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A record three Belgian sides are still in the Europa League's final 16, with KAA Gent and KRC Genk drawn against each other



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AN OPEN BOOK
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Kid power

Flanders' children's rights commissioner on breaking the cycle of poverty

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

With a new book, Flanders' children's rights commissioner, Bruno Vanobbergen, lays out a plan for addressing rising poverty among the youngest and most vulnerable members of society.

When Bruno Vanobbergen wrote his new book, he wasn't thinking of winter at all. Instead, with *Spelen in zwarte sneeuw* (Playing in Black Snow), the children's rights commissioner set out to tackle one of the most pressing issues of our time.

Over the course of the book, Vanobbergen outlines the challenges to fighting child poverty in Flanders. The "fragile manifesto", as he calls it, urges the government not to promote individual responsibility and self-reliance as the solutions, but to take a structural approach.

The office of the children's rights commission is an independent body set up by the Flemish Parliament in 1997 to oversee the application of the UN convention on the rights of the child. The commissioner also represents children's rights within the general public, examines government legislation and deals with complaints about breaches.

Vanobbergen has held the position since 2009. The reason he wrote the book, he says, is that the problem of children living in poverty keeps getting worse. About one in five children in Belgium lives in poverty, and the percentage of children born every year into a disadvantaged family has risen from 6.4% in 2004 to 12% in 2015.

Children from large or single-parent families, or whose parents are foreign-born, unemployed or low-educated, are at the highest risk of falling into poverty. "When Belgium

held the rotating presidency of the European Council in 2010, child poverty was a hot topic and plans were made to significantly decrease its prevalence," says Vanobbergen. "It's very worrying to see that we have made no progress to achieve that goal since then. On the contrary."

The second reason, he says, is that children and parents who live in poverty are framed as the innocent victims and the guilty perpetrators, respectively. "Children, of course, have a very active role, and many factors can prevent parents from escaping financial troubles."

He offers the example of a child who discovered where her mother kept her financial records and checked them regularly to see whether or not it was a good time to ask her for new clothes. The book also points out that children provide their parents with both emotional and practical support,

Repairs begin on beaches

Crews begin replacing sand washed away by January storm



Alan Hope
Follow Alan on Twitter \ @AlanHopeFT

Work has started in Knokke-Heist to repair damage to beaches caused by a severe storm in January, public works minister Ben Weyts has announced. The repairs are expected to cost €17 million. The storm was anticipated for days in advance, and precautions were taken to limit flooding on the seafront. In the end, the storm, nicknamed Dieter, was less severe on land than expected but caused a great deal of damage to beaches. High seas and strong winds caused large quantities of sand to be washed away, in some places leaving behind a sort of cliff in the sand up to several metres high. “Dieter displaced more than 1.25 million tonnes of sand,” said Weyts, who was in Knokke to observe the start of the works. “We started planning how to repair the damage immediately after.” In Knokke, some 300,000 cubic metres of sand from the sea bottom will be sprayed



© Courtesy De Standaard

over two kilometres of beach to replace sand that was washed away. Later, works will move south to De Haan, Bredene and Middelkerke.

The intention is to complete repairs by mid-April. The Easter school holiday starts on 1 April, but Weyts stressed there would be no disruption to tourists.

Gent and Genk to face off in Europa League

At least one Flemish side will be in the quarter-finals of the Europa League, after Gent and Genk were drawn against each other in the last 16. With Anderlecht also having qualified, it means a record three Belgian sides are still in the competition. Gent secured their place after a hard-fought aggregate victory over Tottenham Hotspur, holding the current English Premier League runners-up 2-2 in the away leg at Wembley last Thursday. The match was played in front of a Europa League record crowd of 80,465.

Their 1-0 victory the week before at the Ghelamco Arena meant the Buffaloes went through: a stunning result for a side that won its first and so far only title in 2015. Genk, meanwhile, secured a relatively routine victory over Romanian champions Astra Giurgiu, with a 1-0 win in the Cristal Arena, a week after a 2-2 draw in Giurgiu. Anderlecht endured a difficult tie against Russia's Zenit St Petersburg, where Bruges-born Nicolas Lombaerts plays as centre-back. They lost 3-1 in the away game at the

Krestovsky Stadium, but went through on the away goals rule after winning the home match 2-0. Their next opponents, Cyprus's most successful side, Apoel Nicosia, are unlikely to present a threat, despite their impressive second-round win over Athletic Bilbao. The ties will be played on March 9 and 16. Anderlecht are currently second in the Jupiler Pro League, level on points with Club Brugge. Genk and Genk are in seventh and eighth place respectively. \ Leo Cendrowicz

Trees lining Damse Vaart declared a monument

The twin row of poplar trees lining the Damse Vaart in West Flanders has been listed as a monument, Flemish minister-president Geert Bourgeois announced. The Damse Vaart is a stretch of canal about 15 kilometres long running from Bruges to Sluis in the Netherlands. “They provide what is a characteristic image of the Flemish landscape,” said Bourgeois. “The mirroring of the trees in the canal and the straight line of the canal banks complete an idyllic tableau.” \ AH



© Dirk Waem/BELGA
Jan Jacobs during his 28th appearance in court in the interest of his son, who died in a Mortsel cell seven years ago

Tougher sentences for police on appeal in Jonathan Jacob death

Seven members of Antwerp's special intervention squad (BBT) have had their appeal against a conviction for involuntary homicide rejected by the court of appeal. Six of the men were given suspended sentences of six months, while the leader of the squad was given nine months suspended. The sentences are higher on appeal than the four months handed down initially. The case dates back to 2010, when 26-year-old Jonathan Jacob was picked up by police in Mortsel. Jacob was having a psychotic episode brought on by amphetamines. He was taken to a psychiatric institution in Boechout but was refused entry because he was too aggressive. He then spent a day in a police cell in Mortsel, but his condition did not improve. When a doctor arrived to administer a sedative, the intervention squad was called to remove him from the cell. Nine members of the squad used force to restrain him, which led to Jacob's death. Two lower courts found the police guilty, and the final appeal has confirmed those verdicts. In addition, the former director of the Boechout institution and its chief psychiatrist were found guilty of negligence, and each was sentenced to six months suspended. One member of the BBT and the chief of police in Mortsel had been acquitted in first instance. Jacob's father (*pictured*), whose efforts were instrumental in the outcome of the case, expressed relief at the ruling. “I'm coming to court for the 28th time,” he said. “That's a burden on your health and your family life. I hope we can now put it all behind us.” The police officers found guilty are currently on active duty. A decision on their future will be taken after Antwerp police have studied the judgement, a spokesperson said. The BBT in Antwerp will be dissolved next year and team members transferred to the special interventions department of the federal police. \ AH

€500



maximum costs a bank may charge for the administration of a mortgage, in a measure introduced by consumer affairs minister Kris Peeters, which comes into force on 1 April



1,132kg

of heroin discovered in a container in the port of Antwerp, a record for Belgium, with an estimated street value of €68 million. Six Dutch men have been arrested



deadline for all homes in Flanders to be fitted with smoke alarms, after the Flemish parliament approved the measure unanimously. Only 43% of homes are equipped at present



€2,500

fine for Canvas for product placement during *Herfstbeelden*, a series of picturesque photographs broadcast between programmes. The photos included publicity for two local businesses

1,194



crowdfunding projects launched in Belgium in 2016, compared to 423 the year before, for a value of nearly €30 million. The amount raised in 2015 was €10.2 million

WEEK IN BRIEF

The Hallepoort tunnel in Brussels, between Louiza and South Station, will be **closed for works for three weeks**, day and night, so workers can remove asbestos. Later, five phases of renovation will follow until March 2018, with delays to traffic expected.

Unia, the interfederal centre for equal opportunities, handled 20% more cases of **discrimination, hate speech and hate crimes** last year than in 2015, with the biggest increase concerning discrimination against people with a handicap, especially in the workplace. There were 106 such cases, an increase of more than 120% on 2015.

The production of a Second World War musical called *40-45* by Studio 100 and logistics company Katoen Natie could be at risk after the Flemish government’s safety agency advised against granting a permit to build the hangar where the production is to take place. It said that the building on land in Beveren owned by Katoen Natie is **too close to several chemical plants** subject to strict safety rules. The advice is not binding on the municipality of Beveren, which handles permit applications.

The secretary of state for animal welfare in the Brussels regional government, Bianca Debaets, has approved a resolution **banning force-feeding of animals to produce foie gras**, which she said was “tantamount to torture”. At present, no production facilities in the region employ this method.

Police have received more than 40 tips from the public after VTM broadcast a montage of security footage showing **the last hours of 27-year-old Sofie Muylle**, shortly before she was found murdered on the beach in Knokke last month. Police, who provided the footage, say it indicates at least 10 people

crossed her path on that evening, one or more of whom may have witnessed something important.

King Filip **visited the Flemish parliament** last week, the first time a sovereign has visited the institution since 1998, when his father, Albert II, was on the throne. The king expressed a particular interest in education policy – his children attend Dutch-speaking schools – and was fully briefed on the subject, speaker Jan Peumans said.

Parkkafee, the popular summer bar in the gardens of a private mansion in the Ghent district of Mariakerke, must **close following ongoing complaints** from local residents about noise. The festival, which hosted food, drink and caravans with numerous activities, has been held at the site for 20 years. Despite an earlier closing time and more supervision, the festival failed to satisfy the neighbours.

The emergency personnel who attended the scene of the suicide bombings at Brussels Airport and Maalbeek metro in March last year have been collectively **awarded the title of Brusselaar of the Year** by the newspapers *Vlan* and *Le Soir*. The award was the result of an internet poll and includes ambulance personnel, police, fire service, public transport staff, the Red Cross and the military.

Flemish mobility minister **Ben Weyts spent the night in hospital** last week after becoming unwell in the Flemish parliament. He was examined by doctors on the spot and transferred to hospital for observation. According to his colleagues, he was over-tired. He later tweeted from his hospital bed, “Finally some peace to work on my dossiers.” He left hospital the following day, saying he had no memory of the event. Doctors

diagnosed a condition known as transient global amnesia.

The building that housed De Ultieme Hallucinatie, a renowned Art Nouveau cafe in Brussels designed by Henry Van de Velde, is **up for sale**. It was declared bankrupt last year after being closed from 2009 to 2013. The building, which is listed as a monument and has stained glass, wood carvings and chandeliers, was bought in 2012 by Schaarbeek councillor Sait Köse, who tried to run the cafe but had to give up.

Local police in Belgium are to be **equipped with Tasers**, which deliver an electric shock to suspected offenders. The weapons are described as non-lethal, though a number of people have died as a result of Taser use in the US. The project will begin as a pilot in about 30 zones before being rolled out to all local police.

Federal defence minister Steven Vandeput has denied rumours that there are plans to sell off some of the **collection of the Army Museum** in Brussels’ Jubelpark. Residents of the area had gathered some 10,000 signatures on a petition against the alleged sale. The collection is the property of the federal state, said Vandeput, and, by law, cannot be sold. The museum is to be restructured, however, and will be grouped with other collections in a new War Heritage Institute.

Brussels brewery Brasserie de la Senne has applied for a building **permit for a new brewery and restaurant** close to Tour & Taxis. The brewery, one of only three in Brussels, has outgrown its current premises, a warehouse in Molenbeek. The project forms part of the region’s Canal Plan, which aims to mix housing with offices, commerce and industry. The new brewery is expected to be completed next year.

FACE OF FLANDERS



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Cédric Van Branteghem

Cédric Van Branteghem was the best Flemish sprinter of his generation, and he endeared himself to fans with his dedication and his decency. Now he is hoping to foster future Belgian athletes as the new director of the annual Memorial Van Damme sporting spectacular in Brussels. Van Branteghem, 37, retired from competitive running in 2010, after a distinguished if injury-blighted career. Born in Ghent, he was always a promising talent: He took part in his first European Indoor Championships when he was just 20, running in the 400m. A year later, he became Belgium’s 400m champion, and would add seven more national titles to the list during his athletic career. As a sprinter, his peak was in 2003, when he recorded his personal bests in the 100m (10.54), 200m (20.60) and 400m (45.02). The latter was particularly significant: It was at the Memorial Van Damme that Van Branteghem smashed the Belgian 400m record, which had stood for 27 years. He won the Golden Spike for Belgium’s top male athlete in 2002 and 2003. There were high hopes for the Olympics, but he only reached the 400m semi-finals of the 2004 Athens and the 2008 Beijing games. However, he was part of the Belgian 400m relay team

in Beijing that ran a national record-breaking time of 2.59.37, coming in fifth (upgraded last year to fourth after the Russian team was disqualified). That Belgian relay team was special in another way: It contained the twins Kevin and Jonathan Borlée, who would come to dominate 400m racing in the country. Now joined by younger brother Dylan, their family training methods have become a model for Belgian athletes, and Van Branteghem is expected to build on their success. It was in 2010 that Van Branteghem won his first major medal, with the Borlée twins, as part of the Belgian 400m relay team that took silver at the World Indoor Championships in Doha. His second, a bronze, came in the relay in the European Championships in Barcelona a few weeks later. As he brought his career to a close, he was awarded the prestigious Sports Jewel from the Flemish Community. For the 18 months, he has been the assistant to Wilfried Meert, who co-founded the Memorial Van Damme four decades ago. Announcing his retirement, Meert said that he was, like a relay runner, handing over the baton. \ Leo Cendrowicz

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EDITOR Lisa Bradshaw
DEPUTY EDITOR Sally Tipper
CONTRIBUTING EDITOR Alan Hope
SUB EDITOR Bartosz Brzeziński
AGENDA Robyn Boyle, Georgio Valentino
ART DIRECTOR Paul Van Dooren
PREPRESS Mediahuis AdPro
CONTRIBUTORS Rebecca Benoot, Derek Blyth, Leo Cendrowicz, Sarah Crew, Emma Davis, Paula Dear, Andy Furniere, Lee Gillette, Diana Goodwin, Clodagh Kinsella, Catherine Kusters, Toon Lambrechts, Ian Mundell, Anja Otte, Tom Peeters, Arthur Rubinstein, Senne Starckx, Christophe Verbiest, Denzil Walton
GENERAL MANAGER Hans De Loore
PUBLISHER Mediahuis NV

EDITORIAL ADDRESS
Gossetlaan 30 - 1702 Groot-Bijgaarden
tel 02 467 23 06
flanderstoday@ackroyd.be

SUBSCRIPTIONS
tel 03 560 17 49
subscriptions@ackroyd.be
order online at www.flanderstoday.org

ADVERTISING
02 467 24 37
advertising@ackroyd.be

VERANTWOORDELIJKE UITGEVER
Hans De Loore

OFFSIDE
Here today, gone tomorrow

Marks & Spencer, the iconic department store that expats (and not only the British) yearned for during 14 long years, has announced it will close again, but not before 30 September. The high street chain left Brussels in 2001, taking with it the pork pies and comfy underpants for which it has become famous. It returned to much fanfare in May 2015, the old Nieuwstraat premises traded up to a swish new development on Guldenvlieslaan. It shared a three-store block with Apple and Zara, with apartments on higher floors. But it was not to last. “The shop in Brussels never quite met our



© Altiplan Architects

expectations, and the market offers few opportunities for growth,” according to Amanda Mellor, director of Marks & Spencer Belgium, who last November said the store would close in May or June. The latest news is something

of a stay of execution. The store will remain open until the end of September to allow employees to be retrained for new jobs, and for a new tenant to be found. This, of course, gives expats time to stock up on chicken tikka masala and proper British bacon. Finding a new tenant could be tricky. The store is too big at 5,000 square metres for most retailers, as is the rent of €10 million a year. And a company like Primark, which could fill the space, already has plans to move around the corner on the soon-to-be pedestrianised Elsensesteenweg. \ Alan Hope

5TH COLUMN

Fight or flight

The future of Brussels Airport has been a source of conflict for 20 years and has flared up again. The issue is one of opposing visions, complicated by a complex institutional context. The Brussels-Capital Region has stressed health and environmental protection as arguments against aircraft flying over Brussels when leaving and landing at the airport, located just outside of the capital in Flemish Brabant.

Throughout the world, flight routes avoid the most densely populated areas, the Brussels government argues. For this reason, it has again threatened to fine airlines that do not respect its strict noise regulations.

This has angered the government of Flanders, which stresses the economic benefits of the international airport. Flanders accuses Brussels of recklessness, as it creates uncertainty with the airlines, putting the future of the airport, as well as a great number of jobs, on the line.

Other conflicting visions are institutional. That noise restrictions are regional competences has led to a situation where Brussels can decide on the future of an airport located in Flanders.

To solve this, some parties have suggested that noise restrictions be decided at the federal level. N-VA, on the other hand, has proposed that flight routes should be regionalised, so that every region can decide which areas should be avoided.

All of these are future scenarios, though. At present, Flanders has started a "conflict of interest" against the warnings Brussels has begun issues to airlines. This procedure would put the new noise regulations on hold for 60 days, to allow the regions and the federal government to look for a solution.

However, Brussels refuses to recognise this conflict of interest because Flanders is using it for the second time. Brussels has decided to push through with the warnings – which will later become fines.

Geert Bourgeois (N-VA), the Flemish minister-president, has called Brussels' refusal to play by the rules "an institutional nuclear bomb". The Brussels government accuses the prime minister, Charles Michel (MR), of taking Flanders' side. That brings us to a third complication. Different regions and levels of government also mean different coalitions. The Brussels government is dominated by the French-speaking socialists and Christian-democrats, neither of which are part of the federal government. That this issue should destabilise the federal government suits them fine. \ Anja Otte

Elke Sleurs steps down as equal opportunities secretary

Zuhal Demir takes over federal portfolio, which includes science policy



Alan Hope

More articles by Alan \ flanderstoday.org

Elke Sleurs, secretary of state in the federal government, has stepped down from her post in order to lead the party list for N-VA in Ghent. Elections take place next year, and the list leader of a city's winning party generally becomes its mayor.

Sleurs takes over the role from Siegfried Bracke, who stepped down as list leader following ongoing news regarding politicians' paid board memberships and advisory posts. Bracke, also the speaker of the federal parliament, had been an advisor to telecoms firm Telenet, a role he gave up at the same time.

Sleurs, who was born in Ghent and is a medical doctor, was elected to the Senate in 2010 and to the Flemish parliament four years later. She became secretary of state in the current government handling poverty, equal opportunities, and

science and urban policies.

Sleurs intends to devote herself entirely to her new role in Ghent, she said. "The fraction leadership in Ghent takes up a great deal of time," she said. "There's a lot of work to be done to repair the damage."

New secretary

Zuhal Demir has been appointed by N-VA to replace Sleurs. Demir is from Genk, has Turkish-Kurdish roots and studied law in Leuven, before practising as a specialist in labour law in Antwerp. She was elected in Antwerp in 2010 and again in 2014. Before taking over as equal opportunities minister, she chaired the Flemish government's integration agency.

Demir visited the royal palace last week to take the traditional oath of allegiance. Around her wrist was the red handkerchief that



© Photos courtesy N-VA

Zuhal Demir (left) has replaced her party colleague Elke Sleurs as a secretary of state



her father wore in the mines of Limburg, where he worked after coming to Belgium from Turkey in the 1970s.

"It's our family's good luck token," she said. "My father always said we mustn't forget where we came from."

In the course of her career, Demir

has been given the nickname "Iron Lady", and not only because *demir* means iron in Turkish. She has argued, for example, in favour of limiting the duration of unemployment benefits to encourage people to try harder to find work. She attributes her stances to her own experiences growing up.

Campaign launched to prevent dumping in North Sea

The secretary of state for the North Sea in the federal government is launching an action plan aimed at reducing the amount of waste dumped in the North Sea. Philippe De Backer announced the plan at the opening of the United Nations' #CleanSeas campaign in Bali.

Every year across the world, eight million tonnes of plastic is dumped in the sea, according to the UN. "Belgium is also confronted with the problem," De Backer said. "For example, every kilo of sand contains 150 pieces of plastic."

That plastic does not break down and is often swallowed by fish and seabirds, with fatal results. The animals affected can also become part of the human food supply: mussels feed by filtering seawater, so any plastic they eat – an

average of one piece for every shell – can later be eaten by us.

De Backer is also working closely with fellow minister Christine Marghem, who is in charge of environmental affairs, to come up with an anti-pollution policy. "We are also working with other parties who have an interest in the North Sea," said De Backer. "Abandoned or lost fishing nets, for example, can also cause serious problems. That's why we're getting together with the fishing industry to look at natural, biodegradable alternatives."

Together with the fishing industry, he has launched the Fishing for Litter project, whereby "fishermen, who used to have to throw back any plastic picked up in their nets can now easily gather it and bring it to land". \ AH

Oosterweel compromise could be breakthrough

The activist groups involved in discussions about the Oosterweel connection in Antwerp have expressed their support for a compromise hammered out by the architect brought in by the government to mediate. The three groups – Straten-generaal, Ademloos and Ringland – said the new proposal could be a breakthrough in the long-running conflict.

The Oosterweel connection is intended to close the circle of the Antwerp ring road to allow freight traffic from the left bank of the port to use what would be a new north-western quadrant. This would allow them to head directly north to the Netherlands rather than drive south around the ring, adding to congestion.

In February, mediator Alexander D'Hooghe presented the compro-

mise. The government's current plan for the link would be carried out, but only for local traffic. Heavy traffic heading north or east would use a bypass to the north of the city. "There is enough on the table to come to an agreement between the government and the citizens' organisations," the groups said in a joint statement. "The reassessment of the original route could be the key to a solution that is more than a compromise." The northern bypass, they said, would keep port and through traffic far from the centre of the city.

"Let's keep this dialogue moving forward in the weeks to come," commented Koen Kennis, Antwerp councillor for mobility. "The people of Antwerp deserve a solution that improves mobility and the quality of life in our city." \ AH

Brussels starts handing out warnings for aircraft noise

The debate on aircraft noise over the Brussels-Capital Region continued last week, as Brussels went ahead to issue warnings to airlines exceeding the strict new limits in defiance of a conflict of interest claim filed by the Flemish Community. A conflict of interest may be filed by one government when the actions of another have an effect on its region's interests. In this case, because aircraft taking off from and landing at Brussels Airport in Zaventem have to change their routes to avoid passing over Brussels, the burden of noise nuisance falls on the municipalities in the Flemish periphery of the capital.

Flemish mobility minister Ben Weyts filed an initial conflict complaint at the end of last year, which froze the introduction of the new limits



© Lucash/Wikimedia

for 60 days. As that term has now expired with no agreement reached, the Flemish Community filed a new complaint.

Brussels said it was not ready to observe another 60-day delay and that it would administer notices of fines, but would not, for the time being, make the airlines pay. The fines are likely to apply to

about 8% of the flights taking off from runway 25R, the busiest at the airport (pictured). That would affect about 7,200 of the runway's 90,000 flights a year.

But that figure is an average for the whole day. The crucial hour is between 6.00 and 7.00; noise limits on night flights used to end at 6.00 but, under the new noise limit rules, last until 7.00. During that hour, according to Weyts, 39% of flights taking off from the runway could be liable for fines.

The next step is not clear, according to constitutional experts. For Brussels to ignore a conflict of interest complaint does not change the fact that the new limits are legally suspended, but it will be up to the airlines to fight against any attempt to make them pay fines. \ AH

Kid power

Tackling poverty requires structural solutions, not shifting blame

continued from page 1

\ KINDERRECHTENCOMMISSARIAAT.BE

such as when they go to work themselves or take a student job during school holidays.

For parents, overcoming poverty depends on a lot of factors, Vanobbergen says, and the government plays a crucial role. Education, income, housing, education, health care and leisure are all essential in determining people's ability to take on active roles in the society.

"The government shouldn't emphasise that people have to create their own opportunities to escape poverty and that they are responsible for their own fate," he says. "I see how self-reliant people in poverty already are. The government has to be more aware of its own responsibility in creating the right conditions for people to improve their situation."

As the place where children spend much of their time, schools are an environment where social exclusion is very explicit. For one, children in poverty are bullied more often than their peers. Teachers also have lower expectations for them, and conflicts in which they're involved frequently result in suspensions.

"Parents in poverty are often blamed for not raising their children properly, but studies show that there is very little difference between them and the parents who have more financial means," says Vanobbergen. "The challenging financial situation, however, creates a lot of stress, as it forces people to be stuck in survival mode."

As a result, it's more difficult for parent to spend time with their children, he says, "to help them with homework, for example".

As a result of their disadvantaged background, these children can easily end up in special education (BuSO). The M decree, introduced in 2015, is supposed to transition many of them to regular education, but it hasn't yet created significant change, according to Vanobbergen. "We see that mainly children from higher-income families get mainstreamed."

In the book, Vanobbergen proposes a maximum invoice for secondary education, to limit the financial burden on parents. "This already exists in primary education and has resulted in an important mentality change," he says. "There are also inspiring examples



youngsters leaving school without a diploma and to minister Crevits' action plan to further reduce the drop-out rate.

One reason parents get stuck in survival mode, says Vanobbergen, is that many of the benefits they receive are too low – lower than the EU's poverty-line standards. "Benefits should be adjusted to the parents' needs," he says, adding that child care services, for example, would need to be improved to allow parents to find a steady job.

"In that respect, it's unfortunate that the government recently tripled the lowest rate for child care," he says. "There also have to be more services provided in poorer neighbourhoods, so that people can easily reach them." A good example, he adds, is the flexible child care service in Ghent, which parents can call on short notice if they have to schedule a job interview, for example.

Housing, he adds, is another area where Flanders has a lot of work left to do. "There is a lack of social housing, and the available accommodation often lacks in quality," he says. With the average waiting period for a three-bedroom accommodation at more



© Koen Broos

Rising poverty levels in Belgium prompted children's rights commissioner Bruno Vanobbergen to write *Spelen in zwarte sneeuw*, a "fragile manifesto" calling for a radical change in public policy

Important work in this respect is being done by Steunpunt Vakantieparticipatie (Holiday Participation Centre), a programme operated by Flanders' and Brussels' tourist agencies that helps families organise trips, like an excursion to the coast.

Concerning health care, Vanobbergen says, the federal government should maintain its investment in the VWGC health clinics. "These centres are crucial in providing interdisciplinary and accessible health care," he says. "We need to actually be investing more in such initiatives, because good health is essential to participating in society."

In the book, Vanobbergen argues that child poverty often remains completely invisible to the outside world. "Parents try very hard to limit the visibility of financial problems and try to give their children everything their friends have, like nice clothes or a specific school bag," he says.

Kids affected by poverty also don't stand out in statistical data. "We need more figures on the problem to adjust the policy accordingly," says Vanobbergen. "Without clear statistics on the number of children living in poverty who follow lessons in special educa-

tion, for example, it's difficult to evaluate the success rate of measures that were taken to tackle the issue."

The office of the children's rights commissioner recently set an example by revealing that some 2,000 children in Flanders lack a roof over their heads. This finding was based on a baseline measurement carried out by experts in Flanders' universities in 2014.

The commissioner is now working on a report on the €1 meals measure for disadvantaged children up to 12 years old. At the end of 2015, minister Liesbeth Homans, responsible for poverty issues in the Flemish government, set aside €1.2 million to finance the provision of affordable, healthy meals in 22 Flemish cities and municipalities.

"We are still evaluating the measure," says Vanobbergen. "But it's clear that such a measure – one that doesn't deal with the causes of the problem – cannot be regarded as a cornerstone of a child's rights policy on poverty."

Spelen in zwarte sneeuw (€19.99) is published in Dutch by Lannoo

“

The challenging financial situation creates a lot of stress, as it forces people to be stuck in survival mode

of certain secondary schools that have introduced it on their own."

This suggestion has led to a wide-ranging debate in Flemish media and politics, with socialist party SP.A defending the idea. Flemish education minister Hilde Crevits (CD&V) is looking into the issue.

"That doesn't mean schools aren't putting enough effort into helping children in poverty," says Vanobbergen. "It's heart-warming to see some schools offer free meals to children because they arrive with empty lunchboxes."

He also points to the positive trend of fewer

than three years, "larger families, especially, have to wait too long to get a place".

Social-housing services, Vanobbergen adds, often complain that people are too picky. "While families sometimes have relevant concerns – like a lack of space – it's essential for all services and professionals to establish a dialogue with people in poverty, to find solutions together."

Financial difficulties also severely limit leisure opportunities for families in poverty. "Recent research shows that 24% of children in Flanders live in a family that cannot afford to take a week-long trip once a year."

WEEK IN BUSINESS

Metals \ Nyrstar

The Brussels-based non-ferrous metals group is investing a further €70 million in its Port Pirie facility in Australia to increase capacity. The company lost more than €400 million last year, its fifth consecutive annual loss. It has been selling many of its unprofitable activities and hopes to turn the corner in 2017.

Apparel \ C&A

The Dutch clothing retail group is closing its Vilvoorde-based European headquarter, responsible for the men's and children's lines, with the loss of 70 jobs. The company is in the process of renovating its stores and employs 2,000 people in Belgium.

Horeca \ ISPC

The Ghent-based retailer and distributor for the restaurant and catering trade is being acquired by the Dutch Sligro Food Group. ISPC has outlets in Ghent, Brussels and Liège and employs 250 people.

Agriculture \ Sipef

The Brussels-based palm oil plantations and agricultural commodities company is investing €53 million to acquire Indonesia's PT Dendy Marker Indah Lestari, which manages 6,500 hectares of palm oil trees. The company has options to push production to up to 9,000 hectares.

Plastics \ Resilux

The Wetteren-based PET bottles and packaging group, which was acquired two weeks ago by the Bain Capital investment group in the US for €390 million, is to merge with the UK's Petainer to become one of the leading European players in the business.

Holdings \ GBL

The Brussels-based financial holding company is believed to have acquired 3% of Germany's Hugo Boss fashion label for up to €138 million.

Beverages \ Coca Cola

The American soft drink company is investing €2 million in its Brussels innovation centre to build a production unit to handle low volumes. The local facility recently brought the Nalu and Finley soft drink brands to market.

French pharma firm Sanofi wins foreign investment award

Flanders Investment & Trade's annual prizes go to inward investors



Alan Hope

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A French company has won this year's Foreign Investment of the Year trophy, awarded by the government's trade agency, Flanders Investment & Trade (Fit). Pharmaceutical firm Sanofi has a biotechnology research and development laboratory in Geel, Antwerp province. The Geel facility is the target of Sanofi's €300 million investment, creating 100 jobs in the production of monoclonal antibodies, the latest generation of medicines to fight disease. "Over the past 15 years, more than €900 million has been invested here," said Gunther Pauwels, general manager of Sanofi Geel. "There will be plenty of room for future

expansion after this current investment round."

The trophy is "a token of acknowledgement and appreciation for commitment to Flanders," said Fit CEO Claire Tillekaerts. "Foreign investments are a crucial driving force behind our economy. Not only do they create new jobs, they also help convince other foreign companies to invest in our region."

Last year, foreign companies invested €1.87 billion in Flanders, representing 198 new investment projects and creating 4,260 jobs. Chemicals company BASF received the Lifetime Achievement Award for its 50 years of investment at its site in the port of Antwerp. It's the German



© Courtesy Flanders Investment & Trade
Fit CEO Claire Tillekaerts and Sanofi Geel general manager Gunther Pauwels

company's second-biggest location, employing 3,100 people and bringing in some €150 million a year to the region.

"Foreign investors like BASF play an essential role in the economy

of Flanders and employment in our region," economy minister Philippe Muyters said at the awards ceremony, held at Ghent's Ghelamco Arena. The award, he said is "a major acknowledgement of half a century of investments that have fortified both the chemical industry in Flanders and the petrochemical cluster in Antwerp."

Norway's Kebony received the inaugural Newcomer of the Year prize. The wood producer has chosen Kallo on the left bank of the Scheldt for its first production plant outside Norway, with an investment of €20 million. Construction of the factory, which will employ 25 staff, started last month.

Australian holding company 'looks to sell share' of Brussels Airport

Australian-owned holding company Macquarie is prepared to sell its shares in Brussels Airport, Reuters reports. Macquarie owns 36% of the shares in the airport. The Belgian government has 25% and a Canadian pension fund 39%.

Macquarie is said to be in talks with the Ontario Teachers' Pension Plan to sell its shares. The company's acquisition of a 70% stake in the airport 10 years ago was an important factor in its privatisation. Since then, it has sold off just under half of its holding to Ontario in return for a holding in Sydney airport.

The company, which has holdings in energy, materials, infrastructure and agriculture across the world, said the sale was unrelated to Brussels' new noise limit regulations for aircraft, which has seen several companies threaten to quit the airport. \ AH



© Courtesy Bpost

Federal minister against proposal to limit postal deliveries

Alexander De Croo, the federal minister responsible for postal regulations, will not allow postal deliveries to be cut to three or four days a week, as proposed by postal regulator BIPT. According to the regulator, a daily mail delivery is no longer necessary, given the changes in the way people communicate.

Classic mail continues to reduce in volume, the regulator said. Within five or 10 years, mail carriers' bags could be empty, while the service would be forced to continue by law.

Belgian law requires Bpost to deliver every weekday. That's also

a condition, De Croo said, in the government's contract with Bpost. "I have no plans to allow an exception to that. The reduction in frequency of postal deliveries is not on the agenda in the coming years."

Postal service Bpost itself did not come out in favour of the plan either. BIPT's study puts Bpost's deliveries in a bad light, a spokesperson said, despite handling 9.6 million pieces of mail every day and a strong business in delivering packages. "Going round every post-box every day is one of the cornerstones of our strategic plan," the spokesperson said. \ AH

Delay of biomass station could be end of project, says minister

Flemish energy minister Bart Tommelein is ready to drop the plan to convert a former coal-burning depot into a biomass power station in Genk now that the owners have requested another delay, he told VRT. The Estonian company Graanul Invest took over the plant last summer when the original owner, German Pellets, went bankrupt.

"The date was very clearly agreed," Tommelein (Open VLD) said on the programme *De zevende dag*. "It had to be operational before the summer of 2018, otherwise the subsidies would expire. Now they come and ask for a delay. My administration will give the application the proper attention, but this causes me to seriously doubt the whole project, especially considering I still have not seen any financial plan."

Tommelein has never been a

supporter of biomass, in which organic material – in this case wood pellets – is burned to produce energy. He inherited the project – located in Langerlo in Genk – from his predecessor, Annemie Turtelboom.

But most experts now argue biomass is not sustainable, not particularly efficient and could not remain viable without subsidies. The Langerlo plant is expected to receive €2 billion in government subsidies over 10 years – money that Tommelein would like to spend on more sustainable solar and wind energy.

"I've made no secret of the fact that I'm not at all supportive of the project," Tommelein said. "I respect the laws and decrees, but this whole dossier seems unsound to me. I'm very suspicious of it and, as far as I'm concerned, I'd rather see it disappear." \ AH

Deme and VRT are best employers in Flanders, survey finds

Dredging company Deme and the Flemish public broadcaster VRT are the most attractive employers in the region, according to a survey by temp agency Randstad.

The Randstad Award polls over 200,000 people in 25 countries to find the companies people would most want to work for. It also asks respondents what they think of employer brands and what criteria lead people to select an employer.

According to Randstad labour market expert Jan Denys, dredging companies have scored well as employers since about 2010, regularly winning international contracts and providing international employment opportunities. Flanders' top 10 are: Deme, VRT, chemicals company GlaxoSmithKline, Janssen Pharmaceutica, dredger Jan De Nul, chemicals company Pfizer, Coca-Cola, chemicals company Bayer, Brussels Airlines and Mediahuis, which publishes *De Standaard*, *Flanders Today* and a number of other newspapers. \ AH

Yellow fever

Leuven is home to the world's largest collection of banana varieties



Alan Hope
More articles by Alan \ flanderstoday.org

Bananas aren't something you would necessarily associate with Leuven, but if you were in the banana business you would know that the city's university is home to the world's largest collection of banana plants and genetic material. In a building on the Arenberg campus in Heverlee, the Laboratory of Tropical Crop Improvement houses 1,536 varieties of bananas, plantains and related plants. The collection is managed by Bioversity International, which holds it in trust for the benefit of future generations under the auspices of the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization. The local connection goes back to the time of Belgium's African colonies in Congo, Burundi and Rwanda, where cooking banana varieties and plantains are a staple of the diet. Africa has some 200 varieties, and a research tradition has grown up in Belgium around the crops. However, despite that rich diversity of bananas from Asia, Africa and Latin America, the ones we eat here are almost completely limited to one variety, known as Cavendish. "All the Cavendish in the whole world is one single clone; they are all identical," explains professor Rony Swennen, the head of the department. So why do we only eat this one? "Most people aren't aware of the diversity of varieties." It was also the result of a panic more than 50 years ago, he continues, "when the previous favourite export banana, the Gros Michel, was destroyed by a disease. Within a very short time, the industry said 'we need a yellow banana that looks good', and they



© Bioversity International/N Capozio

The major task of the Leuven banana collection is to document biodiversity

picked Cavendish. And now the whole industry is built around the Cavendish banana." But the situation is different in other parts of the world, and that's where the lab's collection comes in. "The major task of this collection, known as the Musa Germplasm Transit Centre, is to document biodiversity," says Swennen. "The more we document, the more people want to investigate. In the tropics we have a lot of people now using varieties from this collection." About 85% of the bananas in the world are consumed where they are produced, so the collection is having a major impact on small-scale producers. And Belgium has a leading role to play. "Belgium is the second biggest importer of bananas in the world, and the second biggest exporter in the world, because of our ports," says Swennen. "That's almost \$1 billion in turnover. And it's all about this one variety." The collection is split into two

sections: a cold chamber and a cryo-preservation lab. Outside, a complex of greenhouses contains growing plants, the subject of a variety of research projects. The cold chamber houses plantlets in test tubes, kept at 15 degrees Celsius to prevent them growing too quickly. Material from each plant sent to the collection is grown in a nutrition medium that can sustain the plantlet for up to a year. By then, the growing medium is exhausted, and the process starts over. The plants are given to any researcher or other interested party who asks. One in three requests comes from potential users who want to test a particular plant in their own conditions with an eye to production. Another 20% come from producers who intend to plant the variety immediately, while 36% come from researchers looking at breeding new varieties. "So far, 110 countries have asked us for varieties," says Swennen. "Some of

them are banana-growing countries, but for others, like Canada, it's scientists who are asking." Every day, the lab provides samples of three to four varieties to someone, somewhere, either as live plants in bags that can keep them fresh for up to a year, or as plant material that can be cultured rapidly to propagate faster. In the cryo-preservation department, six pots contain genetic material from close to 1,000 varieties from the collection, stored in liquid nitrogen at a temperature of minus 196 degrees. The reason not all varieties are frozen is a matter of time. It takes 12 to 18 months to prepare the plants' genetic material for the shock of being plunged into liquid nitrogen. "We first dehydrate the plant material to avoid ice crystals, which can destroy cells," explains Swennen. "The cells themselves have quite a complicated structure – fatty acids, phenols, sugars and proteins – and we have to protect everything during freezing and thawing. We have been developing the technology over the last 25 years that can be applied not only to bananas but also other crops such as potato, cassava, apple and many more. That's what makes us unique." The cryo-preservation unit is growing at the rate of about 50 varieties a year, and there is space for more than 500,000 samples. There's room for up to 2,000 varieties, which happens to be the number Swennen thinks exist. And there's a backup: An exact copy of the Leuven collection is kept in Montpellier in the south of France, updated once or twice a year with newly frozen banana varieties.

WEEK IN INNOVATION

Drone cluster Euka launched

Flemish innovation minister Philippe Muyters launched the non-profit drone cluster Euka last week in Evergem, East Flanders. The launch took place at a construction site where drones are already used to monitor some of the heavier work, such as moving earth. The goal of the Euka platform is to bring drone users, knowledge centres and suppliers together to stimulate collaboration and the exchange of experiences. Euka will organise events, info sessions and working groups, and will particularly focus on sectors of security, construction, agriculture, logistics, government, technology and leisure. Flanders Innovation and Entrepreneurship agency VLAIO has recognised Euka as an "Innovative Business Network."

KU Leuven defines burnout

Researchers at the University of Leuven (KU Leuven) have defined the main symptoms of burnout and created a list of questions doctors and psychologists can use to facilitate diagnosing the condition. The burnout phenomenon was again the subject of criticism recently, after Flemish entrepreneur Roland Duchâtelet stated to *Het Laatste Nieuws* that many people are faking it. Experts followed up with comments about how the diagnosis was sometimes determined too quickly and that care providers do not always possess the right tools to make the correct diagnosis. Diagnosing burnout is currently done on the basis of a list of symptoms developed 30 years ago. KU Leuven's new list of symptoms is now being tested and, if successful, will become official at the end of the year.

€59 million for life sciences research

The government of Flanders has signed a new agreement with the Flemish life sciences research institute VIB, assuring funding of €59 million for the next five years. By increasing VIB's annual budget by 34%, the government is affirming its belief in VIB's new strategic plan, said innovation minister Philippe Muyters. "VIB is internationally recognised for its research excellence and proactive approach to translating research results into economic and social added value," said Muyters in a statement. "VIB contributes substantially to the success of the Flemish biotechnology sector." \ Andy Furniere

Five-year deal for pioneering research centre imec

Flanders has renewed its five-year agreement with the technology innovation centre imec, increasing its financial support from €79 million to €108 million a year. Innovation minister Philippe Muyters signed the agreement this week at the Flanders After Tomorrow conference, held in Ghent's opera house. The Leuven-based nano-technology research centre merged with Ghent's iMinds incubator last year, adding business development to its portfolio – a combination the government of Flanders is now keen to capitalise on. Muyters said that it's time for Flemish companies to make the shift to Industry 4.0, the current trend of automation and data exchange in manufacturing technologies. The signing of the funding agreement gives the task of facilitating this shift to imec. "This is Flanders' best business card," said Muyters. "We need to guarantee that it can maintain its high level of performance. Most

importantly, the extra €29 million is also meant to develop services to support local players." Imec applies for 120 patents a year. Its annual revenue runs close to half a billion euros, 80% of which comes from contracts with major international technology companies, creating 6,000 jobs in Flanders. "Everyone at Stanford University and in Silicon Valley knows our name, even though there's no imec in California," said imec's general director, Luc Van den Hove. "So we attract innovation from around the world. Now we need to exploit our position to the benefit of the Flemish economy. With the extra means, we'll be able to do this more efficiently than ever before." Research has shown that each €1 invested in imec leads to €11 of added revenue and €6 of extra investment in new jobs. Together, imec and iMinds have created 78 spin-offs, of which 60 are still in operation. Eight of these presented their products at Flan-



Philippe Muyters (right) gets a demonstration of imec's Chillband

ders After Tomorrow. NeoScores, a digital platform for sheet music based in Kontich, Antwerp province, demonstrated its abilities with a live concert. Hasselt start-up Airobot presented its collision avoidance software for drones used in building inspection, and Small Town Heroes from Ghent gave an exclusive preview of its platform combining kids' TV with online messaging. \ Daan Bauwens

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Getting ahead

Lucerna schools combat statistics with quality education



Andy Furniere

More articles by Andy \ flanderstoday.eu

\ LUCERNA.BE

The educational network founded by members of the Turkish community is determined to offset negative stereotypes by focusing on a multicultural approach to education and steering clear of politics.

More than a decade after the first one opened its doors, Lucerna schools in Flanders and Brussels continue to suffer from labels, often called “Turkish”, “ghetto schools” or “Muslim-only”. Don’t mind the misconceptions, says Fevzi Yildirim, one of the directors: Lucerna, he says, is investing in quality education, promoting multiculturalism and avoiding politics to achieve broader recognition.

The Lucerna primary and secondary schools – part of the Flemish education system – received much attention in local media at the start of this academic year, in the aftermath of the failed coup in Turkey. The country’s president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, accused the exiled opposition leader Fethullah Gülen of orchestrating the coup.

The president’s supporters in Belgium responded with hostile actions against the Lucerna schools, which many consider to be part of the Gülen movement. Across Flanders, parents of Turkish descent were put under pressure to remove their children from the schools. A school bus was set on fire at the Lucerna secondary school in Houthalen-Helchteren in Limburg, and some of the network’s board members were victims of vandalism. The situation has since calmed down, but the government of Flanders was quick to back the schools, which are recognised and subsidised, and the police protected the buildings at the start of the school year.



© Courtesy Lucerna

The first Lucerna school opened in Anderlecht in 2003, with 19 students and eight part-time teachers

lag behind, but the current school system, he adds, is another major factor. In his research, he has identified two key mechanisms that put youngsters of foreign origin at a disadvantage. “Because parents are free to send their children wherever they want, there is a lot of competition between schools to attract students from higher-income families,” he says. “These students are likely going to get better results, and thus improve their school’s reputation. This is detrimental for the social mix in other schools.”

The current school system, he continues, also

body is made up of some 40 nationalities. The majority of the students come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and a language deficit is a common problem.

While the Lucerna schools teach in accord with the guidelines set out by the Flemish education networks, they answer to specific needs of their student population by offering a variety of after-school guidance activities. The students are also encouraged to speak Dutch outside of class to improve their fluency.

Parents are also closely involved with the school, says Yildirim. Teachers regularly pay home visits, while parents are invited to follow Dutch lessons at the school and can receive guidance on how to help their children with homework, for example.

The schools also offer a broad range of extra-curricular activities in collaboration with external organisations, including sports and cultural activities like chess clubs and theatre projects. External organisations are involved in carrying out solidarity actions, like tackling poverty.

About one in three teachers are of foreign origin, providing a role model for the students. Alumni are also regularly involved in events.

The network aspires to turn its students into global citizens, says Yildirim. “They have to feel like part of society, and they have to understand that they have a right to state their opinion.” To achieve this, Lucerna has set up a course on civic education, in which students learn about the importance of democracy, tolerance, diversity and media literacy, among other areas.

The network’s reputation is gradually improving, but the schools continue to find it challenging to convince more Flemish families. Prejudices like those concerning the “Muslim” profile of the schools persist.

“We are a free, non-denominational school network,” says Yildirim. That means students can opt for philosophical courses between lessons on Islam, Catholicism, Orthodoxy, Protestantism and ethics. Female students are free to wear a headscarf or not.

“We are part of the Flemish education system and want our student population to reflect the multicultural society in Flanders and in Brussels,” adds Yildirim. “Hopefully our quest for quality education can eventually eliminate all these prejudices.”

“We want our student population to reflect the multicultural society in Flanders and in Brussels

Yildirim, the director of the Lucerna secondary school in the Anderlecht municipality of Brussels, says it is frustrating to be linked to political events. “While the founders of Lucerna were inspired by Gülen’s ideas about encouraging secular education as a way of making progress, Gülen never had a defined pedagogical project,” he says. “We are not part of the Gülen movement, and it is a mistake to associate Turkey’s problems [with our schools].”

The Lucerna network of schools operate in five municipalities – Antwerp, Ghent, Anderlecht, Genk and Houthalen-Helchteren – and are attended by some 1,400 students. The first one opened in Anderlecht in 2003, with 19 students and eight part-time teachers.

The founders of Lucerna were mostly entrepreneurs and academics from the Turkish community, who took action to improve educational standards among youth of Turkish origin.

“They noticed that these youngsters generally performed worse than their peers, with many ending up in technical and professional tracks and not in general education,” explains professor Ides Nicaise of the University of Leuven, who taught a master’s programme on the Lucerna phenomenon and is a member of the school’s advisory board.

According to Nicaise, discrimination and prejudice are part of the reason why these students

requires students to make crucial study track choices immediately after primary education. But “youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds need more time to overcome language deficiencies and develop a clear vision of their study goals”.

According to a recent OECD study – known as the Pisa study – the performance gap between youngsters of foreign origin and other students in Flanders turned out to be the widest of all the countries and regions included in the study.

But the Lucerna schools are doing their bit to bridge that gap, says Yildirim, highlighting the positive evaluations by the government. Only a small minority of Lucerna students, he continues, don’t go on to higher education.

He also points to the various success stories, like that of the two students from the Lucerna secondary school in Antwerp who won a prestigious science competition organised by the Free University of Brussels (VUB). The students developed a physics test that was recently used for conducting experiments at the South Pole.

The statistics and success stories can be partly explained by the school’s choice to offer only the general education track and one technical study programme, in business. But the story becomes more interesting if you take into account the profile of Lucerna students.

According to Yildirim, the network’s student

WEEK IN EDUCATION

More time to learn Dutch for foreign academics

The government of Flanders is introducing more flexible language requirements for foreign academics. While lecturers from abroad currently need to pass a Dutch language test within three years to become tenured, they will now get five years. Flemish universities pointed out that three years is too short a time, as this often means 12 hours of Dutch classes each week in addition to giving lessons and research. According to universities, the regulation sometimes discouraged top international researchers from coming to Flanders.

Primary schools lead way on healthy lifestyle

A survey by the Flemish Institute for Health Promotion and Sickness Prevention and the Flemish centre of expertise on alcohol and drugs shows that primary schools in Flanders and Brussels are working hard to have their pupils eating more healthily and moving more, but this progress isn’t happening in secondary schools. The survey examined the policies concerning healthy food, moving and sitting still, smoking, alcohol and drugs, mental health and the environment, in about 730 primary and 250 secondary schools. Primary schools in particular score well on healthy food, with fewer offering chocolate milk and fruit juice than three years ago, for example. More secondary schools, on the other hand, began offering these snacks over the same period.

‘Introduce standardised testing,’ say experts

Students should take standardised tests throughout their education to assess where they are in basic courses, Antwerp University experts told *De Standaard*. Pointing to the several neighbouring countries that measure the level of students and schools with such tests, the educational scientists suggested that all students in Flanders should take exactly the same tests, both at the end of primary education and after every grade (two years) of secondary education. They should cover only basic subjects, however, like Dutch and mathematics, they suggested, and they would have to reflect the grasp of the subject the students should have at that time. \ AF

WEEK IN ACTIVITIES

Belvue family tour

Learn about the history of Belgium in a fun, interactive tour for the whole family. In each room of the museum, parents and children have to complete a mission, with the help of a guide, to solve a mystery. In English; reservations required via the website. 5 March 15.30-16.30, Belvue Museum, Paleizenplein 7, Brussels; free

\ belvue.be

Stargazing Days

For two nights, everyone can get a close-up view of the Moon, the stars and Jupiter at one of 25+ locations across Flanders. Observatories and amateur astronomers will have their telescopes set up outside and will be on hand to answer questions. (In clear skies only.) 3-4 March after dark, various locations; free

\ vvs.be

Baby Weekends

For two weekends, creative workshops for children aged six months to two years are offered at WIELS contemporary art centre. The workshops focus on artistic and sensory exploration, through visual art, music and movement. Each workshop lasts 1.5 hours and requires registration. 11-12 & 18-19 March 10.00/14.00/16.00, Van Volxemlaan 354, Brussels; €5

\ wiels.org

Bal Rat Mort

For the 119th edition of this ball in Ostend, the theme is Liberation – with music and dance styles from the 1940s. The weekend kicks off with a swing dance class, live bands and a burlesque act on Friday night, then the ball on Saturday features two dance floors, live music, stage acts, dance classes and more. The weekend closes with Sunday brunch on board the Ostend Queen. 3-5 March, Kursaal Oostende, Kursaal-Westhelling 12, Ostend, €18-€85

\ balratmort.eu

App-o-theek

Not sure how to make a Facebook account, start a blog or use Snapchat? Every Monday, you can get free assistance with your computer, smartphone or tablet. Not a repair service, but expert help with downloading and installing applications, accessing and using websites. 6 March 17.00-19.00, Muntpunt, Munt 6, Brussels; free

\ muntpunt.be/app-o-theek

Into the light

Judge of Guislain Award on the power of words to heal troubled minds



Mauricio Ruiz

More articles by Mauricio \ flanderstoday.org

\ DRGUISLAINAWARD.ORG

“We are not transparent to ourselves. We have intuitions, suspicions, hunches, vague musings, and strangely mixed emotions, all of which resist simple definition,” write Alain de Botton and John Armstrong in *Art as Therapy*, a 2013 book that echoed some of the ideas American author Siri Hustvedt had been toying with for a number of years.

Hustvedt taught creative writing to patients at the Payne Whitney Psychiatric Clinic in New York from 2006 to 2010, believing that writing can bring about healing. She is also one of the judges of the Dr Guislain Award, an annual international initiative by Ghent’s Museum Dr Guislain.

A museum of psychiatry as well as outsider art, the Guislain sponsors the award together with Janssen Research and Development. Worth \$50,000, it is presented every year to a person or an organisation that works to lessen the stigma linked to mental illnesses. Previous winners include photographer and documentary filmmaker Robin Hammond of New Zealand and Matrika Devkota, the founder of Nepalese advocacy organisation Koshish.

Why would Hustvedt, a novelist with a PhD in English, have such an interest in psychiatry and mental illness? “I discovered that writing truly does have a therapeutic value for psychiatric patients,” she says. “I saw it in my classes, and I have been thinking through why it has the benefits it does. I believe these benefits are achieved by all forms of artistic practice.”

For almost as long as she can remember Hustvedt (pictured) has



US author Siri Hustvedt has been on the jury of the annual Dr Guislain Award since it began in 2012

lived with migraines, with their unpredictable and blinding pain, which inspired an interest in anatomy and physiology. In 2006, she suffered a seizure from the neck down and recorded her experience in *The Shaking Woman or the Story of My Nerves*.

It was her curiosity and desire to make the world question the boundary between “normal” and “abnormal” that led the Ghent museum to invite her to join the jury when the awards were launched in 2012.

“The award has been given to art therapy causes and to individuals or groups that foster the diminishment of stigma still attached to mental illness everywhere – although in some cultures it is far worse than in others.”

It is crucial to understand, she

emphasises, that having a mental illness doesn’t make someone stupid or ignorant: “Countless people with psychiatric diagnoses are creative and original,” she says. “No doubt, this truth comes from both the physiological realities of their illness and from their experience as marginal in a given culture.” Life can be complex, and simple rules are full of exceptions. In Hustvedt’s classes in New York there were always patients who were relieved to be in the hospital, while others couldn’t wait to get out. She thinks that humans have trouble dealing with ambiguity. “It’s uncomfortable,” she says. “It’s like an itch in our thought processes, and the continual scratching of that itch is annoying. We want it to end.” Although we’re looking for certainty,

she continues, “embracing ambiguity is important because it means being open to new thoughts, and it keeps us humble in the face of the astonishing complexity of the human experience”.

Can an initiative like the Dr Guislain Award help reduce the number of suicides, a topic Hustvedt has written a lot about? Despair and suicide, she says, are linked, “but despair, like happiness, is not a permanent condition. For people with mental illness who are also suicidal, the right word at the right time or some form of dialogue or intervention can – and has – prevented a person from taking her or his own life.”

Nominations for the Guislain award are open until 16 April, with the winner announced in October.

BITE

Vegetarian food-lovers set carnivores a Lent challenge

\ DAGENZONDERVLEES.BE

Persuading avid carnivores to forgo meat is no mean feat – so the initiative Dagen zonder vlees (Meat-Free Days) cannily encourages them to eat less meat and fish over the 40 days of Lent instead.

The campaign runs until 15 April, and it kicked off with a food festival last weekend at Antwerp’s Felix Pakhuis.

The goal of the initiative, founded by student (and carnivore) Alexia Leysen, is to raise awareness about the ties between eating meat and global warming.

“Meat has an enormous impact on water and CO2 consumption, and six years ago nobody was talking about it,” explains actor and campaign member Marieke Dilles. “It’s not that we want everyone to become vegetarian. It’s that we want to inform people that eating

less meat can hugely reduce your ecological footprint.”

After registering on the website, participants can use the counter feature to track exactly how much they’re reducing their ecological impact with each vegetarian day. They can also sign up to one of the groups accepting the challenge this year, from the University of Leuven to the Vegan Teens of Belgium.

Last year, a whopping 90,000 people took part. “The city of Ghent embraced the scheme, and the leaders of the five biggest Flemish political parties joined us,” says Dilles. “This year we have famous people from every big television and radio station in Flanders.”

Other innovations include a website in French, to expand the scheme’s appeal across the rest of the country, and the inaugural food festival,



© Elisabeth Van Lierop

for real-life inspiration.

“A lot of people have questions like, ‘How can I cook vegetarian meals for my kids? What can I put on my bread?’ Through the festival we

want to show them that it’s not so bad eating vegetarian. You can cook delicious things.”

The festival included readings and workshops by luminaries like Graanmarkt 13 chef Seppe Nobels, alongside an after-party and vegetarian food trucks. This year the focus was on easy-to-make recipes, with organisers publishing a cookbook with contributions from celebrity participants.

For those seeking a greater challenge, the book will offer tips on more sustainable consumption, be it reducing food waste and plastic packaging, or eating more seasonal cuisine.

“The main thing is that everyone can participate – even for one day a week,” says Dilles. “We try to make it very simple for people to take up the challenge.” \ Clodagh Kinsella

Reading between the lines

Shared reading offers vulnerable groups of people life-changing interactions



Diana Goodwin
Follow Diana on Twitter \ @basedinbelgium

DEDAGEN.BE

The concept is simple: a group of people from various backgrounds coming together to read and talk about literature. But this is no ordinary book club or literary society, and its aims, though seemingly modest, are life-changing.

De Dagen is a non-profit based in Antwerp that uses shared reading experiences to bring people together and create a community, solidarity and, sometimes, healing. Its founder and beating heart is Silvie Moors, whose passion for books and art inspired her to share great literature with people who aren't usually considered the "literati" of society.

After studying literature at Antwerp University, Moors (*pictured*) worked for Jeugd Literatuur (Youth Literature) and for the Stichting Lezen (Reading Foundation). But then, she says, "I really wanted to do something on my own, because I sing, I do theatre, I like to write. I thought, maybe I have to start something where I can combine all the things that I like."

One of her early projects was in the psychiatric ward at Sint-Maarten Hospital in Mechelen. Although she had no previous experience working with psychiatric patients, she worked with the staff to try out different things.

Along with several friends, she read aloud, sang to them, led discussions and performed plays. She found that she enjoyed this kind of work: hands-on, directly involved with people, doing what she loved and sharing it with others.

Then in 2012, she followed a course to become a "shared reading practitioner". The training was offered by the British charitable organisation The Reader, which brings shared reading – an interactive experience with a certain text – to disadvantaged and vulnerable people in nursing homes, prisons, community centres and other settings.

"This for me was really a key moment," Moors says. "I love people, and I'm passionate about literature, and I was organising campaigns or something from a distance, but sitting around a table with 10 people, reading aloud and talking about what I love."

The idea behind shared reading is that people benefit simply from listening to great literature as it's read aloud in a group. The participants follow along with a printed text as it's read aloud by a facilitator, and there's no pressure or obligation to respond. But inevitably, the books and poems themselves inspire discussion and sharing.

"Shared reading brings people together, and



© Koen Broos

Silvie Moors, whose organisation De Dagen helps marginalised people open up to each other

very quickly we talk about the real essence of life, like death and sorrow – big themes that you don't normally talk about when you have just met someone," Moors explains.

Shared reading is not intended as an impulse for literary analysis or intellectual discussion, she emphasises. It's not meant to be educational. Instead, the texts are a jumping-off point for people to talk about their own feelings, experiences, hopes and fears.

At the same time, she says, "*what* we read is very important. We read texts of high quality like Murakami, Kafka, Rilke, Paul Auster, Flemish authors. That means we have a high quality of conversation as well."

Although these shared reading groups are open to anyone, there is an effort to include those who aren't already well-versed in literature. "It's especially for them, because you don't have to know anything, and you don't have to register or pay," explains Moors. "And afterwards there is soup – that's very important."

De Dagen started out with one small group of

readers at 't Werkhuys in Antwerp's Borgerhout district and now conducts shared reading sessions in six locations in Antwerp, Brussels and Mechelen every week. They partner with social service organisations and mental health practitioners to reach vulnerable and underprivileged people in the community.

Other initiatives include Warm Book Evenings during which Moors talks with a well-known Flemish author, and theatre outings to Het Paleis in Antwerp and KVS in Brussels. In both cases, the shared reading groups use texts by the guest author or read from the play beforehand.

A new project involves reading in languages other than Dutch. One of De Dagen's shared reading practitioners is from Chile and teaches integration classes for new Spanish-speaking immigrants in Antwerp. At the end of a recent class, Moors joined, and they did shared reading in both Spanish and Dutch.

"This is an experiment that I would like to do further, not just with Spanish-speaking people but also with people who speak Arabic," says

Moors.

Now that De Dagen has grown, Moors is no longer able to lead all the groups and relies on 20-odd colleagues to share the workload. Some of her fellow shared reading practitioners started out as reading group participants themselves.

Moors looks for people who have potential, despite their perceived limitations, and gives them the training and support to grow. One of her most valued volunteers is a man who came to a shared reading group after being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome.

He was unable to hold down a regular job and had trouble relating to other people. But Moors recognised his love of books, his intelligence and capacity for organising, and gradually he came to be indispensable to her.

"He's more open to people, he can communicate much better. It's something that was in him that could grow because he got confidence from the group and from his passion for literature. It's so beautiful. That's why I really love this work."

Board game weaves bridges across cultural divides

WILDEVLECHTEN.BE

Board games are a great way to break the ice and bring people together. But *Wie is er bang van Fatima Sultan?* (Who's Afraid of Fatima Sultan?) plays for higher stakes.

The game was created by Antwerp costume designer and stage director Sara Dykmans, who spearheads a number of socio-artistic projects through the non-profit organisation Wilde Vlechten. For *Wie is er bang*, she collaborated with a group of Afghan women to bring together embroidery and cultural exchange in an unusual combination.

The idea is simple and daring at the same time, explains Dykmans. "The Afghan women are skilled in their traditional embroidery techniques, and we designed a board game that is made up completely of needlework."

During the game, the women share their personal stories, which lead to a discussion on how they experience life. "It's a game of questions and answers that helps facilitate the encounter between newcomers and women from around here," she says. "It is very participative, sometimes confrontational, but also funny. But the main aim is to bring women together."

The game is designed to be played at home, but public sessions are in the works as well. People or organisation that are interested can book the game and invite friends and family for an intercultural women-only event.

Dykmans and the four Afghan women involved in the creation of the game come to your location to play. According to Dykmans,



© Sofie Jaspers

the focus on women comes from a sense of female communality that grew while developing the game.

"The game brings issues like emancipation and cultural differences to the table, and we noticed that a lot of values are shared," she

says. "We are more than a culture; we are humans first and foremost. By sharing stories while playing together, we forge connections between women whose social environments differ a lot."

There is a strong need for these kind of encounters, she adds. "Both sides often have a number of questions, which often result in mutual incomprehension. We can only solve this by building bridges."

By playing the game, Dykmans noticed that many prejudices are being turned on their heads. "That's expected because, whether you like it or not, we live in a shared society," she says. "So a little bit more human contact and mutual understanding is what we need."

\ Toon Lambrechts



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Super Nova

Brussels' volunteer-run cinema burns bright after 20 eclectic years



Ian Mundell

follow Ian on Twitter \ @IanMundell

\ NOVA-CINEMA.ORG

The Nova Cinema in Brussels is 20 years old. It threw a party in January to mark the anniversary, and will be celebrating through the year with events on themes dear to its heart.

"There will be a programme on cinemas that have disappeared, one on the shift in cinema technology, and another on family, in the sense that maybe the Nova is like a family," says Katia Rossini, one of the cinema's founders and still one of its busiest members.

Family is important because the Nova has always been organised collectively, not so much for ideological reasons but because lots of people have always wanted to get involved. Volunteers do everything from choosing the films to taking tickets and running the projectors. The same goes for the Nova's friendly basement bar.

"There is this constellation of between 50 and 80 people volunteering at Nova, in different ways and with different degrees of involvement," Rossini explains, "but there has always been a smaller core of people who work more on a daily or weekly basis."

Until a few years ago the only person to be paid was a part-time accountant, but more recently money has been found for co-ordinating work, such as managing the projectors and other equipment,



© Sandrine Brouhier

The volunteer-run Nova is marking a milestone this year, and the collective behind it hopes to buy the building that houses it

ularly in its thematic programmes. These might delve into the cinema of a single country, opening up unexplored territory or overturning expectations. One programme, for instance, showcased realism in Indian cinema where most people think of Bollywood.

Then there were programmes looking at subjects as diverse as dance in cinema, perceptions of mental

diverse and less niche audience, but then you never know how the audience is going to respond," says Rossini.

Last year's Guy Maddin film *The Forbidden Room*, for example, was never going to be a blockbuster. "It's a really difficult film, but at the same time it's a quite unique filmic experience," she says. "We knew we were taking a risk and the audience would probably not be huge, which was the case. But then it's good to have the freedom to take these risks."

But there are also successes, such as *Le Chantier des gosses* by Jean Harlez, a lost neo-realist film set in Brussels' Marollen neighbourhood in the 1950s. After screening an old print at pleinOPENair, the Nova decided to restore it and release the new version. The response was overwhelming. "We had to add extra screenings and people were queuing up the street."

Looking back over 20 years, Rossini attributes the Nova's longevity

to the diligence of the team and a continual evaluation – in endless meetings – of the cinema's activities. "We work on it! And we are very conscious of the economic aspects of running the cinema."

New blood has also been a factor. "There is a new generation of people within the team, bringing in a new energy," she says. "People born in the 1980s and early 1990s don't have the same film heritage, and it's interesting to have that generational confrontation when discussing films."

This new generation is also on the Nova's mind at present because the cinema is currently up for sale. It has changed ownership several times in the past 20 years, but this time the collective hopes to buy the building itself.

"If we've got to this point, it means that people want the place to exist. So we are in the process of securing it," Rossini says. "That would be the safest way to keep the project going for the next generation."

“We try to explore trends in contemporary cinema in terms of content, form and narrative approach

doing administration or organising the volunteers. Even so, this is not regular employment. "Everyone has another activity, either a full-time job or as an artist."

When the Nova opened in January 1997, the first goal was to rescue a derelict cinema, the Studio Arenberg, not far from the Grote Markt. The initial agreement gave the project a two-year residence.

Then the idea was to show films that were not making it on to regular cinema screens, because either their form or their content didn't fit in with commercial expectations. The first programme included political essays by Chris Marker, satire from Michael Moore (then far from famous), animation by Jan Svankmajer and two dark comedies from Dutch director Alex Van Warmerdam.

There was also an open screen for anyone with a film of their own to show, and evenings combining film with music and performance.

Over its first decade the Nova maintained this eclectic approach, partic-

health, and ethnography. There was also a steady interest in urbanism, particularly through the outdoor film festival pleinOPENair, which each summer moved into abandoned or contested spaces around Brussels.

While the Nova quickly established an identity for itself, there has never been a hard and fast rule about what should be shown. "We try to explore trends in contemporary cinema in terms of content and in terms of form and narrative approach, but always with this idea that we might, on some occasions, look at more classic films," says Rossini.

In its second decade, the number of large thematic programmes decreased, in order to have a less frantic pace and to avoid competing with the growing number of themed film festivals in Brussels. Instead, the Nova started to show individual films over one or two months, alongside more focused programmes and itself hosting festivals.

"We try to propose films for a more

OFFSCREEN FILM FESTIVAL

\ OFFSCREEN.BE

One of the best festivals to make its home at the Nova is Offscreen, which each year presents a dizzying line up of genre and cult films. This 10th edition opens with French campus cannibal film *Raw* (pictured), and continues with *Prevenge*, a very dark British comedy about a pregnant woman's deadly urges, and the retro playfulness of *The Love Witch*.

Other attractions include a retrospective of Czechoslovak cinema from the 1960s and 1970s, with a focus on the strange and surreal;



Apocalypse 69, on the psychosis that followed America's summer of love; and a quick dip into Indonesian action films.

WEEK IN ARTS & CULTURE

Merksplas historical site to become hotel

A former colony for vagrants in Merksplas, in the north of Antwerp province, will be converted into a hotel and restaurant. The colony was established in 1824 to provide a place for the poor and unemployed to live and work. Homeless men would be detained and taken to the colony. They were paid for the work and, when they had earned enough money, were allowed to leave. The site's Grote Hoeve (Great Farm) is a listed monument. The renovation of the farm's 14 buildings and 40 hectares has been taken over by Kempens Landschap, with a budget of more than €42 million. Corsendonk Hotels will provide hotel and restaurant facilities, cycling and walking tours and culinary and cultural events. It will also operate a visitors' centre, which should be open by early June.

\ toerismemerksplas.be/kolonie

Barber shop opens in Brussels Inno

The Inno department store on Louizalaan in Brussels is now home to a barber shop specialising in shaving and the care of beards. It's the first shop ever opened in Europe by the German shaving products company Golddachs and offers haircuts and shaves as well as beard trimming and styling. According to Golddachs, the popularity of beards peaked last year, as 54% of men in Europe maintained some kind of facial hair.

Opera Vlaanderen nominated for Best House

Opera Vlaanderen has been nominated Opera House of the Year, the grand prize of the International Opera Awards. It is the third time it has been nominated for the prize, more than any other opera house in the world. The opera was also nominated for Best New Production for *The Makropulos Affair* by turn-of-the-20th-century Czech composer Leoš Janáček. The much-lauded production, directed by Kornel Mundruczo, premiered last September and starred Swiss soprano Rachel Harnisch as the androgynous Emilia, who must decide if she wants to live forever. A third nomination has gone to the German Tatjana Gürbaca for Best Director for Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*, which premiered at Opera Vlaanderen last October. The International Opera Awards will be announced in May in London.

\ operaballet.be

The right lines

Step into the infinite world of Luc Peire at retrospective in FelixArt Museum



Ian Mundell
More articles by Ian \ flanderstoday.org

FELIXART.ORG

LUCPEIRE.COM

It pays to take things gradually at the retrospective of the Bruges-born artist's work, with a finale that's worth waiting for.

Luc Peire's "Environment" is a room with a floor and ceiling made of mirrors. All four walls are marked with the distinctive vertical lines that characterise the artist's later work. Standing inside the room you can see the lines – and yourself – repeated infinitely above your head and beneath your feet. It is an unnerving yet exhilarating experience.

"Environment" is the final piece in *Space*, the Peire retrospective running at FelixArt in Drogenbos, just outside Brussels. Knowing that, there is considerable temptation to rush past the other work and begin at the end. But it pays to take things gradually and see just how Peire arrived at this total expression of his artistic philosophy.

Peire was born in Bruges in 1916, where he also began his education in art. He went on to study in Ghent and Antwerp, developing in the tradition of Flemish expressionists such as Constant Permeke and Gustave Van de Woestyne, both of whom he knew.

After the Second World War he became part of the broadly modernist Jeune Peinture Belge movement, but also went in search of his own style. A trip to Italy was decisive, according to exhibition co-curator Marc Peire.

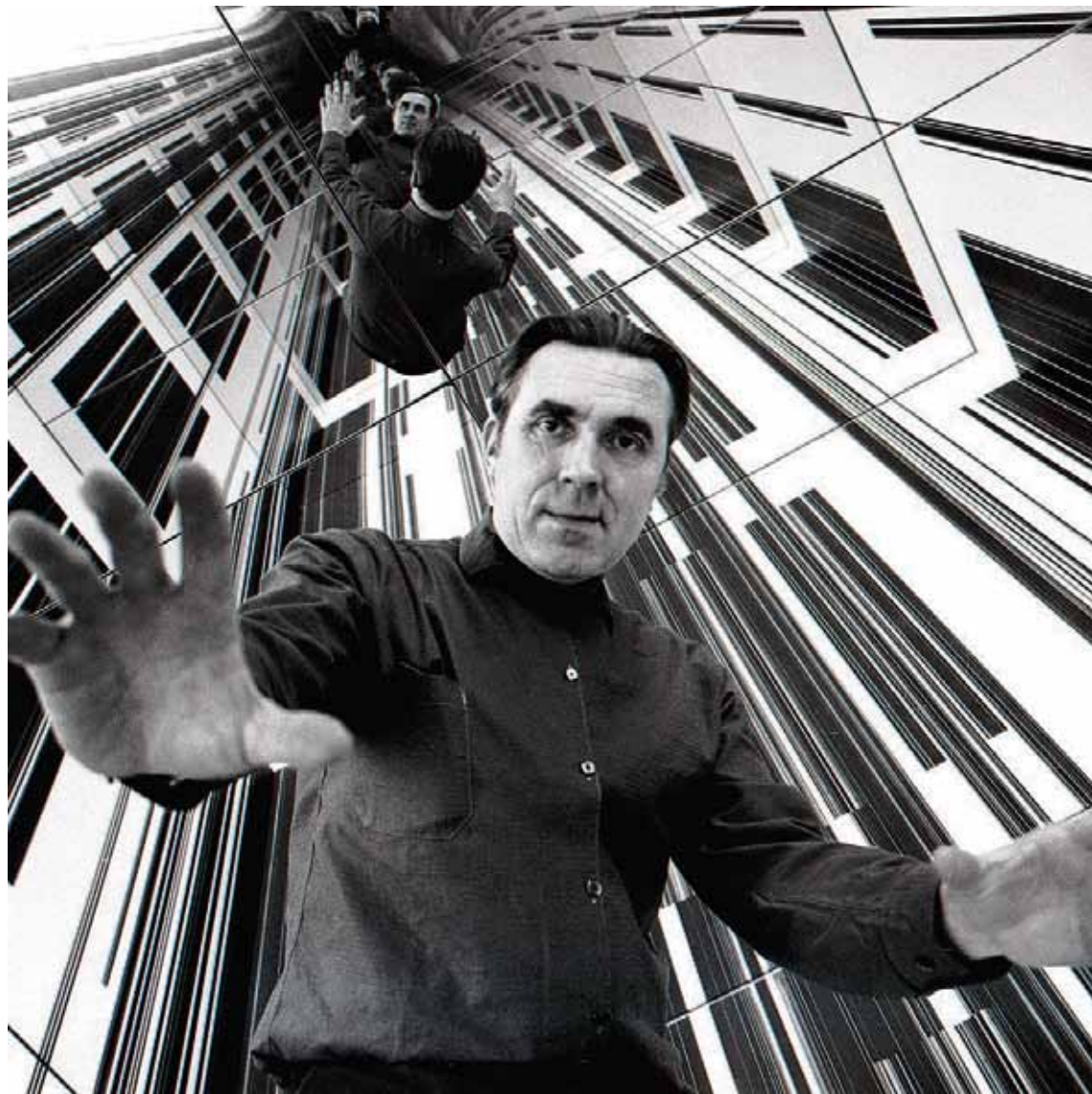
"He visited all the sites and monuments of the Renaissance, saw Giotto and Piero della Francesca, and that was perhaps an affirmation of his own vision and concept of art."

Marc is Luc's nephew, and the curator and archivist of the Jenny and Luc Peire Foundation in Knokke, on the Flemish coast, which looks after the artist's collection.

Luc continued to travel in the late 1940s and early 1950s, taking inspiration from the light and colours in southern Europe and on the Canary Islands. But it was a visit to the Belgian Congo in 1952-53 that produced a definitive thematic shift. Confronted with a population in which he saw humanity en masse rather than as individuals, he started to represent the human form in more general terms.

"He said this was the moment when he moved from the anecdotic man to the spiritual man, to the human being," says Marc. "And that was the beginning of his abstraction."

This is where the exhibition at FelixArt begins, with a room full of rich blue paintings where human figures are made from supple lines and circles. These figures are



© Jean Mil

While "Environment" is a kind of total expression of the ideas of Luc Peire (pictured here in "Environment I"), it was also a dead end

arranged in a landscape of planes and colours, a magical, metaphysical space.

Through the 1950s these stylised figures became straight lines, a representation of humanity in an idealised space that might be a room, an artist's studio or a stage. Several paintings from this period also feature curtains, a further suggestion of the theatre but also a way of creating depth though apparent undulations of fabric within the flat surface of the painting.

While these and later paintings seem purely abstract, the names are still suggestive: "Godot", "Brasilia", "Lucca", "Venice", "Atlantic". "Each painting had a connection with something he had experienced or read," Marc explains. "It's not a rigid abstraction; there is always something personal."

Usually Luc kept these inspirations to himself, only once explaining to a critic the detailed story behind a painting. But one can see connections, for instance in a series of "Elegies" that all deploy blues and blacks for mourning, or a series named after French cathedrals which share a mood of sombre greyness.

From the mid-1950s Luc also started to experiment with new techniques, in particular coating Formica and then Plexiglas with black paint that could then be scraped away to create lines of black and white, or black and light. The effect is very fine and nuanced, appearing to purify the abstraction. Even so, there is something instinctive about the arrangements of lines. "Luc Peire was not a symmet-

“

Luc Peire was not a symmetric or a geometric painter, but a painter of balance

ric or a geometric painter, but a painter of balance," his nephew says.

One way he used this technique was to produce a series of square towers of varying heights, whose lined sides are lit from inside, reproducing his visual theme in three dimensions. He made prototypes of these "Lumino Tours" in groups of four in the 1970s, then several sets in 1980.

"When these multiples were made, all 25 were put together, making an extraordinary city," Marc recalls. Afterwards they were sold and dispersed, but FelixArt has collected 17 towers from different collections and grouped them together. A powerful light shines through them on to a white wall. Peire: "With the reflections and shadows, one can imagine the effect."

The artist's urge to see his ideas realised in three dimensions and extended into the living, working environment also resulted in a handful of monumental projects. In the exhibition these are presented through photographs, models and documents. Some can still be seen in real life, such as the

tower "Teken" on the Gasthuisberg campus of Leuven's University Hospital, or the interior of Roodebeek metro station in Brussels.

Others have disappeared, such as a large amphitheatre in a housing project in Marne-la-Vallée, France, where Peire's patterns of lines on the floor of the square mirrored the verticals of the surrounding tower blocks. The pattern has now either been removed or covered over.

But "Environment" is the culmination of this line of thought, a way for Luc to place the spectator inside his art. Built in 1967 for an exhibition in France, it was subsequently bought by the Belgian state and then passed on to the Flemish community. It usually resides at the Foundation, but has exceptionally been moved to FelixArt for the next couple of months.

From the late 1950s, Peire split his time between France and Belgium, usually giving up Paris in the heat of summer for the cool of the Flemish coast. After his death in 1994, the Foundation was set up to look after his collection and archive, and also took charge of his villa and studio in Knokke.

The villa was demolished in 2003 and replaced by a building more suitable for storing the 200 or so art works in the collection. It also has a small exhibition space, which is open for a few months each summer. The studio at the bottom of the garden is kept much as Peire left it.

"We cannot do very much," Marc concedes. "This is not a museum with a museum's infrastructure, but a foundation. We help organise exhibitions, like the one at Drogenbos, and we are a point of contact for collectors and galleries."

Groups can visit the Foundation by appointment and see the collection, the studio and "Environment", but the exhibition at FelixArt is an exceptional chance to see the work displayed in museum conditions.

While "Environment" is a kind of total expression of Luc's ideas, it was also a dead end. A second and third version were built for exhibitions in New Zealand and Mexico, but no work in the same vein followed to extend the idea. Yet he continued to paint.

"Towards the end of his career there were lots of paintings that are like doors," Marc says, referring to paintings such as the crimson "Tasman" from 1988, which appears in the FelixArt exhibition. "The verticals are no longer grouped together but pushed to left and right, and the colour red draws the eye in towards the infinite."

Until 15 May

FelixArt

Kuikenstraat 6, Drogenbos

On the waterfront

Malta: Land of Sea

Until 28 May

Bozar, Brussels

\ BOZAR.BE

About halfway through Bozar's new exhibition, *Malta: Land of Sea*, visitors will find a 24-hour video stream of the island's Grand Harbour. Called "A Bollard's View", the recording monitors the ferries that come in and out of the port, encapsulating the Maltese obsession with the Mediterranean.

It quickly becomes clear why Malta's inhabitants keep a watchful eye on the water, as the nation's history – as a military battleground, a cultural melting pot and, more recently, a haven – is told, with the Mediterranean a ubiquitous presence.

Curated by Sandro Debono, *Land of*

Sea tells this story of the EU's smallest country through a quirky collection of more than 60 pieces that present a land in fear and awe of the sea that surrounds it.

"The Mediterranean Sea remains a place of opportunity and risk," reads an inscription on the exhibition's wall. The show's collection of rifles, hinting at the island's swashbuckling past, demonstrates the latter. Separated into nine broad categories, *Land of Sea* follows a non-chronological structure, mixing media, centuries and themes, so that each object "acquires new meanings", Debono says.

And while the exhibition's focus is the sea, it seeks to show a nation



© Palazzo Falson Historic House Museum
Fomm ir-Rih, 1866 Edward Lear

that is more than its proximity to the water, as it celebrates the country's Catholic links and diversity. The non-linear structure allows 19th-century rosary beads to be seated next to tiny terracotta figurines and modern installations, chronicling the waves of civilisations that have contributed what Debono calls "threads to Malta's cultural weave".

A loan from Florence's Uffizi gallery of Caravaggio's "Portrait of Antonia Martelli, Knight of Malta" give the exhibition a sprinkle of star power, while there is also an impressive collection of prehistoric artefacts.

And despite its European link – the show coincides with the nation's presidency of the EU – only one piece directly nods to the Mediterranean's central role in a European crisis: a weather-beaten compass used by refugees to cross the treacherous ocean.

"In the land of sea, both then and now, instruments of navigation serve as the tools with which to find the land of hope," Debono says.

\ Mari Eccles

THEATRE

The Crucible

7-11 March, 20.00

Viage Theatre, Brussels

\ ATCBUSSELS.COM

Brussels' American Theatre Company has chosen a most appropriate time to revive Arthur Miller's classic 1953 play *The Crucible*. When it was first staged, the American playwright's version of the Salem witch trials was recognised as a thinly veiled allegory of contemporary fear-mongering, particularly as practised by notorious US senator Joe McCarthy. Now the right is once more on the rise and its demagogues are using the same tactics to scapegoat foreigners and other marginalised groups. The ATC production is directed by Christopher Flores.

\ Georgio Valentino



FESTIVAL

Brussels Flamenco Festival

2-4 March

Bozar, Brussels

\ BOZAR.BE

Bozar celebrates Andalusian music and dance with the help of guest performers from Spain as well as representatives of Brussels' own thriving flamenco scene, organised with the Spanish embassy and boasts several performances. Spanish guitarist Gerardo Núñez and his quartet fuse flamenco and jazz. Master musician Miguel Vargas lead a workshop on the regional Extremadura style cultivated in Spain's western provinces. Internationally acclaimed dancer Eva Yerbabuena performs her weather-appropriate *Lluvia* (Rain). And the Horta Hall is transformed into a pop-up Andalusian village, complete with authentic food and drink. \ GV



VISUAL ARTS

Alec Soth: Gathered Leaves

Until 4 June

FotoMuseum, Antwerp

\ FOMU.BE

Minneapolis-based documentary photographer Alec Soth ignores the glitz and glamour of coastal America for the eccentricity of flyover country. His 2004 breakthrough photo book, *Sleeping by the Mississippi*, was a quirky road trip up and down the country's central artery. He has since continued his explorations of middle America, often in the employ of publications like the *New York Times* as well as prestigious photography agency Magnum. His work evokes the free-spirited vagabondage of Jack Kerouac. *Gathered Leaves* is his first solo exhibition in Belgium and covers his entire career. \ GV



FILM

Black Snow

7 March, 20.00

Bozar, Brussels

\ BOZAR.BE

Chinese director Xie Fei's award-winning 1990 drama gave the world a street-level view of a turbulent period in Chinese society. The film follows an ex-con as he attempts to resume his life and stay out of trouble in Tiananmen Square-era Beijing. Unfortunately the same forces that provoked the famous student protests keep Xie's protagonist from the good life. Part of a retrospective programme celebrating Xie's 50-year career. It's preceded by a conference at Brussels art school INSAS and followed by a Q&A session with the director himself (pictured). (Film in Mandarin with English surtitles, talk in English.) \ GV



CONCERT

Brussels

Thievery Corporation: Veteran American trip-hop duo return to Europe to promote their latest album, *The Temple of I & I*. Their recent work explores Brazilian and world music. 4 March 20.00, *Ancienne Belgique*, *Anspachlaan 110*

\ abconcerts.be

Antwerp

Lukas Graham: This Danish pop/rock group debuted strong with last year's hit single, "7 Years". Now, with a follow-up record and tour, they hope to prove they have staying power. 9 March 18.30, *Lotto Arena*, *Schijspoortweg 119*

\ lotto-arena.be

CLASSICAL

Ghent

Anastasia Kozhushko & Matthieu Idmtal: Thirteenth-century concert hall hosts this matinee concert by a young duo who specialise in piano four-hand interpretations of Chopin, Liszt, Schubert and Tchaikovsky. 9 March 14.00, *Bijloke*, *Jozef Kluyskensstraat 2*

\ bijloke.be

THEATRE

Brussels

Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare: Belgian premiere of contemporary British theatre company Forced Entertainment's marathon staging of Shakespeare's complete works in miniature. In (Shakespearean) English. 7-12 March, *Kaaistudio's*, *Onze Lieve Vrouw Van Vaakstraat 81*

\ kaaitheater.be

VISUAL ARTS

Ghent

James Welling: Metamorphosis: Career-spanning exhibition of work by the celebrated American art photographer. Since the 1970s, Welling has pushed the boundaries of his medium, often by mixing it up with painting, sculpture and performance art. Until 16 April, *SMAK*, *Jan Hoetplein 1*

\ smak.be

EVENT

Antwerp

Belgian Tube Days: Second edition of Belgium's YouTube convention brings internet stars from Belgium and the Netherlands to meet their fans. Main stage panel moderated by young Flemish television star Amir Motaffaf. 5 March 11.00, *Waagnatie*, *Rijnkaai 150*

\ belgiantubedays.be

Talking Dutch

Driven to despair



Derek Blyth

More articles by Derek \ flanderstoday.eu

You might think the traffic couldn't get any worse. But have you ever wondered whether your journey to work is the worst in the country?

Maybe you think it can't get any worse than the morning rush hour on Wetstraat between Schumanplein and the Kleine Ring. Or perhaps you find yourself grinding your teeth in despair as you crawl along in first gear on the A12 between Wilrijk and Boom.

You can now find out if you have to endure the worst congestion in the land by looking at the results of a poll by Radio 1. *Staat u in de frustrerendste file van Vlaanderen en Brussel?* – Are you stuck in the most frustrating traffic jam in Flanders and Brussels?

We willen met de luisteraars – We want to work with our listeners *naar oplossingen zoeken voor het fileprobleem* – to find solutions to the traffic problem, explained traffic news host Hajo Beeckman in an interview with *De Redactie*.

One of the problems the radio presenters uncovered was that the traffic updates on the news often missed the really congested spots. *Op Radio 1 hebben we het*



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in de nieuwsbulletins vooral over de dagelijkse files op de snelwegen – On Radio 1 we mainly focus on the daily traffic jams on the motorways *maar de meeste tijd verlies je vooral op de lokale wegen en gewestwegen* – but you lose the most time on local and regional roads, Beeckman pointed out.

According to figures compiled by the government of Flanders, the region's commuters spend a total of 125,000 hours every day stuck in traffic. *Maar dat zijn enkel cijfers voor de snelwegen* – but those figures only apply to the motorways, Beeckman argued. The true total is much higher, he said.

And this is hurting a lot of people.

Het gaat niet alleen over problemen voor pendelaars – It's not just a problem for commuters, *maar over het dagelijks verkeer van mensen die hun boodschappen doen* – but it also affects the daily journeys of people doing their grocery shopping *of thuisverplegers die zich verplaatsen naar hun volgende patient* – or caregivers who are driving to visit their next patient.

So Radio 1 devoted a week to programmes about mobility. *We willen de luisteraars inspireren* – We wanted to inspire our listeners *om na te denken over hun mobiliteit* – to reflect on their mobility, Beeckman explained.

The main action was a poll called Stop 30, which listed 30 of the most annoying traffic jams across Flanders and Brussels. *De luisteraars kunnen stemmen op de file die hij of zij het meest frustrerend vindt* – The listeners could vote for the traffic jam that he or she found the most frustrating.

And the prize for the worst traffic jam went to... the Brussels Ring between Groot-Bijgaarden and Vilvoorde. So if that's on your journey to work, you might want to find a new route.

VOICES OF FLANDERS TODAY



In response to: Top orchestra leaves Britain for Antwerp over Brexit fears

Fay Simcock: I've mixed emotions; sadness and shame for my country of birth but great news for all of us here in Belgium ☺



In response to: Most Belgians want mandatory cycle helmets for children

Maya Parson: Absolutely.



In response to: It's Carnival time, so party like a local

Christine Alves: I'm from Rio and I can't believe I will be wearing a coat on carnival ☺



Dana @dana_nastase

#Aalst knows how to party!



Naomi Ray-Mathur @naomi_gabrielle

To Ghent and back again... once again the football was the lowlight of another fun away trip!!



Nathalie @iiwant5SOS

Convincing my mom to go with me to the concert in Antwerp
♥♥



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PHOTO OF THE WEEK



© Arnd Wiegmann/Reuters

SLIPPERY SLOPE Twenty-year-old Kim Meylemans of Maaseik in Limburg speeds her way to fifth place in the Skeleton World Championships, held last week in Germany

THE LAST WORD

Lose-lose situation

"You feel like hitting the man, but obviously that's not a very good idea. So you do nothing, and afterwards you feel guilty. You just can't win, that's the worst part."

Cartoonist Hanne Dewachter was sexually assaulted by a passer-by in broad daylight near Brussels North station, in an incident she turned into a comic strip

\ dorktoescomic.com

Anti-social media

"I missed out on part of my youth. I had no friends any more, I never went out. I only lived in the virtual world."

Reboot Camp is a rehab centre for gaming addicts like Matthias Dewilde, now working as a digital media coach in Ghent

The penny drops

"I'm halfway there, and there are about 65,000 coins down. It'll take about 150,000 to cover the whole shop floor."

Wetteren optician Dietbrand Van Durme is busy gluing one-cent coins to form a new floor covering for his shop

Lab success

"We had hoped our idea would work, but the result surprised even us. We couldn't believe our eyes."

Alzheimer's expert Bart De Strooper of the University of Leuven on his lab's success implanting human brain cells into mice, to help study the progress of the disease



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