IV,” said Dr Van Regenmortel. “To patients in shock following a trauma whose fluids are imbalanced; in cases of shock whose fluids are imbalanced; in cases of shock. There are only three good reasons to employ an IV,”

The Flemish media have little recourse to paparazzi photos or rumour, mainly to ensure good working relations with the stars.

Supermarket chain Carrefour has launched its new Visa Flex, a debit card linked to a bank account. The system will allow contact-free payments in stores where the card is accepted, including Carrefour supermarkets and Express branches. The card costs €6 and €1.50 a month thereafter.

The Flemish parliament has extended local and regional radio licences until the end of 2017. The licences run out in 2016, but the parliament claimed the procedure is too complex to be certain of having completed it by that deadline. Questions include how to ensure the survival of local stations while improving quality and how to allow new commercial stations.

A group of chemical and related companies are opening a collective site in the port of Ghent in 2017, joining together to share facilities and reduce administrative obstacles. The Dockland site is the branchchild of planning expert Georges Allaert and entrepreneur Luc Seminck, as a means of helping meet strict European norms for chemicals sites. Dockland will take 20 hectares of the Kuhlmann site, currently undergoing an industrial cleaning process over years of producing sulphuric acid.

A plan to find another purpose for the Justice Palace in Brussels has been scrapped, federal minister Jan Jambon said. A competition who could solicit ideas from the public brought a wide variety of suggestions: the building could house a museum or a concert hall, or introduce a shopping gallery on the lower floor. But the government has decided to renovate the building and bring back many of the services that have been moved to other premises, Jambon said, with a view to saving some €20 million a year in rent for external offices.

Federal consumer affairs minister Kris Peeters has warned insurance companies that life and other insurance policies linked to lifestyle could be in breach of privacy legislation. Peeters was reacting to news in recent weeks of companies offering attractive insurance terms based on lifestyle or driving behaviour, using monitoring software in cars or smartphones. He warned that tariffs must remain affordable for all and plans talks with the industry on the limits imposed by data protection laws.

Bert Baltink has been appointed to succeed Jörgen Oosterwaal as editor-in-chief of Knack Magazine and Knack Focus. Baltink is currently deputy editor at De Standaard. At the same time, An Meskens takes over from Annelies Roebbelen as editor of Story magazinum, where she tactfully changed such things as Dag Allemans, where for the last four years she has been deputy editor. De Persgroep owners of Dag Allemaan, took over Story earlier this year.

A group of railway ticket inspectors protested against staff shortages last week by handing in their ticket clippers. The inspectors, in Kortrijk, Oudenaarde and Zottegem, continued to accompany trains and check safety. However, the NMBS rail authority has proposed solutions, but they will only be felt on the ground next summer, the ACOD union complains.

The team carried out a survey among 200 doctors in 40 countries and found that 30% of those used the wrong fluid without realising it, “Often they don’t know any better,” Van Regenmortel said.

Last week the pair hosted some 500 people in Dubai and Hong Kong, where they tackled such thorny issues, including alopecia. She’d met the owner while preparing to take part in a beauty contest. While the other contentists lined up to get their hair done, Manon was fitted with what the industry prefers to refer to as a haarwerk, or hairpiece – the word ‘wig’ sounds too much like a Carnival, she noted. The public can donate to any organisation that takes part in Music for Life, or start fundraising activities of their own. Visit the website for complete information.

Jessica Manon –

The new edition of Studio Brussels’ charity fundraiser Music for Life launched last week under this year’s slogan ‘Iedereen zorgt voor iedereen (Everyone takes care of each other).” Among all the publicity, one thing stands out: the smiley face of a woman with no hair.

She is Jessica Manon, from Beringen in Limburg, and she suffers from alopecia universalis, a disorder through which one loses all hair, including eyelashes and eyebrows. It’s the more extensive version of its cousin alopecia totalis, which only affects hair on the head. Manon, 28, will be raising money for Madena, a hair clinic in Geel, just across the border in Antwerp province, during the Music for Life campaign. Manon is a kleuterjuf, which means she teaches kids in pre-school.

She’s been hair-free, let us say, since the age of 11, but it was only this academic year that she started coming to school without one of her wigs. The children, as you might expect, were intrigued – but quite non-judgemental, she said. The public reacts very differently to women with no hair than they do to men, said Manon in 2011, when she took part in a photo exhibition designed to break the taboo. “Without a scarf on my head, I just can’t go out the door. People don't realise a woman can become bald without wanting to. They don’t think about it, so it seems strange to them.” As part of her mission to sort out people’s thinking on this matter, she also blogs for Madena, which deals with all sorts of hair issues, including alopecia. Shè met the owner while preparing to take part in a beauty contest. While the other contentists lined up to get their hair done, Manon was fitted with what the industry prefers to refer to as a haarwerk, or hairpiece – the word ‘wig’ sounds too much like a Carnival, she noted. The public can donate to any organisation that takes part in Music for Life, or start fundraising activities of their own. Visit the website for complete information.
Government of Flanders apologises for forced adoptions

Unwed mothers were forced to give up babies over 30-year period

The government of Flanders and parliament have issued an official apology to the victims of forced adoptions that took place in the region between the 1950s and 1980s. The apology was supported by the Belgian bishops.

Forced adoptions usually took place in the case of teenage girls who were pregnant. After giving birth, they were often forced to give up the child immediately, sometimes in the delivery room. In many cases, the girls were not informed that the baby would be taken away after birth.

Special agencies matched children to adoptive parents, and the birth mother was given no contact information. “We recognise that what has been done cannot be undone,” said welfare minister Jo Vandeurzen (pictured). “That painful realisation confronts us as to our responsibility.”

The Flemish authorities, the apology added, “did too little and acted too late to address the interests of both the mothers and children.”

“We must do whatever victims need to help them process their grief and to move towards recovery,” Vandeurzen said. That includes the creation of a DNA database and an agency to gather information that would allow the adopted children, all now adults, to trace their parents.

In the meantime, an exhibition on the subject is being organised by the Dr Guislain Museum in Ghent, to open next year.

The Belgian bishops pledged their assistance in gathering information on the many adoption cases in which the church was involved; they will supply any information to the Flemish family organisation Kind & Gezin. “We need to admit that too little attention was paid to the mother and the effect on the rest of her life,” said Antwerp bishop Johan Bonny.

Enquiry into “planned obsolescence” in household appliances

Federal consumer affairs minister Kris Peeters has called for an enquiry into whether manufacturers of household appliances, including computers, deliberately build their products with a limited life-span. If so, he said, he intends to look into what measures can be taken to stop the practice.

The anecdotal evidence is all around us: a refrigerator or a washing machine used to be good for 30 years of service, and if something went wrong, someone would come round and fix it. Now, repairs are less common and a rattling machine can’t be stopped at the legal two-year guarantee, the buyer can end up paying double the purchase price for a new machine.

As the Paris climate conference started on Monday, Belgium had failed to produce a climate policy. Four of its governments – one federal and three regional – have been negotiating for no less than six years. The negotiations centre on the regional division of the efforts and the source of the Climate Funds, to be invested in environmental measures. About a month ago, an agreement seemed close, but it was turned down by the government of Flanders (embarrassing its own environment minister, Joke Schauvliege) and the federal government (embarrassing its own climate minister, Marie-Christine Marghem).

N-VA, Flanders’ largest party, in particular felt that too much was expected from Flanders. Complicating matters even further are the different governments in Brussels, both the French-speaking socialists and Christians and democrats, which control government in Brussels, the Brussels-Capital and Wallon regions, are opposions parties on the federal level. This makes them reluctant to co-operate, preferring to embarrass their political opponents. That’s exactly the type of situation that has led many international experts to the “failed state” conclusion.

Over the weekend, six ministers – of the environment, energy and climate – met again to try to reach an agreement before the start of the climate summit. They failed. Marghem decided not to board the climate train to Paris on Sunday.

We have never been close to an agreement, prime minister Charles Michel (MR) said on Monday. “Belgium sticks to its commitments and is actually credited internationally. The Belgians are among the world’s most ambitious when it comes to fighting climate change.”

He has his work cut out for him: to convince not just international experts but his own citizens. © Anja Otte

As police operations were taking place last week that helped avoid a terrorist attack in Brussels (see p2), Flemish minister for integration, Liesbeth Hemans, was in Denmark, approaching the problem from another angle. Homans was attending a conference on measures to prevent the radicalisation of young people.

The conference was held in the city of Aarhus, which has attracted international attention for its approach to returning Syria fighters, based less on punishment and more on prevention and support. Unusually, the conference was held under Chatham House rules, which means the proceedings cannot be cited. This, organisers said, was to allow participants to reveal details that might be of national security importance. The conference “offered the opportunity to discuss approaches to radicalisation and violent extremism with other experts and to exchange experiences,” said a spokesperson for Homans’ ministry. While in Aarhus, Homans also had talks with Jacob Bangsgaard, the city’s mayor, about his council’s approach (pictured).

In related news, Ghent’s city council has decided to lure two full-time officials to develop a radicialisation action plan, without waiting for the approval of an application for government subsidies, mayor Danil Terment said. In the course of this year, four people from Ghent – three men and one woman – have gone to fight in Syria.

“Such people are very hard to stop,” commented C&KV fraction leader Yeli Yüksel. “But those who become radicalised and continue to walk the streets of larger community that also had to be replaced. Usually, we were better off buying a new machine. But that can’t be justified when you consider that a washing machine should last for 20 years, given the effect on the environment of making one.

The legal two-year guarantee, he said, turns out to be valid only for about six months. Sellers are willing to accept responsibility for faults in the first six months, but the onus of proof is on the buyer after that, and manufacturer liability can only be proved by employing an expensive expert.

“We what are we asking from minis- ter Peeters is a real guarantee of two years,” November said. “That would encourage both manufacturer and seller to produce more sustainable machines.”

Homans attends radicalisation prevention conference

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Breaking the taboo

University of Leuven encourages students to check in with their peers

To encourage a more open dialogue, MindMates offers a framework for peer support. Students can follow workshops on dealing with and detecting mental health issues — in themselves and in others. Students also organise activities to help raise awareness. “There are already many counselling programmes for students,” says Gheldof, "but we want to invest in what we call universal prevention. We want to address everyone, including those who don’t currently have psychological problems."

This means reinforcing the “protective factors,” she says, “that help build a community of students. Those who have a quality social network are better protected against potential psychological issues. Social isolation can trigger existing problems or cause trouble for students who started their university life carefree.”

Finding your place in a new setting is part of going to university or any institution of higher education. Traditionally, student unions and societies play a role in forging friendships and familiarising newcomers with their new environment. Oftentimes, they are helped by a system of “godmothers” and “godfathers,” more experienced students who show newcomers the ropes of student life, both on and off campus.

“I am all for that system,” says Gheldof, “but there’s a group of students those organisations don’t reach. They often attract a certain type of students. And not everyone fits that profile.”

MindMates sets out to organise events where you can join in on your own. Via their website, they also offer the option to ask for a “buddy,” a student volunteer who has followed the MindMates workshops and is ready to meet up for an informal chat.

One of them is Elisabeth Leysen, a second-year economics student who has recently made the step from attending workshops to being a buddy. “I think the system of godmothers and godfathers at the student societies is less personal,” Leysen says. “They don’t get so much involved in your personal lives. I had a lot of questions about how you are feeling. When you talk with the MindMates buddies, there’s less of a taboos around discussing personal issues.”

Not that those buddies take over the role of professional counsellors or become instant best friends. “The workshops have taught me that it’s OK not to come up with a solution right away when someone talks about her issues,” explains Leysen. “Sometimes it’s helpful just to listen and to honestly say that you don’t know the answer, either. During my first meeting as a buddy, I just went to the other student’s home, and we chatted about all kinds of stuff for two hours.” It’s a view echoed by Kathleen Nollet, a psychology student also in her second year who has had several buddy encounters. “Most of the time, the other person just wants someone to talk to,” she says. “Every activity we did together was spontaneous. It certainly didn’t feel as if I was the therapist. I’ve also learned that you don’t have to make someone else’s problems your own. You have to take care of yourself if you want to be able to help others.”

The buddies form a very approachable initial line of support in a project that acts as a gateway to any type of psychological assistance a student might need, professional or otherwise. Besides its stepping-stone approach, MindMates focuses on building general awareness in the university community. That’s why they have also been training various types of personnel in student housing and across the university. “They, too, have to sharpen their antennae,” says Gheldof. “It’s the responsibility of each and every one of us to pick up on signals if someone is having difficulties. Talking about it is often the first step towards getting help.”

Students who have a quality social network are better protected against potential psychological issues. “We have to be able to help others,” says Elise Nollet, a psychology student who has followed the MindMates workshops and is ready to meet up for an informal chat. “I think the system of godmothers and godfathers at the student societies is less personal,” says Leysen. “They don’t get so much involved in your personal lives. I had a lot of questions about how you are feeling. When you talk with the MindMates buddies, there’s less of a taboos around discussing personal issues.”

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Students who have a quality social network are better protected against potential psychological issues. It’s complicated to delve into longitudinal trends and the reasons why so many students need help but don’t seek it. “The far-reaching individualisation at various levels in our society, the pressure to perform and the pace of our modern lives are all elements that contribute to a need to facilitate a different kind of interaction,” explains Gheldof. People don’t necessarily need initiatives like MindMates to engage in such contacts. “But apparently many students no longer do,” says Gheldof. “It is because this type of interaction isn’t there anymore, or do these students have personal characteristics that prevent them from taking the necessary steps? Or is it because they have a completely wrong perception of how others lead their lives?”

According to Gheldof, social networking sites are part of the problem. “Social media certainly doesn’t invite us to deepen our interactions, but new sites do offer a broad overview of the spectrum of how to live your life, including everything that doesn’t belong to the shiny, happy side of it,” she says. “Because of what they see on social media, some students start to believe that their peers have a blissful social life all day, every day. Which makes them feel excluded. And which makes it even harder for them to participate.”

Students who pursue higher education go through an important phase of their lives, both personally and professionally. They start a life away from their parental homes, especially when living in student accommodation. Universities are havens for personal and intellectual development. At the same time, they also constitute a breeding ground for tomorrow’s human capital, one where the professional rat race begins.

Is it just a matter of perspective? “Leuven has a pretty small student community where you can make friends in a jiffy,” says student buddy Leysen. “I’ve always been a busy bee. But before getting involved with MindMates, I wasn’t always aware of some aspects of mental well-being.”

In the meantime, a new study from Ghent University has shown that about half of doctoral students at Flanders’ five universities struggle with depressive feelings. One in three even shows symptoms of clinical depression. The timing may be coincidental, but both Leyen and Gheldof’s reports now indicate that young adults are experiencing severe difficulties at the very institutions that are meant to help shape their futures.

“One of our main messages is that being a bad day is also part of life,” says Gheldof. “Sometimes we overanalyse everyday occurrences. Paradoxically, severe problems often aren’t treated the way they should be.”
iMinds is world’s fourth-best business accelerator

Flanders’ digital research centre made ranking for start-up success

Andy Furneries
More articles by Andy \ flanderstoday.eu

The iStart incubation programme of Flanders’ digital research institute iMinds, which helps new entrepreneurs to launch their companies, has made the top 5 in the prestigious UBI Global ranking Top University Business Accelerators. Its fourth-place finish is a jump of 21 places from last year.

According to iMinds acting CEO, Danny Goderis, their start-ups have been particularly successful in attracting external follow-up funding. “Since 2010, the iMinds start-ups have attracted more than €24 million in external funding, despite venture capital being scarce in our region,” he said. Studies show that for every euro of iMinds support, external parties invested €3.60 in the Flemish start-up economy. With such statistics, iMinds is among the 3% best-scoring incubators in the world.

Investors increasingly see iMinds, and especially the iStart programme, as a quality label,” said Kris Vandenberk, senior manager at the Flemish government’s investment agency PMV. “Because investors are sure that iMinds applies a very strict selection process, they are confident about the potential of their start-ups.”

iMinds has helped to launch about 100 companies, which together have created more than 300 full-time jobs and generated a turnover of more than €16 million.

Only minor adjustments needed for VW cars sold in Belgium

Most Volkswagen cars found to have been fitted with fraudulent software developed to pass all emissions tests will require only a software update to solve the problem, according to the German company’s sales director for south and west Europe. Sven Kunath. The quick fix can be carried out on about 90% of all affected cars in Europe, he said.

A change to software, which takes about an hour per vehicle, will be sufficient for 1.2-litre and 2.0-litre diesel models to bring them back into line with European norms. The 1.6-litre model will also require a small technical adjustment.

Owners of the vehicles concerned are entitled to a free update and a replacement car, if necessary. VW will also offer the option of having the car picked up at home and returned after the changes have been made, Kunath said.

“Af ter the adjustment, these cars will respect the norms 100%,” he said, “and there will be no consequences in the longer term.” He particularly stressed that the changes would not affect the car’s resale value.

Woestijnvis renews ties with VRT after four years

Flemish TV production company Woestijnvis has renewed its cooperation with Flemish public broadcaster VRT for the first time since 2011. The first evidence of the co-operation is the move of the popular satirical news programme De ideale wereld (The Ideal World) from Vier to Canvas. Woestijnvis was set up in 1997 and immediately started working with VRT. An exclusivity contract ran until 2011. The company made a variety of the broadcaster’s most popular programmes, including the quirky magazine Man bij hond, comedy show In de Gloria, game show De mol and quiz show De slimste mens ter wereld.

In 2011, Woestijnvis’ parent company, De Vijver Media, became part-owner of the two independent channels Vier and Vifj. A continued relationship with the public broadcaster became impossible.

Now, however, Woestijnvis has separated its broadcasting business and its production house, which allows the shift of De ideale wereld. The programme, which broadcasts from Tuesday to Thursday at 22:00, was dropped from the Vier schedule. The new season will start on Canvas 4 January.

“The public broadcaster has always said that co-operation in the future was not ruled out,” said Peter Claes, director-general of media and production at the VRT.

Level 4 terror alert in Brussels cost €52 million a day

The increase in the terrorism threat to its highest level in Brussels last month cost the national economy an estimated €5.17 million a day, according to the VRT TV programme De veje markt (The Free Market).

The main loss of earnings was due to one in five workers being unable to get to work, either because of transport difficulties such as the closure of the metro system, or because of schools and churches being closed; some families had no other option for child care. The economic damage from that single cause was estimated at €29.7 million a day, according to the programme.

The restaurant sector suffered €22 million in losses because of closure during the weekend of 21-22 November at the request of Brussels-City mayor Yvan Mayeur, as well as the general drop in customers caused by the situation in the city centre. Many businesses were closed; police and military patrolled the streets and major attractions such as cinemas and concert halls were closed.

Last weekend, Belgium’s public image received a boost from former US ambassador Howard Gutman.

Tourism agency works to restore Flanders’ image

Tourism agency Visit Flanders is working to assure potential tourists and professionals that the region is still safe to travel to after two weeks of international headlines reporting phrases like “failed state” and “lockdown.” The agency has launched an information campaign aimed at overseas business, like conference organisers and tour operators.

Those working in the event and tourism sectors have been asked to stress that, while soldiers walk the streets of the capital, life goes on as usual in Flanders’ other main destinations — Bruges, Mechelen, Antwerp, Ghent, the coast and the First World War region in the Westhoek.

The Westhoek around Ypres and Poperinge hopes to continue to enjoy the high numbers of tourists brought to the region by the First World War centenary commemorations. Tourism authority Westtoer has announced that the area attracted one million overnight stays in 2014, an increase of 6% on the previous year. Almost 800,000 said they were specifically there because of the centenary.

Biotech \ iMinds

The Ghent-based specialist in the development and production of nanobodies for therapeutic applications has signed an agreement worth up to €10 million over three years with Danish Novo Nordisk. iMinds will develop molecules for the treatment of obesity and diabetes.

Chemicals \ Solvay

The Brussels-based chemicals and plastics group is to go ahead with its €6 billion acquisition of the US Cytec Industries company after shareholders of both companies approved the move. Cytec is specialising in the development and production of composite materials used in the aerospace sector.

Energy \ Fluxys

The local gas transport and supplier is to acquire the 10% stake held by the Russian Gazprom group in the Interconnector gas pipeline linking Zeerbrugge with Bacton in the UK. The move allows Fluxys to gain control of the Interconnector project and strengthens its position on the European gas transport market.

Mobile \ Huawei

The Chinese telecoms company opened its first Customer Experience Center in Europe in the centre of Brussels last week. Huawei is the fastest-growing supplier of smartphones in the world.

Retail \ ikea

The home furniture and decoration chain has opened three pop-up stores in the centre of Hasselt to allow local customers to preview the wares that will be on sale in the new IKEA outlet opening next year in the city.

Software \ Sentiance

Korean technology giant Samsung is to invest €6 million in the Antwerp-based Sentiance software start-up, specialising in mobile data management.

Steel \ Arcelor Mittal

The London-based steel group has inaugurated a state-of-the-art flat steel rolling mill in its ESP unit in Geel, Antwerp province, to increase the plant’s productivity by 50%. The bulk of the production is earmarked for the automotive and building sectors.

Energy \ Fluxys

The local gas transport and supplier is to acquire the 10% stake held by the Russian Gazprom group in the Interconnector gas pipeline linking Zeerbrugge with Bacton in the UK. The move allows Fluxys to gain control of the Interconnector project and strengthens its position on the European gas transport market.

Mobile \ Huawei

The Chinese telecoms company opened its first Customer Experience Center in Europe in the centre of Brussels last week. Huawei is the fastest-growing supplier of smartphones in the world.

Retail \ ikea

The home furniture and decoration chain has opened three pop-up stores in the centre of Hasselt to allow local customers to preview the wares that will be on sale in the new IKEA outlet opening next year in the city.

Software \ Sentiance

Korean technology giant Samsung is to invest €6 million in the Antwerp-based Sentiance software start-up, specialising in mobile data management.

Steel \ Arcelor Mittal

The London-based steel group has inaugurated a state-of-the-art flat steel rolling mill in its ESP unit in Geel, Antwerp province, to increase the plant’s productivity by 50%. The bulk of the production is earmarked for the automotive and building sectors.
Today’s technology, yesterday

Virtual reality app lets Historium visitors step into medieval Bruges

Diana Goodwin
More articles by Diana, FlandersToday.eu

A
nyone who walked the streets of Bruges knows the feeling of being transported to a medieval Flemish city with its cobblestones, canals... De Li
buses? Unfortunately, the present has a way of intruding on even the most well-preserved historic locations. What history buffs haven’t wished for a time machine, for a way to travel back in time and see things the way they used to be? Thanks to a ground-breaking new device using virtual reality, visitors to the Historium can now experience what it’s like to stroll around 15th-century Bruges. The Historium City VR app is accessed via the internet using a simple, portable device that works with any smartphone. The app lets users view complete 360° recreations of six places around the city as they appeared 600 years ago.

“It’s an extra addition that lets visitors relive the locations of the Historium story but in the city itself,” says Christopher Roose, Historium’s general manager. “The City VR is a nice extra for every visitor and especially schools that combines a Historium visit with a walk in the historical city.”

Historium pioneered a new kind of tourist experience combining interactive storytelling, physical environments and historical information when it opened in 2012. Adding virtual reality to the mix would seem like a logical extension of the existing offering, the virtual environments in City VR build on research and designs that were used to create the original Historium experience. According to Roose, Historium already had the content, having invested in researching and recreating a historically accurate 15th-century Bruges, and wanted a way to bring it to as many people as possible. They worked with Sevendene, an interactive media agency based in East Flanders, to develop a virtual reality experience for visitors. Last year, Sevendene set up a virtual reality lab at Historium using technology from Oculus, a major player in the emerging VR field. Visitors could try the high-tech headsets for free and go on a virtual journey through medieval Bruges.

That experience convinced Historium to commission a low-cost, accessible VR product that could be combined with their existing offering. “Taking the Virtual Reality experience outside of Historium and making it accessible to everyone with no investment in expensive hardware was a solution that led us to Google Cardboard,” Roose explains.

Google Cardboard is a virtual reality device that is literally made from cardboard, along with a few other low-cost components. It works with any smartphone on the market and its affordability means many people who might otherwise not invest in new technology can easily try it out. Historium’s Google Cardboard device is available in combination with an entry ticket (for an additional fee) or it can be bought separately in the gift shop. Once it’s removed from its sleeve, it’s a simple matter to unfold it, assemble the viewer and place a smartphone into the slot in the back. The app itself is accessed via the smartphone’s browser. Since the app requires internet access, visitors can use Historium’s free wifi. One of the six virtual locations is the site of the Historium building itself. In the future, Historium plans to install wifi beacons at the other locations around the city, but all the locations in the app can be viewed from Historium — or from anywhere in the world.

“Through our statistics we can check where people use our app, and it’s not only in Bruges. We have downloads in cities from Delhi to Dublin. So the people who bought the Historium City VR in Bruges are re-visiting Bruges using our Cardboard and the City VR app.”

Certainly one of the most appealing things about virtual reality is the idea that someone can visit a remote location without actually having to go there. But in the case of Historium City VR, the remote destination is the past — and part of the fun is standing in modern Bruges while looking at its medieval equivalent.

The virtual location and its modern counterpart don’t match up exactly. I couldn’t get the buildings on the Markt to line up with their medieval equivalents. No matter how I twisted myself around and rotated my viewer, reality and virtual reality remained shifted 90° from each other. And yet it was still a thrill to stand in the middle of the square and see how it looked in the 15th century. Historium has plans to incorporate VR into its main attraction, but for now City VR gives visitors a tantalising glimpse into the future — by taking them into the past.

Air pollutants from electricity production decrease dramatically

Emissions of nitrogen oxides (NOx) and sulphur dioxide (SO2) from electricity producers in Flanders have dropped 41% and 57% respectively since 2010, according to figures published by Flemish magazine Engineeringnet. NOx and SO2 make water and soils acidic, as well as creating a fine dust that damages buildings. According to Engineeringnet, the remarkable decrease of the pollut-
ants is the result of an environ-

mental policy agreement between the Flemish region and the Belgian Federation of Electricity and Gas Enterprises (Febeg). The electricity producers that, back in 2010, ran thermal power plants in Flanders promised to reduce the emissions produced by their installations. The government of Flanders recently presented the final report on the environmental policy agreement to parliament. During the period between 2010 and 2014, Febeg members managed to achieve the ambitious annual emission goals imposed by the policy agreement. Another report, “Lozingen in de lucht” (Emissions in the Air) released by the Flemish Environment Agency indicated that electricity production in 2013 was responsible for only 4.1% of NOx and 4.6% of SO2 emissions in Flanders.

The environmental policy agreement was concluded to help meet the National Emission Ceilings imposed by the European Union to reduce air pollutants.

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Brain power

UHasselt researcher gets areas of the brain talking to each other

I t might not seem like a complex cognitive task, but when we gesticulate we use our brain both for talking and for moving our hands on the beat of our speech. It’s common knowledge that during this motion our left hand is controlled by the right half of our brain, and vice versa. While gesticulating, these cerebral hemispheres alternatively reinforce and inhibit each other. Many specific motions are controlled by certain areas in our brains. But what’s perhaps even more important is the way these areas work together – just like the right and left hemispheres control our hands. The problem is that the extent to which different brain areas work together or communicate with each other cannot be visualized by an MRI scan, the current magic wand of neuroscience. “The drawback of the MRI is that it visualises the activity of individual brain areas based on the measurement of blood circulation,” explains Raf Meesen, a rehabilitation expert at Hasselt University (UHasselt). “But communication between these areas doesn’t happen via the blood circulation; it happens through the synapses, or the ends of nerve cells.” Meesen is intrigued by the “connectomics” of the human brain and sees it as a giant electric circuit. “Every brain area operates at a different frequency – that’s the frequency of the current resulting from the electric discharge of the synapses. These frequencies are what determine many of our brain’s actions and emotional states. The use of another imaging technique called EEG, the electric current that flows through our brains, can be recorded with a very high time resolution, allowing an inference of the brain’s electric activity into time-frequency patterns.”

Meesen is currently organising an investigation into how the brain’s communication network varies between people. More specifically, he is studying the differences between the networks of younger and older adults. “In the first part of our investigation we used EEG recordings to look at how and how we can identify decreased motor skills in the brains of elderly people. We did brain recordings while our volunteers, both young and old, performed manual tasks, like drawing simultaneously with two hands.” The researchers found that “in the group of elderly people there were, on average, more brain areas activated than in the young adult group,” says Meesen. “This could mean that our brains automatically recruit additional areas when a certain task is not performed satisfactorily.”

Meesen knows one brain area in particular that plays an important role in manual exercises. “The dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, in the front of our brains, generally plugs into other brain areas so that the resulting hand movements are well co-ordinated,” he says. In his initial investigation, he and his colleagues – he works with researchers from Germany – used EEG recordings to visualise the spatial and temporal components of motor activity in the brain. In the second part of the study, which will start in January, it’s time for action. Dozens of volunteers with light motor problems – which are normal symptoms of ageing process – will be equipped with electrodes on their head to stimulate the local connections. The electrodes are attached to something that looks like a swimming cap. Meesen says his volunteers shouldn’t be afraid. “The electric current we apply is really tiny,” he says. “The only thing they will feel is a very minor itching feeling on the surface of their head.” Though it might be full of electricity, with millions of synapses constantly charging and discharging, the real basis of our brain is still chemistry. So when you succeed in stimulating the connections between certain areas and thus “rejuvenating” the brain, how long does the effect last? “That’s a good question,” says Meesen, “and we don’t know the answer. That’s why we’re doing all these tests. We will investigate how the chances of success are for very specific tasks. And we’re looking at whether we can invoke long-term effects on the way different areas of the brain communicate with each other.”

The possibility that the effect of electrical stimulation might not last very long – or may even disappear just after the electrodes are taken away – isn’t a fundamental problem for Meesen, who of course hopes to develop treatments and applications that really can help people. “Suppose we discover that it works only if applied during a half-hour session every morning, then it would still be an attractive treatment. Many elderly people spend a lot of time using exercise equipment at home. I don’t see the difference.”

And even if there’s only an effect when the swimming cap with the electrodes is on, Meesen sees applications. “Due to decreased motor skills, many elderly people have problems driving a car. So why not put on the cup while driving, just like wearing your seat belt?”

Q&A

The Free University of Brussels (VUB) has recently launched itself on the stock market – or has it? Rector Paul De Knop explains.

Why did VUB launch on the stock market?

VUB did not launch on the stock market. What we did was we found money in the private sector, such as from insurance companies and other entrepreneurs, for improving our facilities. We now have €61.5 million to finance our universities and to continue improving our facilities. This is the first time this has been done in Europe. There are two kinds of loans: at 1.4% over 15 years and at 1.6% over 20 years. It’s very cheap money. With a bank you pay more than 2% interest. So there are four different loans, in the form of VUB bonds, that can be bought on the stock market. But it’s not VUB itself that is going on the stock market.

Are other universities following your lead?

Yes, Ghent University is considering doing something similar, and I’m also getting calls from universities in the Netherlands that want to know more. It took me three years to arrange this, to assure the green light and it’s safe to give loans to a university, especially one with a 180-year history. The companies decided, along with the banks, that it’s a good investment.

What facilities will the money be used for?

We will build new 600 units of student housing on campus, 3,500 square metres of educational space, research facilities and a new culture tower with a concert venue and exhibition space. We’re also going to renovate our swimming pool.

Students lead departments in Limburg hospitals

Forty students from the Limburg university colleges PXL and PIVH Hasselt have been put in charge of departments at four of the province’s hospitals for four weeks. The project is taking place at Jessa Ziekenhuis Hasselt, Sint-Franciskusziekenhuis Heusden-Zolder, AZ Vesa- lius Tongeren and Sint-Trudo Ziekenhuis in Sint-Truiden. The students will work under the supervision of hospital staff. The participants are Bachelor’s students in nursing, occupational therapy and social work. They will work in the hospitals’ geriatric and motor skills rehab departments. They will work in two shifts and perform all tasks,” said Roald Nelissen, head of the PXL healthcare department, in a statement.

One in eight primary schools has no PE teacher

One in eight Flemish primary schools doesn’t have a physical education teacher on staff. In Limburg, the figure is one in five. The data comes from Het Nieuwsblad based on statistics that Flemish education minister Hilde Crevits provided. Flemish education minister Hilde Crevits provided. Flemish education minister Hilde Crevits provided. Schools represented by the Flemish education association WEVER have the fewest PE teachers, with nearly 30% missing one. That number rises to 55% in West Flanders. The new policy has two main goals: monitoring the range of non-Dutch study programmes and guaranteeing the quality of the use of foreign languages in higher education. According to education minister Hilde Crevits, the annual report is a “positive evolution”. The government stipulates that 6% maximum of the Bachelor’s programmes can be given in a language other than Dutch. For Master’s studies, the maximum is 35%.

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Green love

Shelter in Antwerp arranges new homes for unwanted plants

Rebecca Benoot
More articles by Rebecca | flanders today.eu

PLANTENASIELANTWERPEN.BE

I n your sanctuary getting too big for your apartment? Are the leaves of your fern turning a nasty shade of brown? Or maybe that orchid you got for your birthday isn’t really your cup of tea?

Fear not: plant shelters that might be able to help have been popping up across Flanders. “One of our co-workers saw on Facebook that there were several plant shelters in the Netherlands,” says Liesbeth Van Mol, one of four co-founders of the Antwerp shelter, the largest one in the region. “We loved the idea so much that we started one. It turned out to be a big success.”

Plantenasiel Antwerpen (Plant Shelter Antwerp) offers unwanted plants a new home. “If people have plants that are either getting too big for their environment, or they don’t have green fingers until these plants are withering away, or they’ve simply grown tired of them, they can contact us,” says Van Mol.

They have a lot of participants who’ve moved to service flats, for instance, and can’t take all their plants with them. “We also have people who are redesigning their gardens and don’t want to throw away good shrubs.”

Don’t be fooled by the name, though. The Plantenasiel isn’t actually a physical shelter. “We keep the plants that are up for adoption in our own home,” Van Mol explains. “People bring the plant to one of our four colleagues, where we give the plant the TLC it needs before giving it a new home.”

At first, they simply posted photos of the plants on their Facebook page, and the first person to respond got the plant. But with many people checking the site in the evening rather than during working hours, they didn’t stand a chance, Van Mol explains.

“Eventually it was always the same people who responded first, so we decided to give people a few days to reply and use a raffle system.”

There has been more interest in the initiative than the four of them ever imagined. Van Mol points out that, even if we largely live in a consumer culture today, the mood is slowly changing, with people learning more about recycling and upcycling.

Plantenasiel Antwerpen was founded in May 2014 and have since relocated more than 800 plants. The shelter typically takes in all manner of species, from tropical house plants to classics such as ivy or orchids, as well as shrubs and herbs — anything and everything that’s not beyond saving and is in need of a home.

“Sharing food, second-hand shops and the whole community atmosphere is thriving these days,” Van Mol says. “People who are socially aware particularly like the idea. We give people the chance to get a beautiful plant for free and give a plant that would have otherwise been thrown away a second chance.”

Van Mol and her co-founders started the project because they were interested in nature and ecology. They found common ground in their dislike of a consumer culture where everything gets thrown away as soon as something better surfaces.

“We simply wanted to avoid plants being tossed out or left to die, just because the owners can’t look after them or have lost interest.”

BITE

Winter garden bar blows away the December blues

Looking for a cosy bar in Antwerp to while away the winter? Then look no further than the Little Brewers Winter Garden, a new pop-up from the team who created the Little Butcher’s Summer Grill in Park Sport Noorder.

Situated in an unused factory building of the De Koninck brewery, the Little Brewers Winter Garden is open from Thursday to Sunday for drinks, snacks and meals in a very informal atmosphere. The large space makes maximum use of humble wooden pallets to create walls, chairs and even the ceiling. As befits an eatery in a brewery, the drinks menu contains specially crafted beers from De Koninck including the mysteriously named TTBDBW (Test Brew 2). Also available is Tank 7, a traditional farmhouse ale brewed in the US, and home-grown festive beers like Vedett IPA, Duvel’s Triple Hop and Liefmans Glühkriek.

For those who prefer something other than tea, there’s strudel and pancakes. On Thursdays, the Little Brewers Winter Garden offers free finger food with your after-work drink while DJ Boat spins the tunes. Fridays in December are Gin Day with democratic prices on the popular tipple. Saturday sees the pop-up open for lunch, and on Sunday there’s a brewer’s brunch. There are also special events to keep the kids entertained. They can run off some steam in the garden or take part in cooking and craft workshops.

On Saturday evenings there’s live entertainment, including local bands such as The Girl Who Cried Wolf (12 December). On 19 December you can dance the night away with salsa. Little Brewers Winter Garden will even be open from 12.00 on Christmas Day for its Happy Ho Ho brunch, followed by the Bad Christmas Party. Little Brewers Winter Garden will be open until the end of January.

Dan Smith
The chase is on
The thrill of a safari trip, without the danger, at Brussels’ Natural Science Museum

The latest exhibition at Brussels’ Natural Science Museum is a no-holds-barred depiction of nature red in tooth and claw that marries stunning taxidermy with ingenious feats of engineering. Wonders of Wildlife is no Disney-fied depiction of cute animals all getting along together. Here the chase is on, and it’s kill or be killed.

In a small, moody lit gallery, 10 exhibits depict a variety of beasts on the hoof and in the chase, like freeze-frames from a wildlife documentary. The exhibition’s abbreviated name – Wow – is appropriate: the displays exude so much energy and movement that you can almost hear David Attenborough’s voice providing the narration as you walk among them. ‘It gives people the chance to see the animals in action – what you’d normally see on safari, for example, or in a nature documentary,’ Hans Van Lierde, head of the museum’s education department, told Flemish public broadcaster VRT.

A group of ibex are captured mid-leap, high above the heads of young visitors, while a leopard takes down three impala in mid-air. Elsewhere, a tiger takes out a flying wild boar and two lions bring down a terrified-looking zebra, while another zebra appears supremely unflustered as he kicks a third lion squarely in the face.

A lone wolf considers taking his chances with three wild boar, but you know he’ll soon send him packing with his tail between his legs. No animal in its right mind would seriously mess with six of those fearsome tasks.

As you examine the leopard perfectly balanced on its tail, or the airborne procession of ibex, you might ask yourself where the wires are. Look more closely and you’ll notice that many of the exhibits have the same basic V shape, with some serious foundations to aid that perfect balance. Entire herds of animals hinge on a single paw.

It’s a marvel of engineering as well as a beautiful example of the taxidermist’s craft. The 10 scenes are the work of Antonio Pérez from Granada, the Spanish city that’s home to the co-organiser, museum and science park Parque de las Ciencias. ‘We’re giving the animals a second life; that’s how I feel about taxidermy,’ fellow taxidermist Christophe Demey, who works at the Brussels museum, told VRT. ‘You have to be fascinated by nature, and I’m also fascinated by the anatomy of animals.’

Bases to each installation serve the dual purpose of concealing the foundations and keeping overly-keen visitors at a suitable distance.

The exhibition is much less interactive than the museum’s previous major show, Baby Animals, which encouraged young visitors to get hands-on with the cute installations. Aside from a few mystery boxes containing claws, antlers and hooves, a couple of touchscreen slideshows and a few casts of animal footprints, inquisitive young minds will have to be content with looking, not touching.

Indeed, it’s recommended for over-eights only. The displays cover topics including animal behaviour, biomechanics and species, and landscape conservation. Maps and short texts in four languages provide clear information about each of the animals displayed, and a video tells the story of reformed poachers in Cambodia.

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WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

New Music For Life campaign kicks off

The theme for this year’s Music For Life charity fundraiser, by Studio Brussel is Iedereen zorgt voor iedereen (Everyone takes care of each other). In previous years the organisers worked with a specific charity or issue, but this year local groups and individuals taking part in the popular annual campaign can choose for themselves which charity they want their contribution to go to. Music For Life, celebrating its 10th anniversary, officially takes place from 18 to 24 December, when three Studio Brussel DJs will spend 24 hours a day living at De Schorre recreation park in Boom, Antwerp province. They’ll broadcast from the site, where the public is invited to come and join them. Complete details will be released on 7 December. (See related story, p5)

Accessible Art Fair heads to New York

The Brussels-based Accessible Art Fair is expanding to New York City next year. The popular event, which takes place annually in Brussels – and occasionally in Antwerp – will hold its first international fair next November in New York’s National Arts Club. Canadian expat Stephanie Manasseh launched the fair in 2007 to “give a platform to talented emerging and established artists to sell their work to an art-buying public.” Most of the works on display for the fair are often present to talk to visitors, and most of the works cost between £50 and £5,000. The last Accessible Art Fair took place in October in Brussels and will happen again next October.

Four nominated for European Museum of the Year

Four museums in Flanders and Brussels are among the 49 nominations for the European Museum of the Year Award: Texture, the museum of flax and textiles in Kortrijk; the Museum of Natural Sciences in Brussels; the Guusbek Castle museum in Flemish Brabant; and the Jenever Museum in Hasselt. The prize is awarded annually by the European Museum Forum to an institution that sparks visitors’ imaginations with a unique display of its collection, involves members of the local community and takes a creative approach to education and social responsibility. The Gallo-Roman Museum in Tongeren won the prize in 2011.

Pudding: a history

Flemish food photographer celebrates British cuisine in new book

Regula Ysewijn is a Flemish photographer and graphic designer who is passionate about all things British, especially the food. So much so that she created a blog, Miss Foodwise, to celebrate it. Her blog and Instagram account have been nominated for several awards, and TV chef Jamie Oliver is a big fan. She has now published her first book, Pride and Pudding, which tells the history of British puddings, from ancient times to the present day.

Ysewijn, who is also a trained beer sommelier and attends culinary school in Antwerp, originally had a love-hate relationship with food. “As a child, I was a very difficult eater; it was a big issue,” she says. “I became interested in food because it was so hard to find something I liked. My mother didn’t like to cook, which resulted in dull Flemish fare: meat, vegetables and potatoes on a daily basis. It wasn’t something I enjoyed eating; I just had to.”

Her fascination with Britain began with a nursery rhyme: Witte zwanen, zwarte zwanen wie gaat er met ons naar England varen? (White swans, black swans, who’s going sailing with me to England?)

“This is very much a mythical place,” she says, “Everyone wanted to go to Disneyland: I wanted to go to go to England!” And she got there as early as eight years of age. “To me it was such a mythical place,” she says. “Everyone wanted to go to Disneyland; I wanted to go to England!”

Ysewijn published in the 1860s, which was reissued during the world wars because England was an island, limiting importing during the period, she explains. “They were still rationing until 1954, which meant there were several generations who never learned to cook with fresh produce. Add to that the famous Mrs Beeton’s Book of Household Management, published in the 1860s, which was reissued and filled with all kinds of nonsense, like you had to boil carrots for an hour. Everyone didn’t have a mum or grandmother to teach them how to cook learned from this book.”

After the Second World War, the British imported a lot of processed food from the US. “Combined with Mrs Beeton, British cuisine was at a low point,” says Ysewijn. “People had to wait until the 1990s for chefs like Gary Rhodes and Jamie Oliver to finally change this way of cooking and make it accessible.”

Pride and Pudding (£35) is published in Dutch by Davidsfonds. The English version is expected next spring.
Oh, the shame of it all

Guislain Museum exhibition finds beauty and meaning in the uncomfortable

Sally Tipper
More articles by Sally \ flandertoday.eu

MUSEUMVANDGUISLAIN.BE

A new, wide-ranging exhibition at the Dr Guislain Museum in Ghent explores a universal feeling that haunts us for the better part of our lives. “Everybody can relate to shame. Everybody’s ashamed once in a while,” says Yoon Hee Lamot, one of the curators of the latest thought-provoking exhibition at Ghent’s Dr Guislain Museum. Shame isn’t directly related to psychiatry in the way that previous shows at this erstwhile asylum on the outskirts of Ghent have been. “It’s very difficult to find shame itself in psychiatric literature,” says Lamot. “We thought there would be references, since shame is something that can really define you. But it wasn’t that easy.”

In the early days of asylum, people were shut away because others were ashamed of them. “And there’s still a taboo around psychiatric problems today. Part of the mission of our museum is to break down the taboo. Shame can prevent healing: self-stigmatisation can be more threatening to the healing process than the disease itself.”

The idea of shame is closely linked with being looked at – or thinking you’re being looked at. One line running through the works gathered here is the gaze: closed eyes, a back that’s turned away, the constant video surveillance in public spaces.

The wide-ranging Shame begins with panels from the city’s Sint-Baafs Cathedral, paintings of Paradise made for the “Mystic Lamb” altarpiece, in which Adam and Eve can’t quite look at each other. They were commissioned in the 19th century to replace originals in which the couple were considered to look too ordinary – and too naked.

These are followed by depictions of the same story from the Jewish tradition, a Turkish manuscript and a Ghanaian wood carving, with each saying something different about the culture in which they were created. Clearly, shame is far from a modern, or a Western, phenomenon. “When you look back, you see that shame is usually related to nudity,” says Lamot. “And there are differences in time and in cultures. If we go back to the period of colonisation, for example, we see how the Western world tried to bring our feelings of shame and impose Western norms on African people regarding nudity.”

For the locals, being nude was fine in certain situations, but the colonisers didn’t see it that way and wanted them to wear more clothes. A video and a series of ethnographic sculptures illustrate this. The next room contains photos that show the evolution of beach fashion, and the revolution in what’s possible. It’s interesting to ponder what counts as clothing. In one, a woman is essentially naked, but as there’s a V-shaped strip of cloth covering the essentials, she’s considered not to be.

There’s a sculpture taken from a fountain in Ghent of carved naked bodies, which caused uproar in the 1930s. The League for Public Morality – and don’t they sound like fun? – produced a pamphlet decrying such things. They also designed what they considered an acceptable bathing suit, as they believed there was too much immorality on the Flemish coast.

In “La Chambre”, by the late Belgian filmmaker Chantal Akerman, a single camera turns around in a room in which you see the artist lying on a bed, eating an apple. “It’s a very intimate scene, but instead of being watched, she watches you,” Lamot says. “It’s quite disturbing: even though you know it’s just a film, you still have that uncomfortable feeling.”

A different kind of discomfort screams from the work of Frenchman Marc Garanger, who worked as a photographer in the army during Algeria’s war for independence from France. He was ordered to take photographs of all the people in a village for identification, so the women had to unveil themselves, something that wasn’t normally allowed.

“When you see their gaze,” says Lamot. “This one is angry; this one is very young, she doesn’t know what’s happening and she’s scared; this one is really old and defiant.”

And there’s sometimes also shame there.” When Garanger’s photos were subsequently shown in New York, the curator explains, there was a lot of criticism. “People said: ‘Are you not unearthing the women all over again by showing the photos?’”

A couple of years ago, the series was on view in Algiers, showing how times have changed. “Garanger says he feels a lot of shame around this war, as a French person,” says Lamot. “So we also have the collective shame of a nation – like many German people feel about the war.”

What’s striking about the images in this exhibition is that so many of them depict women. “The show illustrates that everyday sexism is nothing new; throughout history, women have been expected to live up to different standards.”

“In terms of shame, for women, it’s mostly about their bodies, while for men, it’s more about their status,” Lamot says. “That’s a big difference. And today, when anything is possible, it has become even harder: You can have plastic surgery, so if you’re not perfect, then why not?”

It appears that feelings of shame begin before we’re two years old, she explains. “After puberty it diminishes a little, but when you get older, it increases again.”

For his series ©, Flemish photographer Gert Jochens asked couples if he could take photos during their sexual activities. It’s an intimate act that’s suddenly made public. “He told us that at the time, the couples were enjoying what they were doing and didn’t have a problem with him being there,” Lamot says, “but afterwards a lot of them suddenly became uncomfortable and told him he had to leave. In the moment, they appear to have no sense of shame. But as soon as the moment is gone, the instinct is to be embarrassed.”

Hannes Coudelyn • Ugly Belgian Houses

For four years, Hannes Coudelyn has been photographing the country’s houses: not out of pride for the work of local architects but as a record of what he calls the chaos of urbanism (picturae). The result was his popular blog, Facebook page and now book Ugly Belgian Houses, full of the biggest residential errors and wry captions. Publicity for the book, in Dutch and English, includes this show, featuring previously unseen images. Until 18 December and 4-26 January. Recyclart, Utralinenestraat 25, Brussels \ recyclart.be

Nicolas Karakatsanis • Ways of Seeing: Episode 1

By embarraging his images and putting out blank flyers, photographer Nicolas Karakatsanis is aiming to enhance the singular relationship and sense of discovery between viewer and the 20 subjects in this exhibition. The work of Karakatsanis, the man behind the cinematography of Bandits, is also featured in Shame, above. Until 23 December, Alice Gallery, Land van Luikstraat 4, Brussels \ alicedbxl.com

Animalists • Natural History

A group exhibition featuring works by landscape painters Win Ricourt and Benoît Trimborn, Jürgen Lingl Rebutz, who creates wooden animal sculptures with a chainsaw; recycling artist Serge Van De Put, who composes sculptures from old tyres; and bronze works by Carlos Mata, all on the theme of wildlife and the great outdoors. Until 10 December, Absolute Art Gallery, Dijver, Bruges \ absolutartgallery.com

MORE VISUAL ARTS THIS WEEK

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Discomfort screams from Marc Garanger’s photos of Algerian women in the 1960s – there’s the women’s shame, the photographer’s and the viewers’
When the SKaGeN theatre group first performed their PARDO! Sorry dat ik leef in English as Pardon/In Cuffs! at last summer’s Fringe Festival in Edinburgh, members were baffled by the reactions to their play. "A distinct and unusual voice in European theatre," one UK critic observed. "In fact, walking around, we were a bit shocked that they were still serving Shakespeare reshaped at this prime European theatre festival," says Korneel Hamers, one of three stars of the play. And that’s exactly the opposite of what this Antwerp collective is going for. Founded 15 years ago, SKaGeN is today a household name in Flemish theatre, and the group has produced highly acclaimed monologues and smartly adapted ensemble pieces. PARDO! Sorry dat ik leef also stars Clara van den Broek and Valentijn Dhauens (pictured), the latter of whom recently garnered laurels with his Bigmouth and Small War monologues. Inspired by a documentary by French photographer Raymond Depardon about public prosecutor grillings of a number of defendants in a Paris court, PARDO! tells the story of what happens when ordinary citizens run up against big structures and institutions. "Basically, all our plays deals with the human condition, and law courts are the pre-eminent places where this is exposed," Dhauens explains. "In our stage adaptation of Depardon’s text, the actors constantly flip from one character to the next and unravel a tension between man and machine, between humanity and the system." In doing so, the actors and directors hope the audience will develop a degree of empathy for participants on either side of the table: "For the culprit, who’s processed in a routine system," says van den Broek, "but also for the prosecutor, who has to come up with a balanced judgment for every single suspect." (In Dutch)

As a guitarist, Tom Vanstiphout is a well-versed session guitarist who has performed with several successful Flemish pop/rock acts, including Clooneau and Milow. But Vanstiphout can also write and sing a tune. His own work is influenced less by the rock tradition and more by classic American songwriters including Clouseau and Milow. But as a guitarist, Tom Vanstiphout is a true Renaissance man, having not just dabbled in but seriously explored the entire spectrum of artistic forms. This exhibition surveys his career as a visual artist, from the early 80s drawings that brought him international accolades to his latest anatomically sculpted, inspired by cutting-edge medical research in cognition. The out-of-the-way venue is an important part of the Fabre museum’s mission to present the Dutch transnational collection of art. Their collaboration goes back to the 1980s, when ordinary citizens run up against big structures and institutions. (In English)

Rage against the machine

PARDO! Sorry dat ik leef

Across Flanders

Until 12 January

VISUAL ARTS

Jan Fabre: 30 Years / 7 Rooms

Until 20 December

LITERATURE

David Grossman

8 December, 12.30

Award-winning Israeli author David Grossman comes to Brussels to present the Dutch translation of his latest novel A Horse Walks into a Bar (English translation forthcoming). The plot revolves around a fictional stand-up comedian who takes an unexpected detour during his routine. Instead of clever one-liners, the audience become witness to the protagonist’s tragic life story. In conversation with Antwerp-based literary critic Joseph Pearce, Grossman situates this latest title in his entire body of work, in which morbid humour is a recurring theme. (In English)
Talking Dutch

Mingling with the Tinderellas on mutternity leave

Derek Blyth
More articles by Derek \ flanderstoday.eu

Trying to keep up with new Dutch words is like chasing a puppy around a park. You just about catch up with it when off it runs into the bushes. A couple of weeks ago, this column explained several newly minted words like plijkstra – an overfed battery chicken, and aarogewi – a lower back tribal tattoo. Now three Flemish ‘trendwatchers’ – Herman Konings, Tom Palmaerts and Joeri Van den Bergh – have published a book called Futures, which lists yet more trendy words that we need to know if we have any hope of following what is being said around us. Let’s start with mingles.

According to Wikipedia, Mingles are a brand of chocolates made by a British company. But Wikipedia seems to be a little behind the times on the mingles phenomenon. Voor een sommende groep singles is ‘poly’ een levensoptij geworden – more and more single people are adopting a ‘poly’ lifestyle, the Flemish trendwatchers say. Ze hebben geen interesse in a “poly” lifestyle, the Flemish have become a ‘poly’ lifestyle, the Flemish trendwatchers say. Ze hebben geen interesse in a “poly” lifestyle, the Flemish have become a brand of chocolates made by a British company. But Wikipedia seems to be a little behind the times on the mingles phenomenon.

A recent study noted that hiking trails in Flanders’ wilderness areas should be limited to the outskirts, so as to ensure as little disturbance to wildlife as possible. The UGent researchers also noted that dogs along on hikes cause a lot more disturbance than their owners. Most of you agree with the idea. As long as you get access somewhere, you’re good to go. Some of you would even go so far as to kick us out of natural areas altogether. That said, a sizeable minority thinks we should be allowed to cut hiking trails anywhere in forests to ensure that we have access to the outdoors around us. For those of us who love hiking, it’s a tempting opinion. If hikers actually stuck to the trails and left their dogs at home, it would probably be easier for researchers and conservationists alike to feel the same way.

Poll

Ghent University researchers have said that hiking trails shouldn’t cut through the heart of Flanders’ forests but stick to the edges. What do you think?

a. Yes. Keeping to the edges of forests takes care of our needs as well as the needs of wildlife

b. Nonsense. Humans are part of nature and should be able to access forests, not just the outskirts of them

c. Get rid of the hiking trails altogether and leave the wilderness to the wildlife. Humans are not the only species on the planet

Monthly Reader WiFi Giveaway

Each month one lucky reader gets the chance to win our resident WiFi. What do you need this for? Reply to this email with your thoughts and you could be the next winner of our WiFi.

Talking Dutch

In response to: Talking Dutch: Mingling with the Tinderellas on mutternity leave

Amanda Tobin: Oh my god this sounds like me... I so need some mutternity leave and am sort of a mingle... Does this make me cool?

In response to: Talking Dutch: Mingling with the Tinderellas on mutternity leave

Gary Nicol: I agree (...) it’s like inviting yourself to someone’s house without being asked.

In response to: Hiking trails should avoid centre of forests, say Ghent researchers

Some animal lovers are demanding mutternity leave, the UGent researchers also noted that dogs along on hikes cause a lot more disturbance than their owners. Most of you agree with the idea. As long as you get access somewhere, you’re good to go. Some of you would even go so far as to kick us out of natural areas altogether. That said, a sizeable minority thinks we should be allowed to cut hiking trails anywhere in forests to ensure that we have access to the outdoors around us. For those of us who love hiking, it’s a tempting opinion. If hikers actually stuck to the trails and left their dogs at home, it would probably be easier for researchers and conservationists alike to feel the same way.

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Has your behaviour changed since the terrorist threat level was raised after the Paris attacks? Log on to the Flanders Today website at www.flanderstoday.eu and click on VOTE!