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## Is there anybody out there?

West Flanders is home to the region's UFO hotline, looking into claims of alien sightings



Leo Cendrowicz

More articles by Leo \ [flanderstoday.eu](http://flanderstoday.eu)

A man in West Flanders runs a service that investigates reports of suspected UFO sightings – but he thinks the chances of extra-terrestrial visitors to Earth are minimal.

Frederick Delaere's office has all the trappings of an alien obsessive: Some 700 books fill the shelves, mostly about UFOs, though some are about the paranormal. Telescopes are stacked on the floor, next to a life-size plastic model of ET.

Framed covers of 1960s comics like *Weird Science* decorate the walls, and on one shelf there's a sculpture of a cow being beamed off the ground by a flying saucer. But Delaere is quick to shatter any illusions about Martians among us. "I don't think we have been visited by aliens," he says. "There is just no hard proof to show it."

From his base in Meulebeke, West Flanders, Delaere runs

UFO Meldpunt, a hotline for sightings of unidentified flying objects. It's a website that collects reports on UFOs from Flanders, and attempts to make sense of claims about strange flashing lights in the sky.

Since 2007, it has been the main Flemish resource for other-worldly sightings, or at least sightings that seem to be from outside our Earthly experience. So, are there UFOs out there? "Yes, there are things out there that we can't explain," the 35-year-old admits. "Or can't explain yet. But that doesn't mean they are aliens. UFOs are unidentified flying objects, and the key is the first letter. People usually ignore the U part."

Claims about UFOs are often bracketed with ghosts, zombies and Elvis Presley sightings on the scale of eye-rolling believability, and Delaere says most people who contact him are surprised to hear how sceptical he is. "When I tell people I

deal with UFOs, they usually assume I'm a believer," he says. "It's important to be cautious. When you're a believer, you can believe anything. My mission is to explain things."

Delaere makes it clear that, despite the common assumption that UFOs are synonymous with alien craft, most UFO reports can be explained through known phenomena such as planets, meteors, satellites, aircraft lights, balloons or light shows. They can even be cars moving up a hillside road in the dark.


And he is adamant that the only way to assess the viability of claims is by using rigorous scientific methods. "I have not seen anything that I can't explain," he says.

Nonetheless, alien visitations continue to fascinate us and have long been staples of fiction. The comic books and pulp novels in Delaere's library testify to it.

But it's in movies and television that perhaps the most vivid

# Nine-hour wait in Leuven A&E

Emergency departments overworked, especially in winter, says UZ Leuven



**Andy Furniere**  
More articles by Andy \ flanderstoday.eu

Patients at the accident and emergency department (A&E) of the University Hospital of Leuven (UZ Leuven) had to wait up to nine hours for assistance, Sandra Verelst, head of the department, has told *Het Laatste Nieuws*. At peak moments last week, the department had 90 patients waiting at a time. “The situation is sustainable as long as there are fewer than 60 patients,” said Verelst. “Then we can help everyone within two hours.” Typical winter illnesses such as respiratory infections are one of the main causes of A&E overload in January, but there is also a structural problem, she said: There are no hospital beds available. As a result, patients cannot make a smooth transition from the emergency room to a hospi-



© Courtesy UZ Leuven

tal bed. The problem puts patients’ health at risk, claimed Verelst. “If someone has a bacterial infection, you cannot see that immediately, but that bacteria can end up in the blood stream in nine hours,” she said. “Then patients can weaken quickly.” According to the Belgian Association of Emergency Doctors (BeCEP), there is increased pressure on emergency services across the country, but the situation in Leuven is exceptional. BeCEP president Jan Stroobants said that a new system should be introduced wherein the number of hospital beds is decreased in the summer to avoid a surplus and increased in the winter to prevent a shortage.

## €4 million tourism campaign to polish capital’s image

Rudi Vervoort, minister-president of the Brussels-Capital Region, has announced a new campaign to polish the image of the capital and attract more tourists. The campaign has a budget of €4 million and will be run by ad agency Wunderman Brussels. Tourism in the capital is slowly on the mend following the terrorist attacks of March last year and the Brussels links to the attacks in Paris the previous November. However, Vervoort said, there is still a need for investment to give the sector “an extra boost”. “Tourism is without a doubt of critical importance to the economy of the region,” he said. “The most recent figures show that the efforts of the government, which took action soon after the attacks, are beginning to bear fruit. But we can’t stop there.” Recent successes include the Winter Wonders Christmas market and an increase in hotel occupancy on New Year’s Eve by 20% compared to 2015, reaching 85% occupancy. The campaign includes a European road show, taking the attractions of Brussels to potential visitors in France, the Netherlands, Germany, the UK, Spain, Italy and across Belgium. Later, a similar publicity campaign could take in the US and Japan, as well as countries like India and Brazil. \ Alan Hope

## Voka blasts Brussels traffic tunnels as ‘medieval’

The Brussels-based Flemish chamber of commerce (Voka) has soundly criticised the traffic situation in Brussels caused by the condition of the tunnels. The organisation described the tunnels as “medieval”. “It’s time the Brussels [regional] government stepped in,” Voka managing director Hans Maertens said. “It’s not enough just to have a plan for renovation. Plans being carried out quickly and efficiently is crucial.” The latest incident saw the Rogier tunnel closed in both directions one morning last week after fire broke out in a maintenance area. The tunnel is an important section of the inner ring road, and the closure had a serious knock-on effect on the rest of the ring. Later in the morning the Leopold II tunnel was shut down on the city-bound side after drivers faced with delays caused by the Rogier tunnel turned their vehicles around to drive against the flow of traffic. “That led to hazardous situations,” said a spokesperson for Brussel Mobiliteit. Twice more later in the day



© Philippe Francois/BELGA

Leopold II had to be closed for the same reason. Voka also criticised the “total lack of communication” on the morning in question. “It’s just not possible in this digital age that people drive uninformed into tunnels that are completely blocked,” Maertens said. “We are calling on the Brussels region to finally draw up and implement a modern communications policy.” \ AH

## Former deacon to be tried on 10 murder charges


A court in Ghent has ruled that Catholic deacon Ivo Poppe will be tried by jury in Ghent later this year. A deacon in Wevelgem and a former nurse in Menen, Poppe is accused of 10 counts of murder for euthanising patients in terminal stages of illness without authorisation or patient consent. Poppe was arrested in early 2014 and confessed to ending the lives of his mother, father-in-law, godfather, great-uncle and two other elderly women. He was a charge nurse in the Sint-Joris Hospital, now part of AZ Delta. Poppe confessed to ending the lives of the victims by suffocation with a pillow or by lethal injection. He said seeing them suffer had been unbearable. Following an investigation, the prosecutor’s office



© Courtesy De Standaard


announced that Poppe had carried out more murders than he had admitted to, between 1978 and 2011. Poppe has told his psychiatrist he was responsible for more than 100 deaths – a figure he later revised to 48, and then once again to between 10 and 20. The prosecution claims that the six main victims will be enough to ensure that Poppe receives a life sentence should he be found guilty. A date for his trial will be set later. In 2010, a nurse in a Ghent rest home was found guilty of killing four elderly patients using insulin injections. Unlike Poppe, he never explained his motive and was sentenced to life in prison. \ AH

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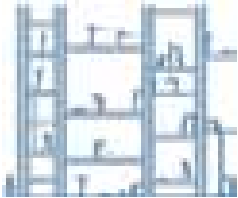
is the new free telephone number to call regarding suspicious behaviour on Brussels public transport network MIVB. The number is operational 24 hours a day

10




incidents involving a “crash alarm” last year at Brussels Airport – where an aircraft approaching the airport is in difficulties. May and July saw the most, with six incidents. All 10 aircraft landed safely

€10 million




for the restoration and renovation of cultural centre Vooruit in Ghent over the course of 20 years. The 103-year-old building is in need of repairs to the roof and the wood-work on its facade

52



buses a day cancelled in Antwerp province in December as a result of a shortage of drivers, public transport authority De Lijn said

150



kilos of TNT contained in an unexploded bomb found in the centre of Kortrijk. Part of the city centre was closed off and 200 residents evacuated while experts dismantled the bomb



## WEEK IN BRIEF

Flemish tennis pro **Elise Mertens won her first WTA title** this week and broke into the WTA's top 100 ranking for the first time. Her victory over Romanian Monica Niculescu (32) at the Hobart International in Australia has put her at number 82 in the women's singles. She is in third place among Flemish women, behind Yanina Wickmayer (60) and Kirsten Flipkens (70). Wickmayer and Flipkens are currently competing at the Australian Open.

Only **82% of trains arrived on time**, meaning up to six minutes late, in November, according to figures from rail authority NMBS. It's the worst result since November 2014 and down from nearly 87% in November 2015. A spokesperson blamed a number of incidents involving people on the tracks and signalling faults that coincided with morning and evening peaks.

The construction of the Oosterweel connection on Antwerp's ring road is likely to cause traffic chaos unless as many as **30,000 vehicles are taken out of traffic** at peak hours, according to a study ordered by the government of Flanders. Oosterweel is a colossal project on one of the country's busiest roads, and construction is due to last for seven years. In related news, enclosing the ring road, creating tunnels, will only reduce emissions by some 30%, according to consultant Alexander D'Hooghe. That's because only 60-70% of emissions will come within reach of the ventilators used to clean the air. Of that portion, only 60% can be cleaned effectively, giving an overall success rate of 30%. "Better technology just isn't available for the time being," D'Hooghe told MPs.

Flemish public broadcaster VRT is launching a **free online video platform** called VRT NU on 30 January. The service will carry all VRT-produced programmes for a month after broadcast, as well as archive video. VRT NU will begin as a website, with apps following later in the year.

The Flemish parliament has unanimously approved a resolution calling for a **ban on beauty pageants** for children and young people. Last year, federal labour minister Kris Peeters banned the election of Mini Miss Belgium after social inspectors described it as "child labour". The new ban would cover contests where children are judged mainly on their appearance.

Bart De Smet, CEO of insurance company Ageas, has been voted **Manager of the Year** by the readers of *Trends* magazine and a professional jury. De Smet, 59, becomes the 32nd recipient of the award, on his third nomination. The jury praised "the way in which he was able to raise an insurance company with a strong identity and a robust balance-sheet from the ashes of Fortis".

The musical department of the Royal Library of Belgium has been bequeathed the **Toots Thielemans Fund**, an extraordinary collection of documents, music recordings, photos, scores and personal letters. Thielemans had discussed the bequest before he died in August last year.

A statement by the European food industry to stop aiming **advertisements for fast food** and sweets at children is "an empty promise," according to a report from the Institute for Media Studies at the University of Leuven. In the EU Pledge from 2007, the industry promised to stop marketing certain products to children under 12. However, says the report, the guidelines "leave many loopholes open". One example: advertising sweets and Happy Meals during prime time is allowed because the under-12s make up less than 35% of viewers.

The city of Brussels has confirmed that an investigation is taking place into the **trafficking of false passports** that involves a city official who has since been dismissed.

The situation came to light during an internal audit of the Population section of the administration, and the prosecutor's office was informed. A spokesperson for Alain Courtois, councillor for population matters, declined to give further information while the case is ongoing.

A 32-year-old Cameroonian woman **gave birth to a baby on board a United Airlines flight** from Chicago to Brussels last week, two weeks before her due date. She was attended by a doctor and a nurse, who were among the passengers, and the delivery went without incident. The baby boy was greeted by a round of applause from the other passengers.

Fruit growers in the Haspengouw area of Flemish Brabant and Limburg have **planted 1.7 kilometres of hedgerows** in an effort to attract more bees to pollinate the trees. The planting was subsidised by the cross-border Interreg programme of the EU's regional development fund and the province of Limburg. A similar planting project is planned for this year.

Flemish education minister Hilde Crevits found herself **caring for a nine-day old baby** at the weekend when she witnessed a car accident on the Antwerp ring road. While her chauffeur, who is also a volunteer firefighter, assisted the woman who was driving the car, Crevits held the baby in her own vehicle until an emergency team arrived. Both driver and baby are fine.

Police in Brussels last week raided the home of a man suspected of receiving stolen goods and discovered a **cache of scarves, jackets, shoes** and vacuum cleaner parts worth €100,000. The man was advertising his wares on Facebook, and the ad was spotted by someone from the fashion industry whose goods had been stolen.

## FACE OF FLANDERS



© Kris Van Exel/ID photo agency

### Robbe De Hert

In the 1980s, he was one of the young upstarts intent on giving Belgian cinema a social dimension. More recently, he's been living in a social apartment in Antwerp, heavily in debt and unable to carry on with his film history project *Hollywood aan de Schelde* (Hollywood on the Scheldt).

Robbe De Hert is in hospital suffering from an infection in his foot aggravated by diabetes. A group of friends from the film and arts industries are working to raise money for his project and have topped €30,000. But a lawyer has warned that that effort may have been in vain, if the sponsors of the crowdfunding initiatives don't take urgent action.

Robin François De Hert, later known as Robbe, was born in Hampshire, England, in 1942, where his Flemish parents were exiled during the German occupation. In 1966, back in Belgium, he became part of the Fugitive Cinema Collective and he is credited with nine short films.

In 1973, he made his feature film debut with *Camera Sutra*, which combines documentary footage of various public events in Belgium with the story of a

group of young people on a journey through the country.

Later, he became known for unconventional, often political, movies like *De witte van Sichem* (*Whitey*), an adaptation of the 1920 novel by Ernest Claes that criticises severe punishments handed out to children. He also made the award-winning *Blueberry Hill* and the sequel *Brylcreem Boulevard*.

He made his last fiction feature *Lijmen/Het Been* in 2001, based on the novels by Willem Elsschot. Since then, he has made only documentary shorts.

The money raised by his friends and colleagues may not be there for long, according to Wim Smits, a lawyer specialising in debt arbitration. "If the money raised is deposited in Robbe De Hert's bank account, it's perfectly possible that one of his creditors will apply for it to be sequestered to pay off his debts," Smits told *Gazet van Antwerpen*. Organisers of the crowdfunding campaign can avoid that, he continued, "by setting up a non-profit specifically aimed at producing *Hollywood aan de Schelde*. It's important that this money be kept strictly separated from Robbe De Hert's private assets." \ Alan Hope

## FLANDERTODAY Flanders State of the Art

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## OFFSIDE The mystery of the raw chicken

It was a mystery no-one could quite get their heads around. Every so often since last May, passengers using the Mousterij train station in Brussels, halfway between Luxemburg and Etterbeek, would see pieces of raw chicken lying around on the platform. No-one could imagine why, or how they got there.

Until, by chance, *Bruzz* reporter Sam De Ryck spotted an elderly man dropping morsels of fresh chicken around the station. Like any intrepid reporter would, De Ryck approached the man, and this is what he found out.

The chicken-dropper is 81 years old and once came face to face with a fox, he explained. They looked each other in the eye. "He looked at me the way I was looking at

him," he said, which convinced him that the fox was an intelligent animal.

Foxes, in Brussels as elsewhere, often use railway lines to penetrate cities from the countryside without quite as much risk as the roads. They haunt cities in search of food, often from garbage bins.

The man, who would not provide his name, started putting out chicken for the foxes coming in on the line from the Sonian Forest. "I love all animals," he told De Ryck. "Even flies. I wouldn't kill a fly. I let them live."

Chickens, as one reader of the paper pointed out, are evidently another matter. \ AH





## 5TH COLUMN

### The education battle

The government of Flanders has reached an agreement on the redesign of secondary education, an issue that has been on the table for 10 years. Education minister Hilde Crevits (CD&V) has pledged to see the reform implemented in schools as soon as 2018.

It is the result of a bitter political fight, though, which N-VA seems to have won.

Although education in Flanders is considered excellent, international studies point out several problems, such as the wide gap between the performances of the strongest and weakest pupils. Too many also drop out. And no-one is happy about the cascading system, where pupils start out in the general track and drop down to technical and professional tracks as their scores fall.

The two previous ministers for education, Frank Vandenbroucke and Pascal Smet (both socialists), held consultations involving parents, schools, education networks and other experts. These partners agreed on a redesign with no strict partition between general, technical and professional education tracks, a broad curriculum for the first two years and postponing tracking to the age of 14.

Little of that has materialised in the final plan, as N-VA has always opposed these reforms. Party president Bart De Wever has spoken out on this debate several times.

De Wever's main concern was with the stronger pupils. He did not want the general track, preparing pupils for higher education, meddled with. Let's not change what is good about our education, has always been his philosophy.

His views conflict with the general consensus in the education field, but the nationalist feels he is supported by a silent majority of parents and teachers. N-VA has been a thorn in the side of the Catholic education network, in charge of managing a majority of Flanders' schools.

The network has drifted away from its original mission, De Wever believes. He has fiercely criticised its director, Lieven Boeve, who stated last year that Catholic schools should be more welcoming to Muslim pupils.

Giving schools more freedom to organise themselves, as the new agreement does, eases them away from the education networks - networks that have also never sat well with N-VA.

The new agreement has angered many in the education sector. De Wever has called the criticism "egalitarian nonsense" and has mocked the broad "math/hair care/Latin/carpentry" track. \ Anja Otte

# Honorary doctorate for Merkel

## German chancellor's award given by universities of Ghent and Leuven



Lisa Bradshaw

Follow Lisa on Twitter \ @lmsbie

The universities of Ghent and Leuven joined together in awarding German chancellor Angela Merkel an honorary doctorate last week, in the Egg event venue in Anderlecht in Brussels. It was the first time, the chancellor said, that she had received a double honour such as this "from two of Europe's most prestigious universities".

Belgian prime minister Charles Michel opened the ceremony with comments on how Germany's past shaped Merkel's future. "As a young woman," he said, "you witnessed the construction of the Berlin Wall. That must have made you feel very powerless. After two horrific wars, your freedom - and that of so many others - was again being limited."

He went on to say - in words that echoed the general theme of the speeches at the hour-long ceremony - that Europe must stand together "to defend our freedoms tooth and nail. Because only in a free Europe can there be peace and prosperity."

Flemish minister-president Geert Bourgeois, who spoke in both Dutch and German, noted that he was happy to see the Belgian and



© Jasper Jacobs/BELGA

German chancellor Angela Merkel (centre) receives an honorary doctorate from Ghent University rector Anne De Paepe and University of Leuven rector Rik Torfs

German heads of state meeting in "more relaxed circumstances" than Merkel's usual trips to Brussels. "World-famous Flemish universities are co-operating to award you with an honorary doctorate in recognition of your diplomatic and political efforts in the development of Europe. On behalf of the Flemish government, I offer my sincere congratulations."

On accepting the doctorate from Ghent University rector Anne De Paepe and University of Leuven rector Rik Torfs, Merkel said that it was

particularly significant to her to receive such academic recognition as she herself has been a researcher, with a doctorate in physical chemistry.

She went on to talk about the relations between Belgium and Germany, both past and present, emphasising Belgium's co-operation following the Second World War when rebuilding diplomatic ties would have seemed impossible. She continued with her insistence that the EU be able to defend its interests without the help of other "world powers", who may not always share those interests.

With clear references to the United States, she said: "I am convinced that Europe and the EU must learn to take more responsibility in the world in the future. Let's not fool ourselves: From the viewpoint of some of our traditional partners, and I'm thinking of transatlantic ties, there is no guarantee of perpetuity for close co-operation with us Europeans."

She ended by telling the students to continue their quest for knowledge and creativity long after they leave university, as they are the future of Europe.

## Government of Flanders can now launch own prosecutions

The government of Flanders has decided to take steps to be able to exercise its right to injunction, which it has had since the start of this legislature, in 2014, but has never used. The right, introduced in the sixth round of state reforms, allows the regions to require the federal justice minister to instruct the prosecutor's office to investigate or prosecute a matter where regional governments have responsibility.

The right may be invoked for a number of purposes: to ask for an investigation into a particular matter, to provide information relevant to an ongoing investigation, to have a sentence carried out or to appeal against a ruling delivered by a court. Flemish government ministers have agreed to pass requests for injunctions through minister-president Geert Bourgeois (pictured) before an official submission to the justice minister.

The right contains certain limits. There is no option of negative



© Courtesy N-VA

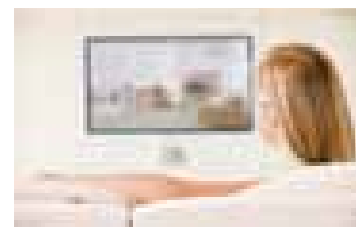
injunction, which would allow an investigation or prosecution to be stopped, and it only concerns individual cases and cannot be used to implement a general action.

"The Flemish government continues to support the existing reluctance to make use of its right to injunction, so as not to threaten the functional independence of the prosecutors service," Bourgeois commented. He also stressed that the government would only invoke the right when there was a major public interest, or where the lack of action on the part of the federal government clashed with the interests of the region. \ Alan Hope

## Media minister to investigate targeted TV ads

Flemish media minister Sven Gatz is consulting with federal ministers regarding the protection of the privacy of TV viewers. The decision follows a report by the Flemish media regulator VRM last week which stated that digital TV companies are increasingly gathering information about viewing habits in order to provide targeted ads.

The phenomenon is familiar to internet users: You search Google for gardening equipment, and for days after you're presented with ads for gardening equipment on websites you visit. That ability on the part of online media companies is now spreading to digital TV, explained Peggy Valcke of VRM. "By using new technologies, the consumer is, whether they realise it or not, giving away a great deal of personal information that is potentially of great value," she said. "The government needs to be vigilant on the way that information is being used."



© Ingimage

Gatz intends to take that warning to the federal ministers responsible for privacy matters. "I want to see how we can proceed," he said. In Flanders, meanwhile, VRM could be given new responsibilities.

Earlier in the week, the European Commission presented a proposal for new laws regarding online advertising. Companies that gather users' information, among them Google, WhatsApp and Facebook, will no longer be able to use that information for custom ads.

The ban would cover not only the content of messages, but also what is known as meta-data, including the time and place of a message.

\ AH

## Open VLD president quits parliament to go on pre-election tour

Gwendolyn Rutten, president of liberal party Open VLD, has given up her seat in the Flemish parliament to begin a tour of all 308 municipalities in Flanders due to last until the municipal elections in 2018. Her tour kicked off in Staden, West Flanders.

"It would not be possible for me to visit 308 municipalities while holding on to my seat," she said. "In the coming months I want to meet and talk to the people, with both feet on the ground," she said. "It's a two-way street. I want to hear what's going on. I want to step outside of my comfort zone, because all too often you only come into contact with like-minded people and party colleagues."



© Sandro Delaere/BELGA

Staden mayor and hairdresser Francesco Vanderjeugd shows Open VLD party president Gwendolyn Rutten the ropes

At her first port of call, Rutten visited the hair salon in Staden run by Francesco Vander-

jeugd, who is also the youngest mayor in Flanders and a member of the Flemish parliament for Rutten's party. She even pitched in, washing a client's hair.

"This is the essence of politics," she said. "By visiting the 308 municipalities I'll see a perfect cross-section of Flanders and its society. Sometimes the barriers to approaching me are too high. I'm doing this as Gwendolyn, not in the name of the party."

Her seat in the parliament will be taken over by Danielle Vanwesenbeeck, the award-winning CEO of Leuven-based direct mailing company Mastermail. \ AH

# Is there anybody out there?

Alien invasions have long been a source of cultural fascination

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UFOMELDPUNT.BE

stories play out, from *ET* and *Mars Attacks*, through series like *The X-Files*, to more serious tales like *Contact* and the currently showing *Arrival*. Delaere says all these could help fuel the claims he hears, some of which bear striking resemblance to descriptions seen on the screen. And they tie in with beliefs about aliens leaving messages through crop circles or through ancient sites like the Nazca Lines in Peru. "People often really want to believe there's something there," he says. "The Nazca carvings are seen as alien landing strips, but really they're just for the gods. In the same way, people look at the pyramids in Egypt and see alien messages in the hieroglyphs." The Fermi paradox, named after the Italian Nobel-prize-winning physicist, is the apparent mismatch between the high-probability estimates of the existence of extra-terrestrial civilisations (of the billions of stars in the galaxy, many have Earth-like planets) and the lack of evidence.

unusual lights moving across the sky. Delaere then investigates, gathering details from the witness about the location, date and time of observation so he can verify contextual information like the weather, astronomical data, traffic and satellites.

He tries to conduct the interview at the spot where the observation was made, so he can look for a circumstantial explanation; for example, if it's near a military base or close to where a party was being held.

At the end of the investigation, he tries to draw a conclusion. "If possible, we try to give a reasoned explanation for the phenomenon," Delaere says. "And if we suggest that it's not a UFO but something like an aeroplane, they are often unhappy!"

While most of the reports seem to come from sober, well-meaning witnesses, Delaere says some could have been embellished by stimulants. "Drugs are things that we always keep in mind, just like alcohol."



Frederick Delaere says people are surprised to learn he's sceptical about the existence of aliens

“There are things out there we can't explain. Or can't explain yet. But that doesn't mean they are aliens

But Delaere says the chance of us somehow missing a visit from another world is highly unlikely. "With all the resources we have on Earth, we would know if aliens were anywhere near us," he says. "People say that if aliens are already here, the government would have hidden it, but I don't believe that. It would be too big to hide."

In the past decade, Delaere has dealt with almost 2,000 sightings. The rate varies – last year there were 143 sightings, while in 2011 there were a record 311 – but his response is usually the same. "We write to everyone who reports a sighting," he says.

The website contains the original witness reports, which tend to use the same language about seeing

Unsurprisingly, planes are some of the most common explanations for UFO sightings, and they can usually be confirmed by checking flight paths or contacting a local airport. More recently, Delaere's reports have been dominated by what turn out to be sky lanterns, Chinese hot air balloons made of paper with a small fire inside. Now easily available in Europe, they have become popular at events and parties, often replacing fireworks. Though they are banned, sky lanterns are still common – and easily confused with UFOs. Indeed, from the ground, sky lanterns match almost perfectly the traditional UFO description: yellow-orange lights that usually follow a linear path but sometimes exhibit

erratic flight behaviour.

A more unusual incident was a recent report of a fiery light in the sky, which was eventually identified as a reflection of 10-metre-high flames spewed from the chimney of an Antwerp industrial plant. The flames were reflected against icy clouds high above and were visible up to 50 kilometres away.

Delaere says the closest he has come to seeing a UFO was when he was 14. "I saw three lights in the shape of a triangle," he says. "I kept looking, and I saw the lights flickering, and realised that it was just an aeroplane. And I understood then that when you want to see strange things, you will."

That was a heyday for UFOs: aficionados talk in hushed tones about the five months from November 1989 to April 1990 when thousands of sightings were made in Belgium. Jet fighters were scrambled to investigate reports of UFOs in Belgian airspace, but authorities

never explained what was hovering in the skies – despite radar contacts and sightings by an estimated 13,500 witnesses.

Delaere admits that he doesn't have a conclusive explanation for what it was. "It could have been US aeroplane tests. Local planes were told not to fly in the region," he says.

But he notes that the most used picture from that time was faked: an April 1990 photo of a triangular object on which four lights are visible, which was later revealed to be the work of a teenager who fixed torches to a lump of polystyrene.

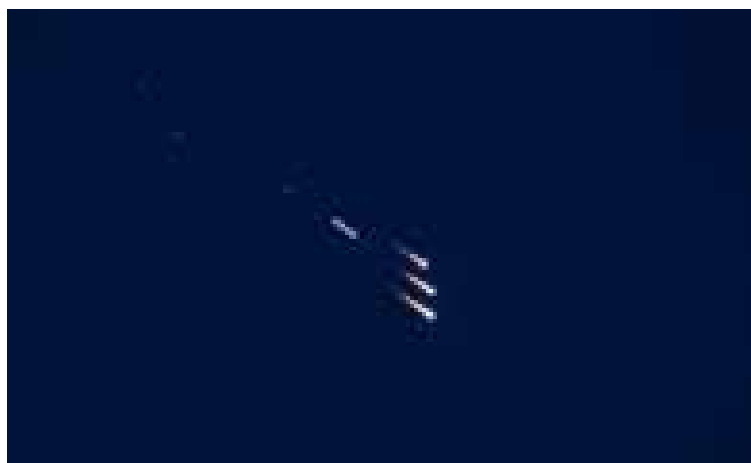
It is hard to make unsubstantiated claims today, with everything being photographed or filmed with smartphones. "It makes it much easier on us," Delaere says. "Now we have visual evidence. And all the films and videos we have seen, we can explain." He gives as an example the unexpected meteor shower over Russia in 2013 that

was widely caught on tape by car dashcams.

Delaere spends six hours every day on UFO research. His regular job is on the production line at the local Libeco-Lagae textile factory, where he works long weekends and holiday shifts. Three years ago, he wrote a book about UFOs in Belgium and the Netherlands, published by Lannoo, and is currently writing another, specifically aimed at children.

"Kids see a movie on the internet, and they think it's real," he says. "I hope this book will help them be a bit more sceptical."

Married with two sons, aged eight and 13, Delaere notes that his own children aren't interested in UFOs and laughs at his inability to engage them in a subject that should be tailor-made for them. "But they are into *Star Wars*," he says. As for his wife, he says diplomatically: "She doesn't have an opinion on it."



© Robert Mikaelyan/fotoarena.nl  
A night-time sighting captured in the Netherlands



## WEEK IN BUSINESS

### Data – Swan Insights

The Brussels-based business information solutions start-up, launched in 2013, has been acquired by Sweden's Bisnode data and analytics group.

### Hygiene \ Drylock

The specialist in incontinence products and thin diapers, based in Zele, East Flanders and with plants in Russia and the Czech Republic, is taking over the US company Presto Absorbent for €68 million.

### Air \ Yangtze River Express

The Chinese air cargo and freight company is pulling out of Brussels Airport at the end of this month, citing Brussels' new noise restriction regulations, which come into effect on 1 March. Other freight carriers, including Saudia Cargo, have expressed concern that the implementation of the new rules may force them to move their operations to Amsterdam, Maastricht or Frankfurt.

### Fruit \ Belgische Fruitveiling

The Sint-Truiden fruit auctions co-operative is taking over its competitor Veiling Haspengouw as part of the sector's consolidation in the face of the Russian boycott of Belgian fruit. Although some firms export through Belarus to bypass the regulation, international sales of local fruit have dropped significantly.

### Cars \ Carglass

The Brussels-based specialist in repair and replacement of auto glass is taking over the Care chain of body shops to offer full auto repair service to customers.

### Textiles \ Sioen

The producer of safety vests and other protective clothing, based in Aardooie, West Flanders, is buying Finland's Verseidag Ballistic Protection, specialised in bullet-proof vests and equipment, for €18 million.

### Construction \ Vandersanden

The producer of bricks and building materials, based in Bilzen, Limburg, and Europe's largest family-owned company in the sector, is acquiring three production units in the Netherlands and one in Germany from the Irish CRH Group.

# Tanning salons breaking rules

## 'Shocking' number of tanning beds in breach of radiation limits



Alan Hope

Follow Alan on Twitter \ @AlanHopeFT

Federal consumer affairs minister Kris Peeters has issued a warning to the tanning salon sector to expect tighter inspections, after a report showed that 185 out of 197 salons inspected in 2016 were not conforming to regulations.

"In other words, 94% of these businesses were not in order," Peeters told VRT radio. "A shocking and sorry discovery." According to the report, half of the salons ignored radiation intensity limits, which is "a worrying number as we know that misuse of sunbeds carries health risks," he said. Inspectors found that certain conditions applying to sunbeds are being routinely ignored, such



© Ingimage

as use by minors or by anyone with skin-type 1 – people with blond or red hair who are sensitive to sunlight and more vulnerable to skin cancer. Until now, tanning salons were registered under a general activities code that also covered other businesses involving personal care, such as nails and make-up. That made it difficult for inspectors to identify the salons in the group.

In future, Peeters said, any business offering sunbeds – and not only dedicated tanning salons – will have to register under a new code. He also ordered inspectors to carry out more checks and to shut down businesses that do not comply after receiving warnings.

## Windmills in North Sea over-subsidised, says regulator

Belgium paid about €2 billion too much for the wind turbines off the coast, according to a study produced for the electricity and gas regulator Creg. The study compared the cost of Belgian and Dutch turbines.

It had already been reported last summer that the Danish company Dong Energy had agreed to build a windmill park in the North Sea off the coast of the Netherlands at a much lower cost than that paid by the Belgian government to two local consortiums for its windmill park.

While the Dutch energy minister Henk Kamp had a budget of 12.4 cents per kilowatt hour, the company promised the park would be profitable at only 7.27 cents. For two new parks off the Belgian coast, on the other hand, the Belgian government was paying subsidy of 13 cents and 12.4 cents respectively. The Dutch park is 22 kilometres off the coast of Zeeland, directly adjoining the two Belgian parks concerned.

Energy experts said the difference lies in the way the two governments structure their contracts. Belgium issues a concession to companies for part of the project, and the companies then have to take care of all permits and make a connection to the electricity network.

In the Netherlands, the government arranges all of the paperwork, then puts the project up for auction. That makes a concession more attractive to companies, increases competition and pushes down price offers. Some of the Belgian contracts were issued 10 years ago.

"This demonstrates that our methods have not taken sufficient account of technological evolutions," said Peter Claes of Febe-lic, an association of large-scale electricity consumers, speaking to VRT. "Belgium has a system in place that cannot produce price reductions as technology advances. That's a pity." \ AH

## Year-end made up quarter of annual e-commerce returns

Income for e-commerce businesses in Belgium during the busy shopping period at the end of the year was €2.2 billion, according to sector federation BeCommerce. That represents more than 24% of the sector's total annual earnings. BeCommerce surveyed 720 online shops, which represent 82% of the country's online business. The figures cover the period from 11 November to 31 December.

The result is a major advance on the same period in 2015, when sales accounted for only 14% of annual income. New initiatives like Black Friday and Cyber Monday, imported from the US, have helped boost online sales.

The most popular products for Belgians to buy online are personal care products (35%), food and



© Jason Howie/Flickr

drink (30%) and clothing and accessories (24.5%).

BeCommerce also reported an increase in sales via second-hand websites such as 2dehands.be and ebay.be in the period following Christmas. More and more people are selling unwanted presents on the sites, resulting in an increase in sales of 17-20%, the federation said. \ AH

## Rail company Infrabel plans 4,000 job cuts by 2020

Rail infrastructure company Infrabel plans to cut 4,000 jobs by 2020, or 27% of its workforce. The cuts are a result of the merger of the company's subsidiaries, according to Infrabel's business plan.

The merger concerns Tuc Rail, Infrabel's study bureau for railway technology, and IT service provider Ixilio. Both will be swallowed up by the parent company, leading to a reduction in the total required workforce as duplicate functions are eliminated.

According to the latest available public figures from the end of 2014, Infrabel had 14,073 full-time staff, a figure that the business plan indicated should drop to 10,299 by 2020. "Nobody will be fired," the company said in a statement. "The numbers will be made up by those taking voluntary redundancy and by those who retire without being replaced." Rail unions, meanwhile, expressed



© Courtesy Infrabel

fears at the consequences of such a deep cut in staff. "It's going to be difficult for Infrabel to ensure the performance of certain functions," warned Marianne Lerouge of ACV Transcom. She joined with socialist union ACOD in concern that only employment had been targeted in Infrabel's plans.

"Today there is a shortage of technicians and engineers, a situation that will also develop in other personnel categories," said Michel Abdissi of ACOD. "How are people going to make the trains run tomorrow?" \ AH

## Knack online articles now closed to reader comments

Readers of web articles published by magazines belonging to the Roularta Media Group will no longer be able to post comments online, the company has announced. The group publishes news magazine *Knack*, business magazine *Trends* and a number of other lifestyle, technology and health-related titles, including *Nest* and *Data News*.

"I refuse to take on the job of teaching people how to behave online," said Knack's online editor Jago Kosolosky. He blamed "the often disrespectful nature of reader reactions, which makes constructive dialogue impossible" for the decision.

Three years ago, he said, the site eliminated anonymous posts, requiring readers to register in order to post comments. Some readers then created accounts using fictitious names. "The constructive comments – and there were plenty – were overwhelmed by reactions where any attempt at dialogue was absent," Kosolosky said.

The group's decision continues a trend among the Flemish press of removing comments sections. Daily newspaper *De Morgen*, published by De Persgroep, also scrapped online comments recently. "The reaction function provided very little added value to the debate," said opinion editor Bart Eeckhout.

*De Standaard*, published by Mediahuis, has not had a comments section for years, citing similar reasons. And *Het Nieuwsblad* allows reader reactions only on certain articles, where they are monitored. De Persgroep's *Het Laatste Nieuws* still allows comments, but they are also moderated.

Daily financial newspaper *De Tijd*, published by Mediafin, remains open for comments, which are monitored closely. However, most of the articles on the paper's website are only open to subscribers. \ AH

# Age of discovery

## Search engine from Ghent helps patients navigate oceans of medical data



Ian Mundell  
More articles by Ian \ flanderstoday.eu

\ ONTOFORCE.COM

A digital platform that helps medical researchers navigate vast amounts of data is making a name for Ontoforce, a start-up company headquartered in Ghent. Its Discover software, launched commercially at the beginning of 2016, is already selling well to the pharmaceutical industry. “We envisioned having four big pharma or biotech companies as customers, and right now we have 12,” says founder and chief executive Hans Constandt. Earnings are also ahead of predictions. “Next year we will break even, I think, and then we will grow.”

Discover is also picking up accolades. In November, it won first prize in the digital health category at a summit organised by the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, the EU’s flagship for new technology and entrepreneurship.

Big data is a fashionable area for new companies at present, but Constandt’s interest goes further back. He’s trained in medicine and biotechnology, but was also a bit of a computer geek, so he combined these interests by pursuing a career in bioinformatics.

After working at Ghent University, he moved over to the multinational pharmaceutical company Eli Lilly, where he worked on the information and technology demands of drug discovery.

Over time he saw that the challenge was not so much devising new ways of manipulating data, but connecting data created by different people – biologists, chemists, clinicians, toxicologists. “When you are making a drug, everybody needs to understand each other’s data, and it all has to work together,” he says.



© Facebook

But the spur to act on this insight was his young son, who appeared to have a learning disability. Constandt started to investigate what this might mean and looked into options for specialist schooling.

“It took me such a long time, and I’m a so-called expert!” he recalls. “So I took a sabbatical and started coding a platform myself to integrate all of that data.”

The result was schoolKID, a non-profit platform that pulls together data on schools in Flanders and makes it easier to access. The response to this work was so positive that Constandt decided to apply the same approach to the more commercial world of drug development.

He set up Ontoforce in 2011, with backing from Flemish technology agency IWT and public sector research institute iMinds. The company’s first task was to convert the software built to sift school data into something more marketable.

“The engine I had made was built from open source components,

and we said: We are going to make a limousine out of this. It has to be industry-ready, scalable and sustainable. So we started coding it from scratch.”

The key to the system is semantic searching, a way of sifting data that allows users to be specific about what they are looking for. The example Constandt uses is someone looking for a place to stay in France who types “Paris Hilton” into a search engine, only to get pages of celebrity gossip.

Adding “hotel” to the search gives a better result, but that’s only because the person knows what they want. “You need to know your keywords,” he says, “and in pharma or other complex areas where you may not be an expert, you don’t always know the keywords.”

For this to work well, data from different sources has to be connected up, so that searches can see through differences in terminology when it comes to diseases, drugs, genes and so on. Ontoforce did this for the most significant public databases of medical, chem-

ical and biological research that it could find.

“We took all of that data – about eight billion entities – and we merged it together into a very scalable and easy-to-use platform,” Constandt explains. Since the data is connected, users can also make connections, moving from clinical studies, for example, to the underlying biology or to the chemistry of the drugs involved. Information can also be found about the researchers, such as their publication records and other interests.

Since October, Discover has been free to use under a community licence, with around 1,100 people currently signed up. Where Ontoforce makes money is adding functionality – for instance allowing people to save and export all their searches – and by licensing the system to pharmaceutical companies.

Under this arrangement, commercial databases can be added to the system alongside internal data, allowing employees to factor in company research and resources.

Ontoforce now has a staff of 14, mixing people with entrepreneurial expertise with those skilled in IT and bioinformatics. In June last year it raised an additional €2.1 million from the Life Science Innovation Fund in the US and its existing investors, such as iMinds and Flemish investment companies Sofi and LRM.

There is a strong interest from the US, but Constandt will keep the company’s research and development in Flanders. “We are very happy here. The talent is here, and we can find the money we need. It’s only sales that are going much faster in the US.”

## WEEK IN INNOVATION

### VUB professor wins Tibbetts Award

Flemish professor Clement Hiel of the Free University of Brussels (VUB) has received America’s prestigious Tibbetts Award at a ceremony at the White House. The prize is awarded by the US government’s Small Business Administration in recognition of innovative projects or organisations with a clear technological and socio-economic impact. The 64-year-old professor, born in Melsele, East Flanders, won the award for a radar tower made from composite materials developed for the country’s air force. The tower can be assembled up to eight times faster than a normal tower, and the whole system can be clicked together with Lego-like cubes.

### Study to monitor environmental hazards

Flemish public health minister Jo Vandeuren is investing €2.84 million in initiatives to monitor the impact of the environment on our health. The two initiatives will study the damaging effects of environmental factors, with the goal of setting up preventive action. The purpose of the three-year investment is to apply scientific insights and educate citizens, doctors and municipalities. One initiative will focus on the impact of mobility issues, including exposure to traffic pollution. The other initiative will look for a link between environment and health in electronic medical patient files. It will, for example, study causes behind large concentration of cardiovascular diseases in particular areas.

### €12 million for green heating projects

Flemish energy minister Bart Tommelein has put out a call for projects concerning the production of green energy, with €12 million set aside in subsidies. Half of the total will go to projects concerning waste heat – the heat produced by other processes such as machinery – which is either used for heating purposes within the company or injected into networks for use by other companies or private homes. Earmarked for the geothermal energy is €4 million, while €1 million each goes to small biomass plants and to the production of biogas – gas produced from organic materials that has been cleaned and can be injected into the natural gas network. Applications for project subsidy are accepted from 1 February to 15 March.

\ Andy Furniere

## Q&A

**Kristof Rubens of the Flemish government’s environment, nature and energy department recently completed a project on consumer behaviour to find ways to promote environmentally conscious choices in supermarkets and canteens**

**What was the objective of the project?**

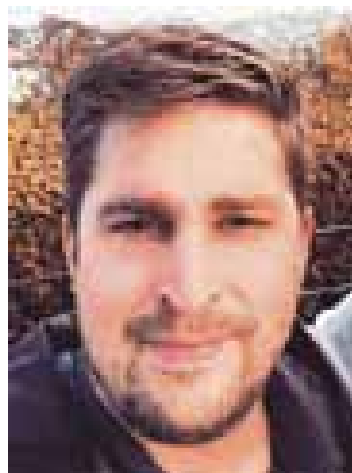
I looked into how you can guide the consumer to a more sustainable consumption pattern. The first focus is food, because this causes a lot of environmental impact. The classic approach is to inform the consumer and run campaigns. But shoppers make decisions very fast – in a matter of seconds. This means that we have to try a different, complementary approach. So this brings us to the field of behavioural economics. We wanted to test the potential of interventions like nudging in a retail context, such as a supermarket, and in a company canteen,

because those are two crucial food consumption patterns.

**What did you find?**

At Colruyt, smaller portions of sausages were offered in addition to the existing range. Using proven psychological influences, like the option in the middle is the most popular, we managed to get a shift in the consumer behaviour. People bought 18% fewer kilograms of sausage, and they didn’t compensate with other meat products.

It’s a very encouraging message and one that can also be used to sell seasonal vegetables. With the sign “Fruits and vegetables in



season” in a central location, sales went up by 20 to 30%. And adding the suggestion “tasty in puree” increased sales of celery root by one-quarter. These are very useful applications because they don’t involve a lot of thinking on the part of the consumer.

**Was there a difference between the company canteen and the supermarket?**

The effects on supermarket shopper were much higher. I think in the retail context it is much easier to say “sell less meat” or “buy seasonal vegetables” – which is what we want to achieve – but in a company restaurant it’s quite different to choose the more environmentally sound dish. And it adds to the complexity if you combine the environmental with the health side of things.

**What’s next?**

Now that we know which interventions work, we want to implement them for environmental purposes. We have to contact other retailers and canteens. We will also start a follow-up project that will investigate the long-term effects of these interventions.

\ Interview by Hywel Jones





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# Think global, act local

## Organisations look for solutions to world's development challenges



Sofia Christensen  
More articles by Sofia \ flanderstoday.eu

The government of Flanders has awarded subsidies to six projects that help solve some of the biggest development challenges facing both Flanders and cities across the globe. Set to begin this month and ranging from sustainable school lunches to interactive theatre, the projects are the winners of a call for projects issued by the department of foreign affairs last April.

The Call for Global Challenges is the latest in a series of grants announced by the government in 2005 for educational initiatives that "promote the creation of support for international co-operation within the Flemish Community and foster the development of an attitude of international solidarity". Subsidies were awarded annually until 2014, after which budget constraints obliged the government to shift the grant call to a biannual basis.

This latest call drew 33 applications. Each was evaluated by a jury of five from various departments and minister-president Geert Bourgeois. "Almost all the proposals were of very high quality," said the foreign affairs department in a statement. "We had about €1 million to spend, so the selection was not easy."

Applications were mainly assessed on their ability to think outside the box and their response to the principle of "think global, act local". Other selection criteria included the quality of partnership – ideally with some form of co-operation with the private sector – target group participation, implementation strategy and long-term sustainability.

The winning proposals are highly diverse but all promote active citizenship and provide an innovative, local solution to a global challenge. "Our goal is to promote sustainable food consumption in supermarkets by linking retailers directly with consumers," says Liesbeth Van Meulder, programme advisor



© Courtesy Vredeseilanden  
Citizens for the Foodture, one of the six winning projects, brought consumers and retailers together to find ways of promoting more sustainable food consumption

for the Leuven-based non-profit Vredeseilanden, which presented one of the winning projects, Citizens for the Foodture.

"We had already brought various agri-food chain actors together," she continues, "when we realised that consumers – the very people whose consumption patterns determine what food ends up on the shelves – were being completely excluded from these processes."

This realisation led to four sessions with consumers and retailers to think about how they can contribute to the mainstreaming of sustainable food consumption. Together they came up with seven concrete ideas to be set up in supermarkets across Flanders over the next two years.

"These ideas are meant to trigger a shift in the consumption patterns of mainstream consumers," says Van Meulder. "We are not targeting 'green consumers' who are already convinced. If you consider the fact that 70 to 80% of Belgians buy their groceries in supermarkets, that is where the leverage is."

Van Meulder points out that her organisation already works with the five largest supermarket chains in the country: Lidl, Carrefour, Aldi, Delhaize and Cora. "If we can change their food offer to a more sustainable one, then we have a

real impact."

She also believes the Citizens for the Foodture project stood out because few initiatives provide accessible, on-the-ground approaches to global challenges – a feature shared by Peace Craft: Play to Change, another winning project presented by the Flemish chapter of the international peace movement Pax Christi, in collaboration with the social innovation lab iDrops.

"We have been working with young asylum seekers in Antwerp for several years and have collected many testimonies," says Hanne Vervaele, who runs U Move 4 Peace, the artistic department of Pax Christi Vlaanderen.

"Our idea is to use these stories for two things," she continues. "The first is to create a virtual reality game about life in the asylum seekers' country of origin and their journey to Europe. The second is to hire professional actors for a participatory theatre play on the struggles asylum seekers face here in Belgium."

Both will be offered to high schools and cultural centres as a package, where the game will be played in preparation for a theatre workshop. Demand is high, with 60 performances to be scheduled in schools across Flanders over the

next year-and-a-half.

"We really work from the bottom up, starting with the asylum seekers' personal stories and sharing them with other youngsters in a creative way," says Vervaele. "We wanted to do more than just create another book on the challenges of migration, and thanks to the grant we will now be able to operate on a wider and more professional level." The four other proposals selected for government funding include Maakbaar, a manufacturing design project by conservation organisation Bos+ that aims to incorporate sustainable solutions into products, and GoodFood@School, a counselling platform set up by GoodPlanet Belgium for schools wishing to educate their pupils on sustainable food choices.

The local chapter of the Food Surplus Entrepreneurs Network submitted a winning proposal for an integrated platform of activities that raises awareness and stimulates action against food waste, while the youth organisation Globelink was selected for its initiative linking Flemish youth to civil society organisations to encourage their involvement in the sustainable development goals.

Underlying all six proposals is the concept of education as key to developing a more inclusive and sustainable global society.

"We know that citizens are concerned about the challenges facing our planet," says Van Meulder. "They draw a link to food consumption, but they don't necessarily know what to do about it. This is where Citizens for the Foodture steps in, providing concrete solutions and making it easier to act responsibly."

Vervaele builds on this idea, claiming that educational projects such as Play to Change help young people relate to the images of refugees they see on TV. "It gives a face to the story, creates mutual understanding and provides a rehearsal for life."

## WEEK IN EDUCATION

### More students studying abroad

The number of Flemish students travelling abroad to study has increased by 80% since 2006, according to Flemish MP Jos De Meyer (CD&V) on the basis of statistics provided by education minister and party colleague Hilde Crevits. The figures were requested on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of Erasmus+, the EU's student exchange programme. Many students travel via Erasmus+, with the most popular countries being France and Spain. The majority of students choosing to do part of their studies abroad are enrolled in studies in the social sciences, business and law. The number of foreign students coming to study in Flanders also increased, from 4,590 in 2012 to 7,702 last year.

### 'Scrap newcomer fees for students'

Christian-democrats CD&V have suggested that Flanders should exempt international students coming to the region to attend college or university from the newcomer fee, which all foreigners from outside the EU must pay to cover the administrative costs of their visa applications since last year. Currently, only students with a scholarship are exempted from paying the fee. Last October, state secretary for migration Theo Francken (N-VA) announced that the fees would be raised. According to CD&V member of the Flemish parliament Katrien Schyvers, students shouldn't have to pay any fee at all as it hinders the internationalisation of higher education.

### Teaching vacancies double to 1,000

The number of vacancies for teachers in Flemish schools more than doubled in one year's time, from 450 in October 2015 to more than 1,016 a year later. The number of job-seeking teachers in the same period decreased by 14%, from 4,672 to just under 4,100. Experts have predicted that by 2024 about 10% more teachers will be needed than in 2014, or 6,000 more teachers per school year. Education minister Crevits said that this evolution is being caused by a combination of more students and retiring teachers. There is still a surplus of some 3,000 qualified teachers seeking work; while there is a shortage of teachers for maths and technical courses, for instance, there are too many for physical education and history. \ AF

## Agreement reached on reform of secondary education

The government of Flanders has reached an agreement on secondary education reform. The current 29 study areas in the second grade (third and fourth years) and the third grade (fifth and sixth years) will be replaced by eight study domains, including "art & creation". The division between general (ASO), technical (TSO) and professional education (BSO) remains in place.

One of the main goals of the reform is to make the range of options more transparent for pupils and parents, with study programmes that prepare students for higher education or the labour market, or keep both options open. One in four of the study programmes in the second grade and one in 10 of those in the third grade



© Rob Stevens/KU Leuven  
Education minister Hilde Crevits

have been removed.

In the first grade, students will receive a broader general education. They will choose a study domain in the second grade and refine their choice in the third grade. The new system

should make it easier for students to change from a practice-oriented programme to a more theoretical one if they choose.

Each stream of study will have a "curriculum dossier" stating its goals, which education networks will create together. As a result, the programme content should be more aligned in different networks, making it easier for students to change networks. The government hopes to introduce the new system on 1 September 2018. Lieven Boeve, head of the Catholic education network, has stated that he is dissatisfied with the lack of reduction of programmes in ASO. Raymonda Verdyck, head of the GO! network, said that students still have to make important study choices too early. \ Andy Furniere

## WEEK IN ACTIVITIES

### VeloFollies

No matter what kind of bike you ride, you won't want to miss the biggest cycling expo in the Benelux. Meet the big names in person, like Sven Nys, Greg van Avermaet and Fabian Cancellara. Try out a new bike, get the latest gear and learn from the experts. There's even an MTB ride on Saturday. *20-22 January, Kortrijk Expo, Doorniksesteenweg 216, Kortrijk; €14*

\ [velofollies.be](http://velofollies.be)

### MTB Ride in Damme

For the 22nd annual Damse Smokkeltocht, there are three routes to choose from, suitable for both beginners and experienced mountain bikers. The routes take you through the polders and along the canals, right up to the Dutch border. *21 January 8.30-14.00, Sportpark Meuleweg, Visserstraat 2A, Damme; €3*

\ [sintritrapppers.be](http://sintritrapppers.be)

### Winter Walk & Tipple

This annual walk takes you to the top of the Bolderberg hill in Limburg, with its panoramic view over Terlaermen Castle. From there, step into the ancient stone chapel for a choral performance of hymns and psalms. Outside, treat yourself to a mulled wine or local spirits, hot chocolate and hot dogs. *22 January, starting at 14.00, Toerisme Heusden-Zolder, Vrunstraat 6; free*

\ [vzw-toerisme-heusden-zolder.be](http://vzw-toerisme-heusden-zolder.be)

### Bright Brussels Winter

During the winter months, the capital's inner ring is illuminated with colourful light installations at all of the main squares and junctions: giant desk lamps on Luxembourgplein, a disco ball at Poelaertplein. Check online for descriptions of all the locations, or just start exploring. *Until 5 February, across Brussels; free*

\ [visit.brussels](http://visit.brussels)

### Family Skating

On Sunday mornings, parents can go ice skating with their kids for a special family price that includes skate rental. Sleds are allowed on the ice, too! Afterwards, enjoy a free drink in the cafeteria. *Until 21 May, Sport Vlaanderen Liedekerke, Sportlaan 1, Liedekerke; €17*

\ [tinyurl.com/familyskating](http://tinyurl.com/familyskating)

# Building blocks

## Lunch with an Architect discusses quality of architecture in Brussels



Laurens Bouckaert

More articles by Laurens \ [flanderstoday.eu](http://flanderstoday.eu)

\ [LUNCHWITHANARCHITECT.BE](http://LUNCHWITHANARCHITECT.BE)

Despite its name, Lunch with an Architect has little to do with the conventional midday meal. The series, which began in 2015 in Brussels, is actually a two-hour conference by a renowned architect, organised around noon. (But don't worry: a meal, albeit a small one, is provided.)

Taking place three times a year, the series is targeted at real estate professionals, architects and academics and aims to be a forum for reflection and discussion on improving the quality of architecture in Brussels. According to its mission statement, it serves as a "window on the major contemporary events in the world of architecture, the more specifically Belgian issues, and the emblematic projects under way". "Through these conferences," explains series founder Kathleen Iweins, "we try to influence both society's and policymakers' views on architecture." By working closely with the arts centre Flagey, the architecture faculty at La Cambre Horta and the City of Brussels, she continues, "we can arrange meetings between architects and future policymakers".

Before last year's conference with the Norwegian collaborative workshop Snøhetta, for example, Iweins organised a meeting between the Norwegian architects and the cabinet of Brussels minister-president Rudi Vervoort. The group visited the empty Citroën garage, which is going to be repurposed as a museum of modern arts.

Iweins, who studied economics at the University of Leuven, previously worked for *De Tijd* and the Boston Consulting Group, before transitioning to real estate. With her business partner, Nathalie Saverys, she started the public relations agency Forum Press & Communication in 2006. The agency's first series of lectures, called Buildreen, focused on sustainable construction and ran from 2007 to 2014.

Lunch with an Architect's next guest speaker is the expressive-minimalist Manuel Aires Mateus, one of the two brothers behind the Lisbon-based Aires Mateus studio. In Belgium, the Portuguese architect is best known for designing the University of Architecture in Tournai. He is also behind the Olivier-Debré contemporary arts centre in Tours, France. "His studio has its own distinct style and places high value on simplicity and purity," says Iweins.



© Courtesy Lunch with an Architect

Xaveer De Geyter of the Brussels-based XDGA architecture firm leads a previous session of Lunch with an Architect

Like Aires Mateus, the previous guests are all internationally renowned. "The whole concept is based around international architects who design buildings all over the world, fitting with a global profile" of the project, explains Iweins.

“We try to influence both society's and policymakers' views on architecture

In addition to Snøhetta, represented by Jenny Osuldsen, previous speakers include Japanese architect (and prolific writer) Kengo Kuma, Xaveer De Geyter of the Brussels-based XDGA and Winy Maas of the Dutch studio MVRDV.

Who else is the series hoping to profile? "That has got to be the Paris-based Lacaton & Vassal," says Iweins. "They have a brilliant concept for social housing, one that is actually attainable in Brussels. They always reuse existing buildings and constructions, and in most cases add gardens. That would be great for the social housing blocks in the Brussels-Capital Region." In Bordeaux, for example, the studio refurbished 530 apartment units, equipping the tower blocks with winter gardens and generous balconies.

That choice demonstrates the social spirit behind the Lunch with an Architect. If anything, says Iweins, architecture has an important social role to play in cities of the future, and it could prove to be a solution to many of Brussels' problems.

23 January 12.00-14.00

Flagey  
Heilig-Kruisplein, Brussels

## BITE

## Momo brings Tibetan dumplings to Brussels

The name says it all: the menu at Momo revolves completely around one signature dish – momos, the Tibetan take on dumplings. Opened three years ago, the unassuming but friendly Brussels eatery has become a bit of an institution as one of Elsene's major lunch bars, attracting an international crowd that appreciates the healthy, authentic and vegetarian-friendly dish.

The place is run by Lhamo, a 39-year-old daughter of Tibetan exiles. A former political scientist, she left office life behind to open her own business without any prior experience in the restaurant industry.

About to open a second branch in Sint-Gillis, Lhamo is driven by the idea to introduce Brussels to the delicious speciality from her home country, which she prepares just the way her family taught her growing up.

"I don't think there's a single Tibetan who doesn't know how to make momos", she says. "Because



© Courtesy Momo

they are not easy to make and it takes quite some time to prepare them, we only make them on special occasions, and then the whole family participates and cooks together. It's an important tradition."

But how are Tibetan dumplings different from, say, a Chinese dumpling? According to Lhamo, the dough is key. "Momos need to be made from wheat flour," she says. "I test a lot of new things

and continuously try to adapt to the taste of my clients, but wheat flour dough is the one thing that's obligatory."

This is also the reason why momos are a bit more filling and heavier than other Asian dumplings – a sort of healthy comfort food, if you will. Characteristic for the Tibetan dish is also a certain restraint when it comes to spices: onions, ginger and salt suffice.

While in Tibet momos are generally filled with meat, Lhamo also serves vegetarian and vegan interpretations, following local demand. "This is probably the biggest adjustment I had to make," she explains. "It's a bit of a fusion between Tibetan and Western cuisine."

At lunch, there's only one option: steamed momos, locally grown organic vegetables and a soup, but the evening menu allows you to discover different variations, from fried dumplings to momo salads, soups and even a dessert version. \ Sarah Schug

\ [MO-MO.EU](http://MO-MO.EU)



# The right trousers

Life-changing accident leads to innovative fashion for wheelchair users



Bartosz Brzezinski  
More articles by Bartosz \ flanderstoday.eu

\ MAKT.BE

When Steven Claeys from Antwerp was paralysed in a road accident in Australia, it prompted him to come up with a line of fashionable, functional clothes that better fit the lives of people in wheelchairs

Steven Claeys often thinks back to the day he found out he would never walk again. "I had just finished the first semester of my master's studies, but I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life," says the 26-year-old. "Applied economics wasn't really my thing, so I decided to put my studies on hold, booked plane tickets and went to Australia for six months."

Hopping trains between cities or cruising along the coast with new friends, he found himself at a small farm south of Brisbane, in the country's east, where he hoped to pick up some extra cash before heading back on the road.

"One evening I was driving a utility vehicle back to the farm when I lost control of the wheel and skidded off the road," he recalls. "It was hours before anyone found me and the rescuers had to call in a helicopter to pull me out."

As he woke up in hospital in Sydney, doctors told him that the injuries he'd sustained had left him paralysed from the chest down, with only limited movement in his arms and hands. "At first, I couldn't even swallow, let alone eat or drink," he says. "Two months passed before I was flown back to Belgium."

His home in Antwerp was fitted with a lift, and as he underwent intensive physical therapy at the university hospital in Ghent, his closest friend began helping him out with basic daily routines.

"But once you regain some of the confidence, you begin looking to the future," Claeys says. "You want to try doing things on your own, like washing yourself, eating, or getting dressed."

That last aspect was especially important to him. Growing up with three sisters, he always had to look great. As a student, he usually wore a blazer and a tie, or even a full suit.

But all that changed when he found himself confined to a wheelchair. "Now, whenever I went out, I had to wear trousers that were either way too big and ugly or very uncomfortable, if not outright painful."

He asked his therapist about wheelchair-adapted clothing, but the trousers "looked like they were made for old people, with these bulky cargo pockets and boring design," he says. "On top of that, they were made of synthetic fabric that wasn't even stitched right and had these huge seams on the back – a recipe for pressure sores."



Injuries from a serious accident prompted Steven Claeys to create a line of fashionable, functional clothes for people in wheelchairs

Encouraged by his family and friends, he decided to make his own. In February 2015, family friends introduced him to Mira Sohlen, a fashion designer from Sweden. "I told her about my situation and what I was hoping to achieve, and she said, 'You know what, why don't we give it a go?'"

From the get-go, he didn't want to compromise on look or comfort. The goal was to make clothing that would be both stylish and empowering. The trousers couldn't be practical but ugly, or the other way around.

The slim-fit design they came up with features extended trouser legs and a higher back, and the cotton, interwoven with elastic Lycra fibres, protects from skin damage and pressure sores. And on the back, Claeys did away with conventional seams and added horizontal pullers for putting the

trousers on.

"It's a balance between looks and comfort," he says. "Having something nice on might give you the confidence needed to step outside the house and make you feel like your bum isn't aching all the time." In addition to raised side seams and an angled

pocket for easy access, there is also a magnetic closure instead of buttons.

"That was a stroke of genius from Mira," Claeys says with a smile. "Or maybe it was me. I want to say it was me, but I don't remember." After months of work, and with the first pair ready to try on, he caught himself feeling excited and anxious at the same time. "When

you're in the position I'm in, you often ask yourself, 'Is this even possible anymore? Will I ever be able to brush my own teeth, eat with a fork, get dressed?'"

Anticipation growing, he struggled to pull up the trouser legs. When he finally got back into the wheelchair, he let out a cry and smiled.

"I rushed over to the mirror to make sure I wasn't just imagining it. I mean it's so difficult to look at yourself in a wheelchair and think that you look nice, but in that moment, sitting in front of the mirror, yeah, I kind of loved myself again."

He shared the experience on his blog and the response from his followers encouraged him to make the same trousers for others. Last year, he founded Makt.

In December, the start-up raised more than €10,000 on Indiegogo, and Claeys aims to deliver the first trousers to his backers by April. With interest from all over the world, he's already planning to launch an online shop and hopes to one day equip the trousers with sensors and heat-absorbing material. He's also looking into a line of adapted clothing for women, with the help of Julia Gerasko, a Flemish designer who specialises in manufacturing.

In retrospect, he has no regrets about going to Australia.

"People always say to me, 'Stephen, thank God you didn't die'. I don't play the 'what if' games any more, but in that moment, I knew my life was over and I would have to start a new one," he says. "Things happened the way they were supposed to happen, and I could only do one of two things – either feel sorry for myself and give up, or try to make the best of it."

In a way, he adds, "I'm in a much better place than before the accident. Back then I wasn't sure who I was and what I wanted in life, but now, now I'm crystal clear."



## WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

Antwaerps  
Bierhuyske to close

The famous beer bar 't Antwaerps Bierhuyske will close in July, as the owner of the building, the Fakkelteater, decided not to renew the lease. The theatre intends to install a new ticket office on the premises. The bar is a place of pilgrimage for lovers of Belgian beer from around the world, with more than 300 beers on the menu, including some rarities. It was voted Beer Cafe of the Year in its first year in 2010 by an American beer site, and in 2014 was voted best geuze-lambic cafe in the country.

Rock Werchter is  
best festival

Flanders' two biggest summer music festivals, Rock Werchter and Pukkelpop, were among the winners at the European Festival Awards in Groningen, the Netherlands, last week. Rock Werchter was named Best Major Festival of 2016, while Pukkelpop won the Brand Activation award, given for creative sponsoring activity with its Baraque Futur smart energy installation. The stage dedicated not to music but to talks, debates and workshops on the future, generates green energy with solar panels, a wind turbine, plant power and battery packs.

New Van Dyck  
acquisition for Antwerp

A portrait by Flemish Baroque painter Anthony Van Dyck has a new home in the Royal Museum of Fine Arts Antwerp, after it was acquired by the Flemish Community's major artworks acquisition fund, culture minister Sven Gatz announced last week. The work, "Study of an Old Man with a Beard in Left Profile" (pictured) was painted by Van Dyck when he was 20 years old and working in Rubens' studio. It was obtained from a private collector in France for €234,000.



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# Where did you go?

Ghent exhibition on the history of adoption offers sobering wake-up call



Sally Tipper

More articles by Sally \ flanderstoday.eu

\ MUSEUMDRGUISLAIN.BE

Illustrated with archive material, paintings, video and comic prints, *Adoption: Between Adventure and Misadventure* is a small but affecting exhibition at Museum Dr Guislain in Ghent.

What do the following have in common? Spider-Man. Mowgli. Oliver Twist. Tarzan. Superman. Harry Potter. Moses. Paddington Bear.

All were raised by people other than their birth parents, and many of them have special powers that set them apart – a common theme in culture down the years. And it's the starting point for the latest exhibition at Ghent's Museum Dr Guislain, a show that aligns with the institution's continuing focus on identity, trauma and being an outsider.

"When we started out, we didn't really realise how many of these characters had an adoption background," says curator Sarah Van Bouchaute. "And they're not obscure, they're part of mainstream culture."

*Adoption: Between Adventure and Misadventure* takes this cultural fascination and uses it to explore adoption more generally. How do adoption practices evolve? Are the interests of the child, the would-be parents or society at the centre? How do we handle the traumas resulting from forced adoption? In November 2015, the Flemish parliament publicly apologised to the victims of forced adoptions carried out between the 1950s and the 1980s. A panel of experts produced a report, which among its observations said that Museum Dr Guislain would be a suitable location for an exhibition about the theme in its historical, societal and cultural context.

Using paintings, photography, video, archive documents and comic prints, the result is a small but affecting exhibition. It begins with an early 20th-century portrait of a mother with her baby by Ghent-born Jenny Montigny. "Montigny was unmarried and had no children, but she painted a lot of mother-and-child portraits. We show it at the beginning because it's a kind of idealised image of



© Benoit Lapray

Orphaned fictional characters often have magical powers, a starting point for discussions on identity, trauma and being an outsider

how a woman should be," Van Bouchaute explains. "A mother, married, taking care of children." It's a societal standard that has seen unmarried women over the years forced to give up their children or face a life lived in shame. And the most moving part of the exhibition is a selection of archive documents concerning such women and their babies.

There's a letter from one of those children, now an adult living in America and seeking information from the institution where his mother gave birth, exiled from her family. A solicitor's firm in Liverpool writes on behalf of a mother sent to give birth alone in Belgium, who signed her baby away without being told what was happening to her.

In another letter, an Indian agency responds to a girl's request for information about her birth mother, politely but firmly advising her not to disrupt the woman's new life.

Glaringly absent throughout this section are the fathers. While it takes two to tango, the inconvenient results have always been something for women to face alone.

There are documents from insti-

tutions for unmarried mothers in the 1950s to '80s, which women had to sign when they decided to give their children up. "You can see they're pre-printed, standardised forms; it clearly happened a lot," says Van Bouchaute.

"Sometimes it was with the mother's permission, but often not," she continues. "It might be the deci-

sion of the nuns, or the family, or a judge, or because a woman couldn't see how she could raise a child alone. It was totally taboo and totally shameful, and women were left with no choice."

The texts are watched over by a sombre painting by French artist Edouard Gelhay, depicting a woman handing her baby over to



© Edouard Gelhay

Many unmarried girls and women were forced to give up their babies, even up to the 1980s

Until 16 April

Museum Dr Guislain  
Jozef Guislainstraat 43, Ghent

an agency. Her face isn't visible, but it's easy to read the desperation in her body language.

A register from such an agency in the mid-1800s lists details of the children left in its care, including scraps of fabric taken from the clothes they were wearing at the time, and, in one case, even a letter from a woman to the child she was forced to give up.

"It's very painful to leave you," she writes, "but I hope you find good parents and I hope to meet you again one day." It remained in the archives, and it's unlikely the child ever saw it.

In Antwerp today there is still a "foundling drawer", where women can leave their babies anonymously. "There is a debate – should we install more of these facilities or should we stop? It really feels medieval, but it still exists," says Van Bouchaute. "It's only very recently that the mindset around unmarried mothers has started to change."

While there has been a certain amount of societal progress, it's far from universal, and some of the stories told through these documents feel uncomfortably recent. Other exhibits include a striking photo of dozens of babies in boxes, strapped into aeroplane seats as they are evacuated to America and Europe during the Vietnam War; and images of children in one of Belgium's Lebensborn institutions, housing "designer babies" conceived by German soldiers and local women and later given up out of shame by their adopted parents. There is a collection of original drawings from comic strips from Belgium and elsewhere, featuring orphaned and abandoned characters – Suske, Largo Winch, Thorgal – and images of superheroes in desolate landscapes, emphasising their loneliness and outsider status.

Then there's the issue of Belgium's colonial past, with the children of white men and Congolese women left in limbo in a strictly segregated society. And, finally, a contemporary film featuring people with personal experience of adoption, whether as a child seeking their "true" identity or as parents desperate for a child of their own.

## Two new cinema spaces open in Leuven

Anyone who thinks cinemas are on their way out doesn't live in Leuven. The city's popular Cinema Zed, located at the Stuk arts centre, has opened two new cinema spaces at the Vesaliussite, a new shopping and residential centre in the south-east of the city centre. Both cine-

mas are on a floor under street level, together with a new auditorium owned by the University of Leuven.

Cinema Zed Stuk has just 96 seats and is often sold out as a result. A single-screen cinema, it only has the capacity to programme two

films at a time. The two new spaces at Cinema Zed Vesalius seat 215 in total and have programmed six to 10 films a day.

The cinemas opened to the public last week with the premiere of the heralded film *La La Land* by Damien Chazelle (*Whiplash*), which has just

won seven Golden Globe awards. The opening celebration continues all month with a slew of new avant-premieres, including Kenneth Lonergan's *Manchester by the Sea*, starring Michelle Williams and Casey Affleck, and the much-anticipated *Jackie*, starring Natalie Port-

man as Jacqueline Kennedy in the days following the assassination of her husband, president John F. Kennedy, in 1960s Texas.

Both cinema locations are managed by the non-profit Fonk, which also runs the Leuven Short Film Festival and Docville. \ Lisa Bradshaw

\ CINEMAZED.BE

# Till divorce us do part

New work by stage director Valentijn Dhaenens explores age-old quarrels



Tom Peeters  
More articles by Tom \ flanderstoday.eu

\ KVS.BE

*Domestica* brings to the stage a timeless story of marital argument, in a performance that recalls the great poets, classic authors and successful soap operas.

The roots of actor and playwright Valentijn Dhaenens's new play are personal: His parents are divorced. "Just like every third couple," he says. But it still made a lasting impression on him. "I remember the impact their quarrels had on me as a little boy. One of the consequences is that I'm a very poor arguer myself. If someone starts to yell or takes a certain tone, I blow my top."

Dhaenens still blames the situation at home for this fear of conflict. As an actor, he used to focus on the big issues, touring the world with monologues about political speeches and wartime letters for the SKaGeN collective. Now, with *Domestica*, he has found a way to connect personal matter with his professional forte, while staying close to the kind of monologues he performed in *Degrote monD* (Bigmouth) and *De Kleine Oorlog* (Small War).

The biggest change from these monologues is that he needed an antagonist. Read: a wife. That role has been filled by Alejandra Theus, a Flemish actress with Colombian roots who he had known for only a month.

"I was looking for someone with the appeal of Elizabeth Taylor, who could also sing musicals," he says with a smile. After she was approached, Theus travelled to London to see Dhaenens perform the English-language versions of his monologues.

"I was pleasantly surprised," she recalls. For Dhaenens, it was important she saw the mosaic quality of his plays, the way they move intuitively from one scene to another.

The trip was productive, since,



© Danny Willems

*Domestica* has its roots in Valentijn Dhaenens' experiences as a child as his parents divorced

for *Domestica*, the couple had to scroll through myriad texts, from the great history of literature and television drama. It's lucky that fighting couples have always been a safe bet for (screen)writers, from the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare to *Dallas* and reality TV. Dhaenens admits the way Elizabeth Taylor fought her husband, Richard Burton, in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was a guide. But what of the musical skills?

"To reconcile, we always have our main characters sing a cheesy, Disney-style love duet."

These romantic songs are played on piano by a girl on the stage, symbolising the hopes and dreams of a young Dhaenens, sitting on the stairs confronted with his squabbling parents.

"She's hearing these love songs in her head," he says. "To me, the child's perspective is very important. Her world collapses when she sees the love between her parents come to an end. And such experi-

ences will influence her later relationships. Often kids do just the same as their parents, even though they think they are doing the opposite."

Dhaenens and Theus tried to look at marital dispute in literature by wiping out the emotions. "We aren't investigating the cause or reason behind these quarrels," he says. "We focus on the quarrels themselves."

They are trying to discover, he continues, "which arguments and weapons a couple use while arguing, and if this has changed over time. The issues that make us angry or unjustly treated today – are they the same as 200 or 2,000 years ago?"

According to Dhaenens, the answer is "yes". "It sounds strange, but when I noticed the same arguments prevail in all these texts from different eras, I had the feeling we were finally getting somewhere. There aren't so many ways for a man and a woman to really

hurt each other. On a physical level, the man dominates, but the mental aspect is often more important. The psychological terror and humiliation are the worst. Fortunately, they are also the most theatrical."

One consistent theme, from Medea to the latest soap operas, is how children are brought into the row to hurt the partner. And how someone who already has a problem will often take it out on the other party.

"After reading so many dialogues about fighting couples, we recognise the system behind it better," Dhaenens says. "But it's impossible to benefit from it personally. From a distance, looking at your own quarrels, you still look awful because you're not rational at all, certainly when you're in a situation in which you've just been hurt or

are feeling helpless or angry." But after two monologues dealing with conflicts on a worldwide scale, he decided it was important to return to the heart of the matter: Two people who had truly intended to love each other end up unable to understand one another. Dhaenens: "How can you understand the bigger, more complex world conflicts, if you don't even understand how two people fight?" By coincidence, from February, Theus is playing a divorced woman in *Zie mij graag* (Love Me), a new TV sitcom on Eén. "There are indeed some similarities with *Domestica*," she says. "The main character left her husband after he kept cheating on her. But we are not really focusing on the quarrels. It's more of a feel-good series about how she tries to take her life back into her own hands, exploring a new aspect of the single woman's life in each episode."

For instance, trying to find a new partner online, or discovering how it feels when her children spend a week with their dad. She's afraid he'll forget things like their gym bag or to provide clean clothes when the kids have to work in the school garden.

It's the first time Theus has had to play a mother. "I constantly had two 'kids' on the set," she says. "It really helped to feel the helplessness and disappointment mothers feel, and even to understand why quarrels about kids are so intense." She hopes experiences like that will help to introduce real tension on stage, preventing *Domestica* from becoming dull.

The biggest lesson learnt? "You can only hurt what you care about," says Dhaenens. "It's simple: If no one hurts you, you don't exist. I had to get used to that idea, but now I think it's very true."

19-20 January

KVS, Brussels  
Then touring Flanders until 23 March

## MORE PERFORMANCE THIS WEEK

### Na de Repetitie (After the Rehearsal)

STAN

This Ingmar Bergman play was made for TV in 1984. In 2013, STAN's Frank Vercruyssen staged it in French. The new Dutch-language version stars young Dutch actor Tessa Friedrich at Anna, who returns to her theatre following a rehearsal to engage in an unforgettable exchange with the stage director. (In Dutch) 18-21 January, *Nona, Mechelen*

\ stan.be

### Quarter-life Crisis

Xander De Rijcke

The Flemish comedian is slowly approaching his 30th birthday and wonders in his new comedy show if he has really grown into an adult, or if it's just another one of his crazy ideas. You can check out his last show on YouTube. (In Dutch) 20 January, *CC De Werf, Alost*; 21 January, *CC Palethe, Overpelt*; across Flanders until 12 May

\ xanderderijcke.be

### Say No! The Deserters' Song

Brussels choir Brecht-Eislerkoor asked video director Jan Vromman to compile an afternoon with choirs from all over the world. Based on a new contemporary deserters' song by Dick van der Harst and Elvis Peeters, it (re)launches desertion as a relevant topic in modern-day society (pictured). (In English) 22 January, *Kaaithheater, Brussels*

\ kaaithheater.be



© Heleen Declercq



Live from the living room...

# Chambres d'O

27-29 January Across Ostend,  
CHAMBRESDOHUISKAMERFESTIVAL.BE

The citizens of Ostend show their hospitality every last weekend of January. Hosting a whole range of music, literature, dance and theatre in their own living rooms, they invite visitors to get up close and personal with the performers in the small-scale and intimate settings. A film programme has been added this year. Residents' own TV sets will screen movies related to the sea, like *Moby Dick* and *The Old Man and the Sea*. Music fans can choose among concerts by Flemish singer-songwriter Anton Walgrave, American jazz pianist



Craig Taborn and BeraadGeslagen, the local avant-pop improv duo uniting Fulco Ottervanger and Lander Gyselinck. Quite a few of the scheduled performances are in English, such as *Short of Lying*, a sharp commentary about entertaining but unreliable narrators by the Ghent-based Brazilian storyteller Luanda Casella. In *Exit/Rabbit Hole* dancer Tijen Lawton of Needcompany escapes into a short movie that serves as a parallel world. Literature is another highlight of Chambres d'O. Devoted readers can discuss the latest books by

Flemish writers Annelies Verbeke and Jeroen Olyslaegers in the presence of the authors, while Peter Holvoet-Hanssen and Stijn Vrancken will be combining high tea and poetry. The organising Kunstvaarders connects the newly formed Kaap arts centre, summer theatre festival Taz, Mu.Zee museum, cultural hotspot De Grote Post and the Ostend Film Festival. De Kunst-academie aan Zee is the meeting point here, offering workshops, small-scale exhibitions, a dedicated children's programme and a party on Saturday night.  
\ Tom Peeters

## CLASSICAL

### Bach Academie Brugge

Until 22 January Concertgebouw, Bruges  
CONCERTGEBOW.BE

Every year Bruges celebrates the life and work of Johann Sebastian Bach with a festival featuring dozens of performances and lectures. This edition focuses on the role of music in the political and religious upheavals of the Reformation, which began exactly 500 years ago. The movement's chief instigator, Martin Luther, was a believer in the power of

music to spread his ideas and tighten community bonds. Bach himself was a Lutheran who put those principles into action. Festival performers include young lute prodigy Thomas Dunford, Russian pianist Olga Pashchenko and the Collegium Vocale Gent, a local choir conducted by Bach expert Philippe Herreweghe.  
\ George Valentino



## FAIR

### Brafa

21-29 January Tour & Taxis, Brussels  
BRAFA.ART

The Brussels Antiques and Fine Art Fair (Brafa) marks its 62nd edition. Inaugurated in 1956, the event has grown into one of the art and antique fairs in the world, attracting more than 50,000 visitors annually. Dealers come from all over Europe, North America and Japan to show some 10,000 to 15,000 objects. Collectors will find pre-



Colombian and contemporary tribal art as well as antiques from around the world. There's also a healthy selection of modern art ranging from paintings to sculptures to photographs to objects. All objects are vetted by Brafa's team of 100 experts.  
\ GV

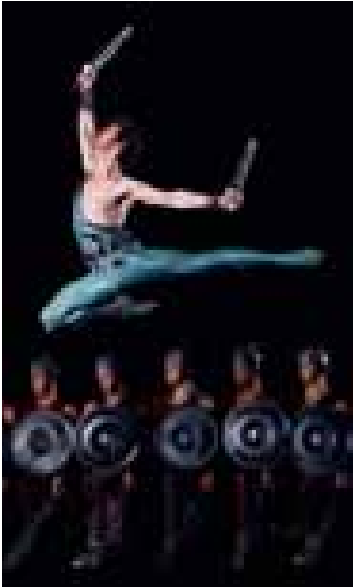
## DANCE

### Spartacus

27 January to 5 February Stadsschouwburg, Antwerp  
OPERABALLET.BE

On the occasion of Yuri Grigorovich's 90th birthday, the Royal Ballet of Flanders stages the Russian choreographer's 1968 *Spartacus*. Grigorovich's reimagining of the Roman legend, in which the defiant slave challenges Emperor Crassus, was an allegory of the class struggle as conceived by the philosopher-technocrats of the USSR. Indeed, the production was conceived to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the October Revolution that founded the Soviet Union. The themes of freedom and equality remain as relevant as ever, and Grigorovich's masterpiece retains its majesty long after the political system it glorified came to an end.  
\ GV

© Altin Kaftira



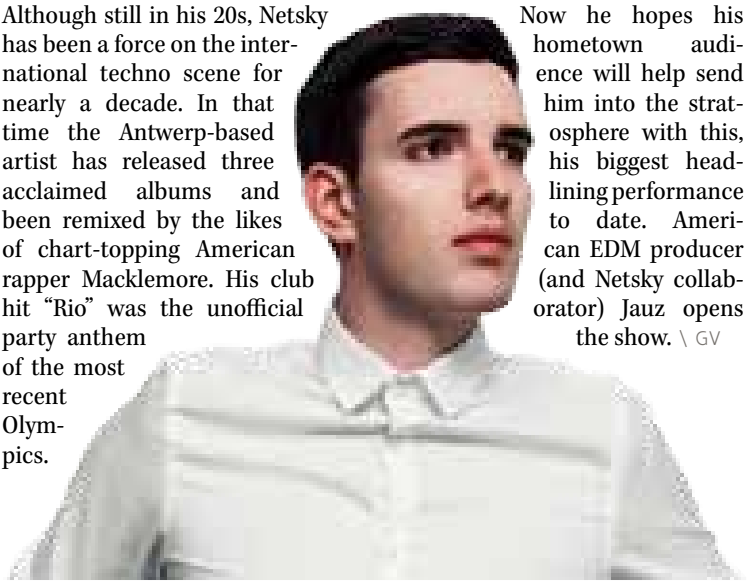
## CONCERT

### Netsky

25 February, 18.30 Sportpaleis, Antwerp  
SPORTPALEIS.BE

Although still in his 20s, Netsky has been a force on the international techno scene for nearly a decade. In that time the Antwerp-based artist has released three acclaimed albums and been remixed by the likes of chart-topping American rapper Macklemore. His club hit "Rio" was the unofficial party anthem of the most recent Olympics.

GET TICKETS NOW



Now he hopes his hometown audience will help send him into the stratosphere with this, his biggest headlining performance to date. American EDM producer (and Netsky collaborator) Jauz opens the show.  
\ GV

## THEATRE

### Brussels

**Say No!:** Poet Elvis Peeters, composer Dick van der Harst and choir Brecht-Eislerkoor subvert the First World War centennial with this multimedia performance about army deserters and conscientious objectors. 22 January 15.00, Kaaitheater, Sainctelette-square 20  
\ kaaitheater.be

## VISUAL ARTS

### Antwerp

**Dr Hugo Heyrman: Transparency of Time:** Pioneering Flemish contemporary artist and scientist's 13th solo exhibition at De Zwarte Panter explores human perception through artistic form. Until 12 March, De Zwarte Panter, Hoogstraat 70  
\ dezwartepanter.com

GET TICKETS NOW

## CONCERT

### Across Flanders

**Natalia:** The Flemish pop diva celebrates the deluxe edition of her latest album, *In My Blood*, with a tour of Hasselt Antwerp and Ghent. 19-20 May, 30 June  
\ sportpaleisgroep.be

### Ghent

**Cécile McLorin Slavant:** Haitian-American star performs songs from her Grammy Award-winning 2016 album *For One to Love*, accompanied by frequent collaborators the Aaron Diehl Trio. 25 January 20.15, Handelsbeurs, Kouter 29  
\ handelsbeurs.be

## FILM

### Brussels

**Ukraine on Film:** Weekend festival celebrates Ukrainian cinema with four new, award-winning features as well as a screening of Oleksandr Dovzhenko's 1930 avant-garde masterpiece *Earth*, with live soundtrack by Ukrainian ethno-chaos quartet DakhaBrakha. 20-22 January, Bozar, Ravensteinstraat 23  
\ bozar.be

## EVENT

### Ghent

**The Druids, Who Know, See and Hear Nothing:** A marathon seven-hour performance combines the complete projection of Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation's Slow TV documentary *Bergen Line* (a real-time train ride from Bergen to Oslo), accompanied by a live, experimental soundtrack. 21 January 17.00, De Bijloke, Jozef Kluyskensstraat 2  
\ bijloke.be

# Talking Dutch

## It's a dog's life



Derek Blyth  
More articles by Derek \ flanderstoday.eu

\ SNUFFLE-DOGBEER.COM

No, I thought. This must be a joke. *Honden krijgen frietjes voor bij hun pintje* – Dogs get fries to go with their beer, it said in *Het Laatste Nieuws*.

But it was true. *Binnenkort kan u naast een frikandel* – Soon you will be able to order, along with your fricandel (a fried meat product sold in Belgian snack bars), *een zakje 'doggy fries' bestellen* – a portion of doggy fries.

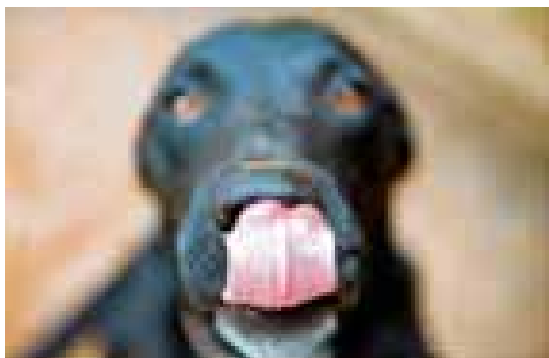
The Flemish company Happy Animal Planet, which already sells a "dog beer" called Snuffle, plans to launch doggy fries next month. But they're not the same as the snacks sold at your local *frituur*.

*De frietjes hebben amper 0,8 procent vetgehalte* – The fries have a mere 0.8% fat content *en zijn gemaakt van aardappel en maïs* – and are made from potatoes and corn, explains sales manager Stefaan Dielens. *Een friteuse en een pot mayonaise komen er niet aan te pas* – There's no need for a deep fat fryer or a pot of mayonnaise.

But don't get the wrong idea. *De dagelijkse portie hondenbrokken vervangen door friet is niet de bedoeling* – It doesn't mean you can replace the daily portion of dog food with fries.

The company plans to sell doggy fries in supermarkets, as well as in bars. *Hondenfrietjes zijn perfect om aan je viervoeter te geven na een wandeling* – Doggy fries are the perfect snack to give your four-legged friend at the end of a walk, Dielens claims.

Before you start to mock, just take a look at the international sales figures for Snuffle dog beer. *In Engeland zijn ze er dol op* – They are mad about it in England, Dielens says. *Daar alleen al leverde ik de voorbije anderhalve maand 100.000 flesjes hondenbier* – I've already



© Ingimage

delivered 100,000 bottles of dog beer in the past month and a half to England alone.

Snuffle sales shot up after Dielens launched his exclusive beer on social media. *Een YouTube-filmpje dat hij lanceerde om zijn Snuffle Dog Beer in de kijker te zetten* – A YouTube video that he created to promote his Snuffle Dog Beer *werd opgepikt door enkele populaire Britse websites* – was picked up by several popular British websites.

*Dankzij The Lad Bible* – Thanks to the Lad Bible (a website aimed at young men) *ging het meteen viral* – it was an instant viral hit. *Het filmpje werd ondertussen meer dan 8 miljoen keer bekeken* – The video has now been viewed more than eight million times.

*En daarna?* – And what next? asked *Het Laatste Nieuws*. *Brusselse wafels of Luikse stroop voor honden?* – Brussels waffles or Liège syrup for dogs? *Een kattenwijn misschien, wie weet* – Maybe a wine for cats, who knows, replied Dielens. *Ik heb nog massa's ideeën* – I still have plenty of ideas.

## PHOTO OF THE WEEK



© REUTERS/Yves Herman

**WALK ON THE WILD SIDE** Waves crash against a dam in Ostend as storm winds cross the country at the weekend. The harsh weather is expected to continue for several days

## VOICES OF FLANDERS TODAY



In response to: Old-school glamour at new-look Café Metropole

**Sue Wolfe:** Orla, we are going here when you get back from Ireland!!



In response to: Angela Merkel receives honorary doctorate from Flemish universities

**Agora Praag:** Angela Merkel: respect!



In response to: Music makes chocolate taste even sweeter  
Turn the volume up!



**Groove In The Heart @Tigrib29**

Ah wow! I have very fond memories of #Ghent. I studied there for a year... a long time ago 😊



**Ally McCabe @ally\_mccabe\_**

Today I ran into Bruno Pieters in his Honest By. shop in Antwerp and I can't even wrap my head around it



**Sophie Serraris @Sophie\_iMuseum**

Good things happen over lemonade #museumcafe  
@M\_Museum #Leuven



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## THE LAST WORD

### Tents situation

"It's harder than scoring tickets for Tomorrowland."

Parents like one unnamed father are signing up in the thousands to book their kids into summer camps run by Kazou, the youth service department of the Christian Mutualiteit

### Jail bird

"Let them throw me in jail. I'd quite like to find out what that's like."

A 90-year-old woman in East Flanders faces charges of allegedly laundering €12.3 million in undeclared income

### Blown away

"We've more or less lost our beach."

Steve Vandenberghe, mayor of Bredene, after Superstorm Dieter swept away hundreds of thousands of tonnes of sand along the coast last weekend

### Tough love

"After one night, the affection for Jef has disappeared. I no longer see him as a harbinger of my own future, but just as an annoying lump of plastic."

*Het Nieuwsblad* reporter Kim Clemens spent 24 hours with the Real Care Baby, a robot developed to train expectant parents, and was homicidal halfway through



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