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From the photo book *Flandrien* by Flemish photographer Stephan Vanfleteren

Cycling moves up a gear

How biking is booming in Flanders

Lisa Bradshaw

As both amateurs and professionals will tell you, cycling in Flanders has never been more popular. Belgium is one of only a few countries with professional women's teams, and pros are moving in from around the world, including British medallist Emma Davies Jones.

When British cyclist Emma Davies Jones moved from northern England to East Flanders in the spring of 2005, she had no idea it would be the most transformational year of her life. The Olympic contender had signed on with Team Vlaanderen and settled in

Oudenaarde to live and train. She married her fiancé that September back home in Britain and stayed awhile to train on the bike paths of Manchester. In October, a car hit her, knocked her down and drove away. The fall broke the cyclist's back.

"I was going straight forward

in a cycle lane, and the car turned left," Davies Jones remembers. "I was leaning against the car, screaming. He accelerated, and I lost my balance. I fell very quickly on my back."

Continued on page 4



Business

Ghent's inland port has become a major centre for dismantling old ships. We find out about a company that is taking warships apart without harming the environment

Arts

European photographers have been capturing the changing face of Brussels since the early days of photography. Two exhibitions show the city as a strange and sometimes seductive place

Active

Pressure is mounting on people to abandon their cars and use public transport. We take a look at some of the interesting places you can get to in Flanders for the price of a single ticket

Debt hits record levels

More people than ever face credit crunch

Alan Hope

A record number of Belgians are in debt, with some families paying off three or more lines of credit at once, according to figures from the National Bank. At the end of the year 4.7 million Belgians were paying off 7.5 million credit agreements – a rise of 5% in a year. The largest growth was in hire-purchase agreements, which, together with store credit, accounts for nearly half of all debt.

At the same time, the weight of mortgages rose by 7.1% and car-loans by 6.8%. Hire-purchase involves smaller amounts – on average €4,600 – and can cover anything

from home renovations to electronic goods. The accumulation of smaller debts, together with interest rates as high as 19% per annum, often leads to arrears and defaults.

The number of cases of bad debt also rose, for the first time in five years, to nearly 339,000. One in five (some 65,000) took their problems to debt counsellors, who last week revealed that the profile of the average person with debt problems was changing: one in three is now younger than 25, and is more likely than ever to come from a home with one or even two incomes.

Continued on page 3

EDITOR'S CHOICE

The Low Countries

Anyone who wants to keep in touch with what's happening in Dutch-speaking Europe should take a quick look at one of the newest blogs jostling for attention in cyberspace. It comes from the cultural organisation Ons Erfdeel and provides snappy views in English on Flanders and the Netherlands. The blog is still a fresh-faced babe on the Internet but has already reported on hot new issues, like the book behind Geert Mak's 35-part TV history blockbuster *In Europa*, now airing on Canvas every week.

The blog is written by the serious cultural organisation Ons Erfdeel, but still manages to slip in a sly snippet of celebrity gossip, namely the recent rumour that Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie were planning to buy a house in Amsterdam. It turns out that the rumour was spun by the people at Madame Tussaud's, who placed two wax effigies of the couple in front of a house on the Leidsegracht and, what do you know, house prices locally went through the step-gabled roof.

Admittedly, we at Flanders Today are only really interested in what happens in the region below the tulip line. So our eyes immediately fell on the tag Brussels, which we clicked to find an article talking about ... *Flanders*

Today. Well, it's a small world. It turns out that *Flanders Today* is a name shared by the newspaper you are holding in your hands and one of the sections of the VRT's English-language news site.

Now, we don't want to be competitive here, but, just out of interest, let's see how many blog entries are on Flanders compared to the Netherlands. The result: out of 10 entries so far, six deal with the Netherlands, and, er, four are on Flemish topics. A humiliating defeat for Flanders, you might think, but no, you have to take into account that the Netherlands has a population of 17 million whereas Flanders has just six million. So, adjusting for population, the final result appears to be: Netherlands six, Flanders 12.

Anyway, our advice is to save this blog in your favourites and click it on any time you start to think that you're living in a boring part of the world. Those people really know about everything that is exciting and weird in the region that stretches from Westvleteren's brewing monks to the quiet cycle-friendly streets of Groningen.

DB

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www.thelowcountries.blogspot.com

NYDOW



Find out about the plan to deliver affordable homes for New Orleans on The Low Countries blog

FACE OF FLANDERS



Titus De Voogdt

Titus De Voogdt is the kind of actor who would be famous were he located in Hollywood. With a casual ease and a disarming ability to convey the authentic, he is every ounce a Sean Penn of 20 years ago. "I'm not a well-known actor in Belgium," he says. But anyone who's followed Flemish cinema of the last few years would disagree. From De Voogdt's debut feature four years ago in Tom Barman's *Any Way the Wind Blows* to his first starring role in *Steve + Sky* to his latest film *Small Gods* (see photo), the actor's rough-around-the-edges style of charisma makes him uniquely memorable.

De Voogdt's first stint in front of the camera was on a children's educational TV programme when he was 12. Later on, his best friend was a stage actor, and he used to go along with him to the theatre. "One day he had to do something else, and I had to take his part," he explains. Then in the mid-90s, De Voogdt was cast in *Bernadetje*, a bustling musical circus by Belgian theatre greats Alain Platel and Arne Sierens. The show was a huge hit, both in Belgium and abroad. De Voogdt's role as a theatre actor was set in stone.

Together with Sierens and others, the 29-year-old now runs Compagnie Cecilia theatre company in Ghent, where he lives with his girlfriend and new baby. De Voogdt is grateful for the work onstage because in cinema "there's never enough work for me," he says. He chooses his roles carefully, and both his star turns have been quietly nervous characters, anti-heroes you trust one moment and fear the next. "You always want to make the character a little exaggerated, always a bit on the edge – the edge of society," he explains. "I like that because mediocre is boring. If you want to see ordinary people, go to a supermarket."

Still, though he did pass on playing a surgeon on a TV series ("I'm not a surgeon," he says), the best Flemish actor of his generation is not exactly turning down offers right and left. He actually gets very few. "I have the feeling that people just don't ask me for things that they know I'll say no to," he explains. "I never tried to profile myself as an art-film kind of guy, but it just happened. I will not play in movies that I don't like just for the money."

Which is a pretty good recommendation for *Small Gods*. Releasing this week, the film co-stars De Voogdt as David, who kidnaps a young woman named Elena from a hospital to take her on a road trip in a broken-down camper. Eventually we learn that David is on a spiritual quest to bring moments of happiness to complete strangers. With Elena, he feels the need to go further, but he's terrifyingly unpredictable. Every moment, you're waiting for him to explode – or possibly implode. "Most actors, if you ask them about the personality of their characters, they have a unique outlook on it," he says. "But with David, I don't. He's difficult to read, even for me."

De Voogdt got the part before there was even a movie. "I got a telephone call: 'Hello, my name is Dimitri Karakatsanis, and I would like to make a movie with you.' He tells me that he has no money and no script." Many actors would have hung up the phone and changed their numbers, but not De Voogdt. He met with the first-time director, and the two became good friends. Eventually there was a script but still no money, so De Voogdt took the role unpaid. "In Belgium, it's hard to be an actor," he explains. "It's small, and there are not a lot of directors I'd really like to work with. And then someone comes along who you like, and you notice you have similarities. It sounds cheesy, but I believed in the project."

Lisa Bradshaw

See our interview with Dimitri Karakatsanis, director of *Small Gods*, on page 9.

TALKING DUTCH

notes on language



Potverdekk!

This week's column is not for those of a delicate disposition. The most difficult thing about learning another language is the swear words. It isn't a matter of words but knowing when you can use them. As children, we grow up learning these words, and when and with whom you can and cannot use them. You soon learn if you've made a mistake; you probably remember times when you swore in front of the wrong person, usually your mother.

The remarkable thing about swear words is that we may recognise them in a foreign language, but they don't really shock us. However, when it's your swear words being used in another language, that is doubly shocking. So imagine, if you can, how I gasped when I read the other week the headline of an article about the people behind the renovated *Standfeestzaal winkelcentrum*, that spanking new shopping centre, the pride of Antwerp. It read *Shit, wij kregen de trots van Antwerpen in handen. Sh*t* – I really can't write out the word in English – has its place but surely not in a headline or, as I frequently hear, in serious political debate on Flemish television.

Clearly, *shit* is being used here as a mild expletive, perhaps like "good grief!" or "crumbs!"

I can almost hear you muttering that the writer is perhaps past his use-by date, too genteel for the modern age. *Poppycock*, I say! I can swear with the best of them, but I know that swearing is an art. By the way, "*poppycock*", the preferred mild expletive of maiden aunts, actually comes from the Dutch for ... soft *sh**. A great example of how swear words lose their power when they switch languages.

Recent studies into swearing show marked differences between the Netherlands and Flanders. Yes, professors devote their careers to enquiring into such matters. I read about this under the great headline which ran: *Shit, een enquête over vloeken*. The Dutch prefer to curse you by calling down nasty diseases: *krijg de kanker aan het hart!* or *krijg de pus!* The Flemish are too nice to do that. They restrict themselves to *shit!* *verdorie!* and *Jezus!* They also enjoy using *stapenvloeken*, multiple swear words, such as *godverdomme!* *miljardeklote*, which I don't have the space to translate. Not everyone approves of swearing and certainly not in the Netherlands, where you can find *de Bond tegen het Vloeken*. Their goal? According to their website, *De Bond zet zich in voor respectvol taalgebruik*. No doubt necessary and laudable. On the other hand, there is *de Bond voor Vloeken*, which claims that *als je vloekt gooi je allerlei stress van je af*. So, unload your stress by swearing. This clearly calls for a comparative study.

As a learner of the language, I prefer to remain prim. However, on occasion I do echo the famous first line of John Makin's, aka Mister John, great ode to Belgium, knowing I will offend no one: *Potverdekk!* It's great to be a Belgian!

Alistair MacLean

online
www.vandale.be



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Editor: Derek Blyth
Deputy editor: Lisa Bradshaw
Agenda: Sarah Crew
Picture research: Esther Bourrée
Prepress: Nancy Temmerman
Contributors: Marie Dumont, An Gyde, Alan Hope, Alistair MacLean, Katharine Mill, Monique Philips, Steven Tate, Rory Watson
Project manager: Pascale Zoetert
Publisher: VUM
NV Vlaamse Uitgeversmaatschappij
Gossetlaan 28, 1702 Groot-Bijgaarden
Editorial address: Waterloosesteenweg 1038
1180 Brussels
Tel.: 02.373.99.09 – Fax: 02.375.98.22
E-mail: editorial@flanderstoday.eu

Debt problems grow worse

Continued from page 1

An information campaign will begin shortly aimed at young people, and two organisations are preparing packages for schools on the problems of debt.

The debt crisis comes as pressure grows for the government to take action to combat a loss of *koopkracht*, or purchasing power. Last week figures showed that for the first time since the 1980s, workers in a number of sectors, including telecommunications, IT and tourism saw their pay fall behind the consumer price index to which it is supposed to be linked. Prices last year rose by 2.64%, while pay rose only 1.82%.

National Bank governor Guy

Quaden has asked the European Central Bank in Frankfurt to carry out a study on the effects of linking salaries to the price index. Belgium is alone among European countries in maintaining any sort of link, which is generally seen as responsible for making industry less competitive.

Meanwhile, the Regulatory Commission for Electricity and Gas (CREG), an independent watchdog, estimated that the average family would have to pay higher energy charges in the coming year amounting to as much as €300: €100 for electricity and €200 for gas. That represents increases of 15% and 25% respectively and comes alongside recent increases in food prices.

Mechelen bids to become Cultural Capital

Mechelen will put itself forward as Belgium's candidate for European Cultural capital in 2015, city authorities revealed last week. The Flemish city joins Mons, which put its own candidacy forward three years ago. Mechelen's bid started in September last year, when a "nomination coordinator" was appointed. The federal government will issue a call for nominations by the end of the year, after which cities will have eight months to submit their bids. A jury of six Belgians and seven European experts will then have until the end of 2009 to make a pre-selection.

This year's cultural capitals are Liverpool in Britain and Stavanger in Norway, where the Flemish theatre company Muziektheater Transparant is performing the musical fairytale *A girl, a boy, a river* from 15-17 February.



NEWS FLASH



Strikes hit car plants

Following a strike at several of Ford Genk's suppliers, which ended with workers going back last week, workers at the plant itself downed tools on Thursday. They are demanding permanent contracts and a cut in working time but also a pay rise. Talks between management and unions failed to reach a solution, and an arbiter has been called in. Unions, meanwhile, threatened to spread the strike-action to other car producers beginning with Opel Antwerp. "People are waiting to see the result at Ford Genk," one organiser said. Workers at car-seat maker Johnson Controls went on strike on Friday.

Ben X ruled out of Oscars

Ben X, Flemish director Nic Balthazar's film about an autistic boy, has been left off the short-list of nominees for Best Foreign Language Film at the Academy Awards in May. The film, based on a true story, was Belgium's official entry for the Oscar and one of 63 foreign films in the running. Balthazar said he had never counted on a nomination but speculated that his film might have done better had it not been screened for Academy members at 22.30 on a Friday evening after a hard week. "Half of them had to leave halfway through because of fatigue," he said. The film won three prizes at the Montreal World Film Festival last year.

Broadcasters attack rules on product placement

The Flemish government is looking at ways of making the rules against product placement in TV programmes more flexible, it admitted last week, following complaints from broadcasters that the Flemish Media Regulator (VRM) was "too strict and arbitrary" in handing out fines to TV companies. Representatives of the independent regulator were last week called to report to the media committee of the Flemish parliament. In 2007 the VRM handed out fines of €119,750 for offences such as the prolonged view of a Coca-Cola can in the VRT series *Witse*, which is sponsored by Coca-Cola.

Murder suspects detained

Belgian police have detained three suspects in connection with the murder of police officer Kitty Van Nieuwenhuyzen in Beersel, Flemish Brabant. Van Nieuwenhuyzen, 23, was killed during an armed carjacking on December 4. The suspects, who have not been named for legal reasons, all have criminal convictions for armed robberies.



Calls for more English teaching in higher education

Flemish education minister Frank Vandenbroucke was criticised in the Flemish parliament over a proposal to extend the use of languages other than Dutch in higher education courses. One N-VA member called the proposal "not useful and not desirable". But the idea was supported by Open VLD minister for economy, Patricia Ceysens.

At present, 10% of all bachelor-level courses

may be taught in English. For masters-level, there are no restrictions other than the requirement for an equivalent course to be available in Dutch. Ceysens wants that rule, which she blamed for needless duplication, to be scrapped.

Vandenbroucke's proposal comes as figures reveal that the number of foreign students studying with Erasmus grants at Flanders'

universities and colleges remains low, barely more than the 2% reached in the 2005-2006 academic year. Leuven, Ghent, Antwerp and Hasselt lead, and most students come from Spain, France and Italy, with Poland and Scandinavia on the increase. By far the greatest number – more than 3,000 in all – come from the Netherlands, though not all via Erasmus.

Only about 8% of Flemish students spend even a semester studying at an Erasmus university abroad – Vandenbroucke hopes more courses in English might also lead to an increase there. Between Erasmus and other programmes, 12.5% of Flemish students graduate with some foreign study experience.

One senior academic, retired Antwerp University lecturer Jozef Devreese, said the increase in courses in English was "the wrong medicine based on a mistaken diagnosis". The problem is not that too few foreign students are coming to Flemish universities, he wrote in an opinion piece in *De Standaard*, but that the quality of those who do come is not high enough. The solution to that problem was not to offer courses in English, he said, but to improve the standards of universities as a whole. The international attraction exercised by some Dutch universities was not a result of the courses they offer in English, he said, but "the exceptional scientific excellence of their professors, researchers and laboratories."

Alan Hope

Post Office to tackle absenteeism

The management of the Belgian Post Office is considering strict new rules to tackle the problem of absenteeism, it was announced. Last year saw an end to a five-year trend towards falling absenteeism. According to a letter from Post Office boss Johnny Thys to 34,000 mail-carriers, the organisation every year pays out about €120 million – the equivalent of 3,200 full-time jobs – to people who are not at work. Hours lost are moving steadily from a low of 8.5% up to 10%, where it was five years ago. The new measures would include immediate dismissal in cases of abuse, checks on the situation of individual absences and reductions in the work of offices that perform badly. Post Office unions called the plans "unacceptable".

Dutch doctor struck off for alternative cancer treatment still works in Flanders

Patrick Van Eeghem, the doctor who was struck off the register for life in the Netherlands but who continues to work legally in Flanders, has called for his case to be fully investigated by the Order of Medical Practitioners. Dr Van Eeghem was disbarred earlier this month by Dutch healthcare inspectors for using "alternative medicine" in the treatment of cancer patients, but the ban does not prevent him practising in Belgium. He is accused of using cosmic rays and energy therapy on cancer patients, as well as employing a divining-rod in diagnosis. He has been suspended by the Groeninge hospital in Kortrijk, where he has worked as a gastro-enterology specialist for more than 20 years, but continues to work in his private practice.

Royal Library seeks sponsor to buy manuscript from 1500

The Royal Library has contacted a number of banks and insurance companies looking for a sponsor to help it acquire the medieval manuscript known as the Antifonarium Tsgrooten. The manuscript, consisting of 21 illuminated capitals and 42 miniature paintings, was made around the year 1500 by the Leuven scribe Franciscus van Weert on the orders of the abbot of Tongerlo, Antonius Tsgrooten. The asking price of €400,000 represents virtually the entire annual acquisition fund of the library. The Meroe family tried to arouse interest among Belgium's cultural institutions last year but without success. It now plans to auction the manuscript in London.

FEATURE



"It's a fantastic place for cyclists": British pro cyclist Emma Davies Jones moved to Flanders in 2005 and has never looked back

Pedal power

Continued from page 1

Right away, she wanted to sit up, but one of the witnesses who came to her aid convinced her not to. She soon learned that a piece of bone had gone backward toward her spinal column. Had she sat up, it probably would have cut into it, paralysing her.

"That piece of bone was just sitting there waiting to slice it," she says. Just after the accident, Davies Jones suffered a temporary loss of feeling from the waist down. "I couldn't feel my feet, and I had no reflexes. That scared me the most." At the hospital, the prognosis was grim. "It wasn't just about learning to ride a bike again, I had to learn to walk," the 29-year-old says. "They told me I would never compete again."

Davies Jones had been competing since she was a teenager for the British national team. She was predominantly a road racer, but her specialty was track cycling. In 1998, she won a bronze in the British national championship for individual pursuit. Two years later, she upped that to a silver and was selected to go to the Sydney Olympics. She returned to the Olympics

four years later in Athens, where she was placed eighth in pursuit.

So hearing that she would never compete again did not sit well. "After seven days, I started learning to walk; I set small goals every day," she says. "As an athlete, you're always asking 'what is your next goal, what do you want to achieve?' I took all the discipline and the goal setting and put that into my life."

On 10 January 2006, three months to the day after the accident, her doctors told her she could get back on her bike. "I went out for 45 minutes straight away,"

she says. And then two months later, she went out and won the bronze medal in the Commonwealth Games. Before her accident, she had placed fourth but never medalled in the world-class competition.

How did she manage it? She gives a one-word answer: "Determination."

The cycling world's competitors and fans marvelled at her success. She did, too. "I shocked myself," she admits. "On the day of the race, I got everything out – all the frustration, all the anxiety, I put

into that one ride. It was determination and hard headedness and a hell of a lot of good luck."

Before the accident, Davies Jones lived in Flanders on her own – apart from her husband – planning to just stay temporarily until the end of the season. But then "we realised that life was very short. Why should we live apart and travel between Belgium and Britain?" So he moved to Flanders, too, where he works as a chef. "We thought if we didn't like it, we can always go back." But they like it. "It's a fantastic place for pro cyclists," she exclaims. "Belgium is highly underrated, especially the Flemish region. I don't think cyclists realise how lucky they are with the quality of the roads and the training."

The excellent roads and paths make cycling enjoyable for the casual cyclist as well. "I think everybody in Belgium owns a bike," she says. "You go out on a Saturday or a Sunday and find people riding bikes with a car following behind them. You would never, ever see that in England." This national pastime is infectious. "I know people who didn't start riding a bike until they got here,"

Emma's choice

There are plenty of bike trails in Flanders, but everyone has their favourites. Here are Emma Davies Jones' recommendations:

From Oudenaarde to Kluisbergen: It's not an official bike path, "but there's a back road, and then you can come back along the canal. It's about an hour, and it's a nice little route, very scenic. Oudenaarde has a big town hall and church, and you can see those from a distance coming towards you, which is quite nice."

Tour of Flanders: "I like doing sections of the Tour of Flanders. If you start at the Tour of Flanders Centre in Oudenaarde [Markt 43], you can do varying distances of the tour itself. You can pick up a map, and the routes are colour coded along the way."

Flemish government gets on its bike

New fund to create 100 km of cycle paths

Derek Blyth

The Flemish government has assembled a €60 million fund dedicated to creating almost 100 kilometres of cycle paths in the region this year. The package, announced by mobility minister Kathleen Van Brempt and public works minister Hilde Crevits, involves bundling funds from three separate budgets for road improvements. Some €27 million comes from the "mobility covenant" signed by the Region and the municipalities for creating cycle paths along the main regional routes (where cycling is often at its most hazardous). A further €23.4 million comes from the Flemish department of transport's fund for improving the cycle infrastructure, and the final €10 million is generated by the Fietsfonds, a special fund set up in 2007 to create cycle paths on local roads.

The Flemish government is now committed to investing an annual €60 million in cycle paths out of its yearly €240 million budget for roads. The decision is welcomed by cycling pressure groups, who have been urging the government to act faster to improve road safety for "vulnerable" groups such as cyclists and pedestrians.

One new government scheme is the Meldpunt Fietspaden, or cycle path contact point, an online site created last October to register complaints from cyclists. The site allows anyone living in the five provinces of Flanders to register a complaint about the state of a cycle path. The message is then forwarded to the relevant town hall, provincial office or regional department.

Figures for the first two-and-a-half months show that Antwerp province has the highest number of disgruntled cyclists (39.3% of complaints), followed by Flemish Brabant (24.3%), while Limburg province comes bottom of the list with a mere 4.1%. Antwerp was the city with the highest number of complaints, despite it wanting to become the most cycle-friendly city in the country.

online

www.meldpuntfietspaden.be

she says.

Davies Jones also notes the support from the general public and the Flemish government. "Everything is geared towards cycling here; it's as big as football is in England. It makes a huge difference to people who cycle," she says. "In England, you say to people 'I'm a cyclist', and they say 'what's your real job?'" She also notes that cycling is male dominated across the world, but Belgium is "one of the few countries that offers women the chance to race professionally."

Since the accident, Davies Jones has had to give up track racing but still takes part in competitive road racing, including the Tour of Flanders and other events throughout Europe. She recently left Team Vlaanderen, who said they wanted to concentrate on recruiting and training "younger" riders, for Swift Racing, a British club based near Brussels.

On top of that, Davies Jones is a commentator for the sports television network Eurosport and has just co-founded her own business. Cobbled Classics is a cycle tour company, "but a cycle tour company with a bit of a difference," she says. "It's aimed at those who want to experience racing the Tour of Flanders in style." Those who sign up will be led on the 120-kilometre Tour of Flanders (along with

your own mechanic and masseur) the day before the real thing in April. It's also a five-night stay in a luxury hotel, VIP tickets to the Tour of Flanders, a ride alongside the Irish former pro cyclist Sean Kelly, a guided tour of Ghent and other local tour opportunities.

Her foray into business suggests that she has decided to settle permanently in Flanders. "We don't see ourselves moving back to England," she confirms. "It's a slower pace of life here compared to where I come from. When I lived close to Manchester, everyone was go, go, go all the time. On a Sunday in Britain, people go to the shops because the shops are open. In Belgium, you get together for a family meal, and you go walking or biking."

Though Davies Jones is still known around the world as a British cyclist, she feels great affection for her adopted country. "I think I'll always be a little bit Belgian," she says. "I've come to love the country so much."

The driver of the car that hit Emma Davies Jones was identified and convicted of three separate offences.

online

www.emmadaviesjones.co.uk
www.globalracingteam.com
www.cobbledclassics.com

Powered by impulse

One woman, one bike: Leuven to Brussels

It was a pure whim. I'd been to Leuven eight years ago to research an article and had been particularly struck by a cluster of well-stocked cycle shops on Diestsestraat, an otherwise nondescript shopping street. I told myself that if ever I needed to buy a bike, I would come back to Leuven.

In recent months, dividing my time between the UK and Belgium, I have relocated my 10-year-old mountain bike to Norfolk. But I cannot live without a bike in Brussels.

And so it was that on cold Saturday this month I took a train to Leuven, hoping that the glittering bike stores of my memory were still there. They were. Within half an hour I had purchased my steed, an "Oxford Team" ladies bike, at Jacobs. I took it out in the drizzly morning, and it felt to me like midsummer. I learned that Oxford bikes are in fact made in a factory in Sint-Niklaas, East Flanders. The company, Van Den Berghe, has been making bikes since the late 19th century.

"I don't suppose many people go bike shopping in January," I said to Mevrouw Jacobs. "You'd be surprised," she replied. "That man who just left commutes to Brussels by bike. He does 60,000 km a year."

And that was it. The challenge. I had planned to take the bike home on the train, but that would have been a cop-out. No matter that I was wearing a long leather coat and velvet trousers.

The staff at the tourist office discussed my

options. 1) Along the Leuvensesteenweg: 30km of fast road through a commercial zone, not advised; 2) The Tervuren road: better, but hilly; 3) The Dijle river valley: flatter, along paths. Appealing.

As I drank coffee with a friend in Leuven, the sun came out, and it became the most beautiful day. There was just one hitch: I had just two hours to get to Brussels. I plumped for the Tervuursesteenweg.

The bike was silent. We sailed along the undulating road past Bertem, Leefdaal and Vossem. I felt the faint warmth of the January sun. The fields were bright with new shoots, and an elderly man stood on his doorstep watching the world go by, mainly in SUVs. For the whole distance, bar one short section, there was a path alongside the road.

At Tervuren I stopped for a brief rest. This was familiar territory and the end felt near. I arrived at Mokafe 10 minutes late, exhilarated and famished. The journey had taken exactly two hours.

Katharine Mill

online

www.rijwielenjacobs.be
www.oxfordbikes.be

Stephan Vanfleteren



The loneliness of the long-distance cyclist: photograph by Stephan Vanfleteren, whose exhibition *Belgicum* is on show at the Fotomuseum, Antwerp, until 10 February

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NEWS FEATURE

Flanders wants powerful regions to play a stronger role in Europe

But can they overcome the challenges ahead?

Committee of the Regions



Committee of the Regions: where cities and regions have a voice

Rory Watson

Flanders has taken over the presidency of a network of powerful European regions and intends to use the coming year to breathe new vitality and authority into the organisation.

Gert Bourgeois, the Flemish Minister for Foreign Affairs, has secured the approval of his colleagues for an ambitious three-point programme that is designed to give regions with legislative powers, such as Bavaria, Catalonia and Flanders, greater influence over European Union policy making.

He believes that the loose network, known as REGLEG, should benefit from the opportunities the new EU Reform Treaty brings. This specifically gives national parliaments a clear role in

the EU policy process for the first time. It also reinforces the principle of subsidiarity, whereby decisions are taken at the most appropriate level: European, national or regional.

"I think that up until now, REGLEG has not been ambitious enough," Bourgeois says. "Perhaps it was because the right conditions did not exist. But I believe we can do more."

Created in 2000 in order to channel the views of regions into the negotiations on designing a European constitution, the network now has 73 members. Traditionally, it has focused on institutional issues such as arguing for the right

of regions with legislative powers to take cases to the European Court of Justice – an option that is still denied since this is limited to member states.

Securing this right remains an objective, says Bourgeois. "According to the EU Treaty, you need a direct and personal interest to be able to go to court. We say that if we are the policy makers in the regions and vote on all kinds of matters, then we are the people who should have the right to go to court."

The organisation will also continue its work on applying the subsidiarity principle in practice. This has taken on new urgency with agreement on the Reform Treaty. Under the rules, expected to operate from January 2009, every national parliament will have eight weeks to examine future EU legislative proposals. Each country has two votes, and if a third of the parliaments consider that the Commission is going beyond its powers, the proposal must be withdrawn and reviewed.

At Bourgeois' insistence, the future treaty contains a declaration (No 49) stating that national parliaments in Belgium also include "the parliamentary assemblies of the Communities and the Regions". If any of these believe the Commission is overstepping the mark, it will automatically have one of Belgium's two votes, placing them in a strong position since most EU legislation is implemented at their level.

To maximise coordination between the regions, Flanders is organising a seminar and developing a network on the subsidiarity test so that experiences can be shared and assessments given 2009

within the eight-week deadline.

In addition to these well-established institutional issues, Bourgeois wants to take the organisation down a new route by getting its members to adopt positions on policy issues such as economic growth, employment and sustainable development. He acknowledges that it might be difficult to reach a consensus on these but argues that if REGLEG is to have an impact on the European stage, it must have views on the important socio-economic issues of the day.

"If we can make our opinions known on these issues and explain how we want to influence European policy, then I think we will show that we are necessary and can forge a link between the EU and its 500 million citizens. If we cannot do this, then we will just continue to exist on a formal basis only," he warns.

The third leg of Bourgeois' programme is visibility: to make better known an organisation that is only familiar to regional aficionados. This involves not just improving the distinctly low-key website, but also raising REGLEG's political profile. "We want to have good contacts with the Commission President, José Manuel Barroso, and the Committee of the Regions (CoR), for instance, so that we can make our opinions heard," he says.

In a happy political coincidence, he is likely to be knocking at an open door within the CoR. Its next President is almost certain to be fellow Flemish politician, Luc Van den Brande.

online

www.regleg.org

How to win friends and influence people

Networking in Brussels

Brussels describes itself as the capital of Europe. It could equally well lay claim to the title of Europe's regional capital. The city has become a magnet for regions across Europe and beyond. Every year more and more regions – as well as major cities – open a representative office in the Belgian capital. In 2007, at least 10 did so. The most recent arrival was Istanbul, shortly before Christmas.

There is no definitive figure for the number of regional offices in

the city. Even the European Union's Committee of the Regions, which put together a special brochure on regional offices for its European week last October, accepts that the publication is not definitive.

The conventional wisdom, however, is that there are around 270 and that, if networks of regions and cities are included, the number climbs to nearer 300. They include powerful political forces such as the German Land of North Rhine-Westphalia,

which set up premises in Brussels over 20 years ago and now has a staff of 27. With 18 million inhabitants and a powerful economy, it dwarfs most EU member states.

At the other end of the scale, many representations are from smaller regions with far fewer resources. The Brittany office operates with two people and the Bratislava region with just one.

It is the European Union that brings these offices to Brussels. The first, small wave of arrivals

appeared in the early to mid 1980s. As the EU and its budget priorities have evolved since then, so, too, have the interests of regional representatives. Europe's financial support for R&D, the environment, enterprise, skills training and other programmes is very much on their radar screen.

But it is not just money that brings regions to Brussels. The extension of the European Union's influence on people's daily lives has meant that regions with their own legislative powers need to monitor any EU initiatives that could directly concern them.

Volker Löwe, the director of Berlin's Brussels office, explains: "We have to act as an early warn-

ing system to our administration in Berlin and communicate its views to EU legislators."

Michael Aron, the director of the Scottish Government's EU office, endorses that role, but more forcefully. "It is all about influencing people. Everyone, including member states, is trying to do it."

But it's not all hard sell. Regions also use culture as a subliminal way to project their image and instil a warm feeling for their area among policy makers. Scotland is running a series of talks in Brussels this year by Scottish authors. To the regret of many, it does not include the Edinburgh-based JK Rowling.

RW

Breaking up is easy

Ghent shipyard to recycle historic British warship

Belpa



Derek Blyth

Afamous British Royal Navy warship recently sailed into Ghent on its final voyage before being taken apart and sold for scrap. HMS Fearless is to be broken up by a specialised Flemish firm, Van Heyghen Recycling (VHR), located in the port of Ghent.

The 11,000-tonne assault ship entered service 44 years ago and served in the Falklands conflict of 1982 and the First Gulf War of 1990. The ship also appeared in the 1977 James Bond film *The Spy Who Loved Me*, when it rescued the British secret agent from the sea.

HMS Fearless was mothballed by the Royal Navy in 2002 and moored in Portsmouth harbour while a suitable candidate was found to dismantle the vessel. The British Ministry of Defence finally opted for the Ghent firm following an open competition. The UK's defence minister Lord Drayson told the BBC News that Van Heyghen was selected because of its track record in recycling materials. "The selection of Van Heyghen Recycling ... demonstrates our commitment to reprocessing military equipment in an environmentally friendly way," said Lord Drayson. "These arrangements are fully compliant with EU legislation and international treaties concerning the safe treatment of waste."

The dismantling operation will be carried out on the Wondelgem-kaai after asbestos and loose waste have been removed. The entire ship constitutes some 11,000 tonnes of material, of which almost 7,000 tonnes of waste and scrap metal will be extracted and sold, including about 6,700 tonnes of steel, which will be smelted at the ArcelorMittal plant outside at

Ghent. "The first batch of scrap metal goes on sale in March," says CEO Bernard Beyne. "By the end of the year it will all be gone."

Yet some Navy personnel in Britain are saddened by the destruction of the famous warship. Colin Waite, 49, a former Royal Marine who served on board during the Falklands War, said: "It is sad because she is a ship with more history than most. You had the special forces based on Fearless, as well as the command and control. She was the pivotal point in that war."

VHR, which employs 35 people and has been recycling ships for the past 25 years, currently dismantles about one ship a week. As a result, Ghent's inland port has become a key recycling centre, used by the Belgian government for reprocessing its redundant ships. "The harbour allows us to bring the ships here, and the companies that take the scrap metal are located nearby," explains Beyne.

Most of the world's ships are currently recycled in India and the Far East, where standards are often less stringent. But VHR has built up a reputation for ecological recycling and has been award-

ed the European Commission's "Green Ship Recycling" label. The company hopes to see its business grow as governments become more aware of the environmental impact of ship recycling.

The Ghent company was acquired in 2002 by Galloo, a metal recycling company based in Menen, West Flanders. "Galloo is the absolute number one metal recycling company in Belgium," says CEO Rik Debaere. "And we're one of the big boys in Europe."

VHR recently bid for a French government contract to recycle the aircraft carrier Clemenceau, which has been moored in the port of Brest since 2006. The Ghent company is one of five in the bidding process for the contract, worth an estimated €45 million.

The 24,200-tonne ship was originally sent to India for recycling, but was forced to return to France following a campaign by environmentalists who were concerned about the disposal of asbestos on board.

The final decision on recycling the Clemenceau is expected from the French ministry of defence at the end of February.

Belgian beer sales boom in US

The US economy might be looking shaky, but American drinkers are knocking back Belgian beers at a record rate. Sales of Belgian beers across the US rose by 83% last November, according to a study by the stock exchange analysts Credit Suisse, while overall figures for beer imports dropped by 6.3%.

While Mexican brewers saw sales figures drop by 8.5% in

November, and Dutch brewers faced a sobering 17% slump, Belgian brewers were trying to figure out how to respond to the rising demand for their ales.

The main winner is Leuven-based InBev, which concluded an agreement last year with the American beer giant Anheuser-Busch. The deal means that InBev has access to Anheuser-Busch's extensive distribution network

BUSINESS FLASH



Stock Market jitters

The Brussels Stock Market has lost some 15% in value since the beginning of the year. The market is being held down by economic uncertainties and the effects of the US sub-prime credit crisis. Analysts do not expect the indices to recover before May or June at the earliest.

Galapagos

Galapagos, the Mechelen-based bio-technology company, is to receive a €4.4 million research grant from the Flemish government to develop a treatment against rheumatism. The company recently signed several key research and development agreements with Janssen Pharmaceutica, an affiliate of US-based Johnson and Johnson, Lilly and Glaxo Smith Kline.

Brussels Airlines

Brussels Airlines, the Zaventem-based Belgian carrier, made a profit of some €25 million last year, while traffic increased 2% to 5.8 million passengers. The company, which is involved in the development of the RDC airline in Congo, is increasing its frequency of flights to African destinations.

Volvo Ghent

Volvo Ghent, the assembling affiliate of the Sweden-based automotive company, may be under threat if the group's plans to build a production unit in the United States are confirmed. Many of the Ghent unit's 203,000 cars produced this year were shipped to the US.

Colruyt

Leading discount retailer Colruyt is revamping its own branded products line under the generic "Everyday Selection" label. The move will allow the distributor to phase out several labels such as Resto, Fresh and Jempy.

Erasme Immobilier

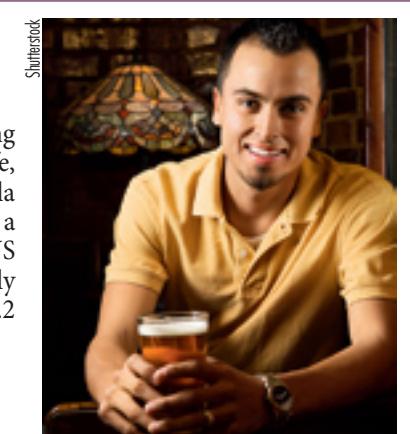
Erasme Immobilier, a property developer, is to build some 1,800 houses and apartments in the neighbourhood of the Erasmus hospital in Brussels. The project is intended to alleviate the housing crisis in Brussels, but work on the new dwellings is not expected to begin before 2010.

Bank trial

Dexia and KBC Bank, two of the country's leading financial institutions, are to be brought to court in separate cases of fiscal evasion and money laundering that allegedly took place in the 1990s. Several key executives of both banks, including both chairmen at the time, have been indicted.

Metris

Metris, the Leuven-based specialist in metrology and control systems, has bought the British X-Tek, a developer of X-ray and computer tomography inspection equipment.



FILM

Thinking small

First-time director's impressive debut takes Flemish film in new directions



Accidental nomads: Steffi Peeters (top) and Louiza Van de Woestijne go along for the ride in *Small Gods*

Lisa Bradshaw

A long list of festival appearances is not something you often see on the poster for a Flemish film, which is one of the many differences of *Small Gods*. The movie, which releases in Belgium this week, was selected last year for the Venice Film Festival, something that has opened doors to other festivals in Australia, the US and all over Europe. A tense psychological thriller that packs a tinderbox of emotions in its final scenes, *Small Gods* is the best Flemish film to come around in several months and marks, together with last year's *Ex-Drummer*, a shift in the art of Flemish filmmaking.

"Film is an international medium, and Flanders doesn't actually have any international status in the film world," says director Dimitri Karakatsanis. "I had

hoped it would do well at the festivals because I set out to prove that a Flemish-spoken film could reach an international audience."

If Karakatsanis doesn't sound like a Flemish name, that's because the first-time director's father is Greek. His mother is Flemish, and he and his brother Nicolas (the film's cinematographer), grew up on the outskirts of Brussels before moving to Leuven. Now Karakatsanis lives in Antwerp, where he makes commercials. He's been working on the script for *Small Gods* for years and eventually shot it in two weeks on a shoestring budget he borrowed from the bank. You wouldn't know it.

In the movie, a defence lawyer (Dirk Van Dijck) sits across the kitchen table from a young woman named Elena, trying to piece together the facts of her case.

It unfolds in flashbacks: after a car accident that killed her young son, Elena was kidnapped from the hospital. She slowly regained consciousness to find herself being driven across remote, open landscapes in an old camper van by David (Titus De Voogdt), a complete stranger. Eventually, the pair pick up a frightened teenager named Sara, on the run from a juvenile home. Together the three form a makeshift family, with the increasingly edgy David silently leading them down a path that grows ever-more destructive.

As she quietly continues, Elena's story sounds more and more fishy. But everything she is saying is the truth, she insists. If her lawyer won't believe her, how can he help her? This is the crux of *Small Gods* and what Karakatsanis was most keen to explore.

"The film has a very realistic side to it where you have facts – but there's always something beneath facts," the 32-year-old says. "There is an emotional universe inside all of us, which is, I think, most of the time shut off. Everything has to be the facts, the facts, the facts. But there's actually something much stronger and deeper going on. For some people, what I'm saying right now doesn't exist for them; only the facts exist – what they can see, and that's it. For me, life is something else completely."

The nature of that "something else" reveals itself in *Small Gods* in sudden bursts of realisation, which flicker beautifully across the face of Van Dijck. In fact, the acting is across-the-board superb: the always-strong De Voogdt (*Steve + Sky*) plays the narcissistic David with all the pot-about-to-boil-over tension required, while Steffi Peeters is a revelation. With no previous acting experience, Peeters as Elena is persistently convincing. Confused, muddled and too exhausted to resist, she just watches and waits while David decides her fate. Even while you're questioning her actions, you're believing her story.

Peeters also happens to be the director's wife. The pair met years ago in film school. "Unconsciously, I think I based the character on her," Karakatsanis says. "I looked for other actresses, but of course I didn't find one because she was the one." Preferring to work with non-professional actors, he also cast newcomer Louiza Van de Woestijne as Sara – from whom he also coaxes a fine performance.

Nicolas Karakatsanis is an experienced cinematographer, and the brothers worked together to convey a sinister moodiness,

creating tension with blurred visuals and shaky camerawork. "It tells the story with images, which is also not that common in Flanders," Karakatsanis says. "They just want to tell a story that is written in the script and use a camera to record it. For me, movie-making is using all the elements. You can do so many things in film – you can really create your own world. Most of the time, it's as if filmmakers don't even know this."

Flanders does look like another world in *Small Gods* – or at least a region you wouldn't immediately recognise. "I wanted to create my own universe, to have this almost mental place, this wasteland," says Karakatsanis. This is also another way to make the film more accessible outside Belgium. "It's not necessarily Flanders; it could be anywhere. It's just a place."

Rather unbelievably, because Karakatsanis could not secure funding for the film, all the actors and crew worked for free. "They were out there shooting at six in the morning in the freezing cold. Nobody complained for one second."

Now that *Small Gods* has made a dent in the international film community, he hopes that he will receive funding for his next project. But he's determined nonetheless. "Flemish film is very old fashioned and conservative. It's always the same actors, the same stories. You have to fight to get something different made."

Small Gods is different and, in this case, different is good.

online

www.smallgodsthemovie.com

FILM FREAK

Anima

Max is 15 and has decided it's time to find his absentee father once and for all. He hits the road and winds up in the little town of Saint-Hilaire, where he meets a pretty girl and has a load of fun at the local Fly Swatter festival. In fact, the whole town is dependent on the production of fly swatters, but when there are simply not enough flies to keep the factory going, the unscrupulous manager creates a swarm of mutant flies who begin to attack the town. Can Max save the day? Will he find his father?

A Swiss-Flemish co-production, *Max & Co* is the first stop-motion animation film to come

out of Switzerland, and it opens the children's programme at Anima, Brussels excellent animation festival. This annual nine-day event at Flagey officially opens on the evening of 1 February with *Peur(s) du noir* (*Fears of the Dark*), a series of six short films featuring Europe's elite graphic artists and cartoonists, who collaborated with animators to transfer their work onscreen. *Max & Co* screens the next day in both French and Dutch dubbed versions. (The festival caters to all ages, but the screenings in the afternoons are guaranteed kid-friendly.) You'll also find festival screenings in Ghent, Leuven, Kortrijk and

Genk.

Anima counts 14 features and more than 70 shorts, which is where you'll find the Flemish work. Among the many shorts programmes are *Dit is Belgisch*, specifically for Belgian shorts, and *Het Meesterlijke animatie-atelier*: three sets of screenings that illustrate how Belgian animators both influenced and were influenced by international animators, particularly those from Eastern Europe. I highly recommend seeing at least series 2 on 8 February, which includes four short films (spanning four decades) by Flemish master Raoul Servais, one of the most famous animators in the



The masterful stop-motion *Max & Co* opens Anima

world. His work combines the Flemish landscape with universal social concerns, exploring almost simultaneously both the past and future. Don't be surprised if you run into Servais in the audience;

he's a regular at Anima.

Lisa Bradshaw

online

www.folioscope.be

EXHIBITION

A city transformed

The accidental beauty of early Brussels photography



Wooden vaulting covering the Senne, Jean Kämpfe (attributed), 1870

Derek Blyth

Some cruel blows have been dealt to the historical quarters of Brussels over the years. It's almost too painful to go down to the city archives in the Marollen and leaf through the index boxes full of old faded photographs of

buildings that are no more. And not just buildings – entire streets have been wiped off the map; whole quarters have vanished without a moment's hesitation. In many cases, all we have left are photographs.

Some of the oldest surviving

views of the city can be seen in an exceptional exhibition running at the St Gorikshallen in central Brussels. Taken from the collection of the Centre for Information, Documentation and Study of Heritage (CIDEP), they illustrate decisive moments in the

city's history between 1850 and 1880.

The photographs were selected by Steven Joseph, a European Commission official with a special interest in the history of photography. He has organised exhibitions in several cities in France,

the Netherlands and Belgium, but this is his first in Brussels. "Belgian photography – like Belgium itself – is very underrated," he says.

Photography and the Changing Cityscape brings together some 60 photographs picked from a collection of several hundred in the CIDEP archives. Joseph points out that most were not intended as works of art. "Mostly they were done for practical reasons," he says. "Some were used in the city land records, for example. They were really seen as ephemeral documents."

Yet these images now provide a unique record of a vanished city. You can see the river Senne flowing through a mediaeval quarter that resembles Bruges, a beautiful South Station every bit as grand as London's St Pancras, and a charming market square where farmers' wives once sold eggs and milk before the site was cleared to build the Stock Exchange.

The exhibition was due to close at the end of this month, but Charles Picqué, minister-president of Brussels Region, was so impressed after a visit that he asked for it to be extended. So there's still time to catch a glimpse of these faded sepia images from a Brussels that vanished a century-and-a-half ago.

Photography and the Changing Cityscape: Brussels 1850-1880, Sint Gorikshallen, until 29 February, entry free

online

www.hallessaintgery.be

FLANDERS EYE

Tony Clerkson

Scottish photographer Tony Clerkson chose a high vantage point to capture the hidden geometry of a small city park near Brussels' Sint Michiels en Sint Goedele Cathedral that many people walk through without a second glance.

Since moving to the city, Clerkson has taken a series of photographs that make it seem a strange and beautiful place. He somehow finds rare moments of mellow light that give the city an unexpected warmth that is almost Mediterranean. "The thing I found about Brussels is that it took a while for me to get my eye in, and I think that's down to the light and pollution," he says. "I felt I had to become a bit more creative to get any kind of shot, which is no bad thing. I often hear people refer to

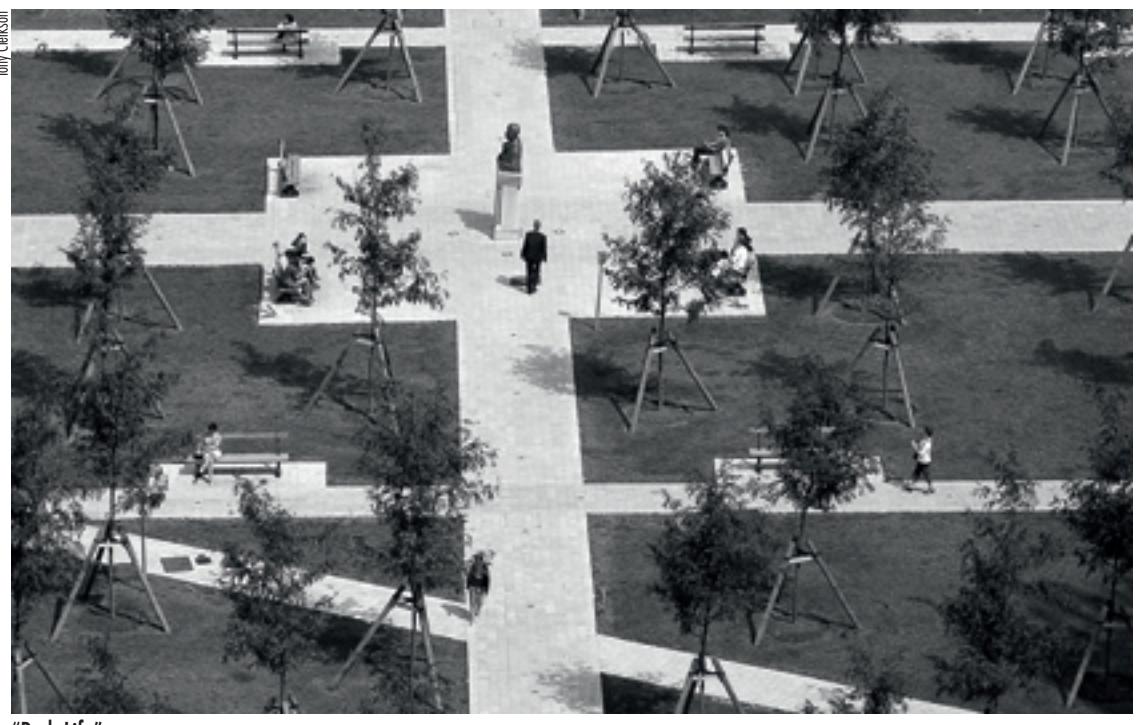
Brussels as a city of hidden gems, and that's certainly true from a photographic point of view."

Clerkson has also photographed strange corners of other European cities such as Paris, London, Glasgow and Budapest. He is currently exhibiting 28 of his urban images at the Gallery Garden in Brussels' European Quarter. "I'm instinctively drawn by the geometric patterns of urban life," he explains, "but I also enjoy parks and woods and the natural beauty found in these places."

Until February 22, Gallery Garden, Stevinstraat 206, Brussels

online

www.tonyclerkson.com



"Park Life"

The accidental tourist



Ghent's Tram 1 acts as tour guide to one of Flanders' most beautiful cities

Derek Blyth & Lisa Bradshaw

Public transport gets you from one place to another without harming the environment – and sometimes shows you a different view of a country you thought you knew

Public transport changes practically daily throughout Belgium – new trains stations, more trams, altered schedules. For commuters, it's essential to know where you're going and when you'll get there. But lots of lines throughout the country are perfect for the adventurous weekend rambler.

Tram line 1 in Ghent

Few tram lines cover the best bits of a city as perfectly as Ghent's number 1, which travels from Flanders Expo all the way north to Evergem, stopping conveniently at Gent-Sint-Pieters train station along its way. The station itself, though undergoing endless renovation work, is graced with a lovely square in front and several restaurants across the street, including Lekker Gec, a popular local vegetarian eatery.

Tram 1 then rumbles into downtown Ghent, past the beautiful Kouter – the large square with a daily flower market, especially busy on Sunday mornings – and enters the heart of the city at the Korenmarkt. Buzzing with activity, the area stands between Sint-Michiels church on

the banks of the Leie River and Sint-Baafskathedraal, home to Jan Van Eyck's 15th-century masterpiece, the *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*. Shooting off from the Korenmarkt, you'll also find the Veldstraat, Ghent's main shopping street. The tram then passes into the picturesque Groentenmarkt, then on past the sinister walls of the Castle of the Counts. The tram continues northward out of town, but not before passing the Dr Guislain Museum, Belgium's only museum of psychiatry – a fascinating place.

Tram line 6 in Antwerp

Tram lines hardly get any better than the number 6 in Antwerp, the new line that links the city from north to south in a nine-kilometre ride packed with interest. Get on a southbound tram at Centraal Station and sit tight for 10 minutes to reach deSingel cultural centre. Hold on another five minutes as it sweeps through the stately southern quarters, and you arrive at the doors of Antwerp Expo, home to the annual autumn Book Fair. Or take the tram northbound from Centraal Station to get to the Lotto Arena concert hall while avoiding the almost inevitable monster traffic jam that accompanies any major rock band appearing here. A few stops further, and you arrive at the Metropolis cinema complex feeling much fresher than if you had just spent 20 minutes hunting for an elusive parking space. Tram 6 arrives every 10 minutes during the week and at 15-minute intervals during the weekend.

Coast tram

The world's longest tram runs

way from De Panne on the French border to Knokke on the Dutch frontier. While the whole 68-kilometre run is a bit too long for comfort, you can take an interesting ride from Ostend rail station to the fishing town of Nieuwpoort, glimpsing on the way stretches of grey sea, World War Two coastal defences, a statue of King Albert I and the famous sluices at Nieuwpoort.

Train line 26 through Brussels

Recently, the Flanders Today team was searching for the fastest route from our office in Ukkel to Kinepolis in Heizel (a long journey, as you can imagine). To our great surprise – and not a little embarrassment – we

Train line 26: three stops to step out

Sint-Job

Take the train to the station in Sint-Job to escape the urban crush. You emerge in a pretty village square with country-style restaurants, a local butcher and a friendly market on Monday mornings. This is one of those places where the baker soon gets to know what type of bread you like to buy and the cheese seller has the time to tell you just what three cheeses to buy for eating that evening.

Merode

Take the train to Merode and stroll around one of the Jubelpark museums for a cultural day out. The vast collection of the museum of art and history includes a scale model of Rome, an Easter Island statue and an exceptional collection of Flemish altarpieces. The Auto-world museum next door contains hundreds of vintage cars with polished hub caps and engines ready to run. On the other side of the courtyard, the army museum holds an impressive quantity of military hardware, including tanks, aircraft and soldiers' uniforms. Don't miss the view from the top of the triumphal arch, reached by lift from the army museum.

Boondaal

Reach the city's green edge by getting off the train at Boondaal station. Then it's just a short hike down to the end of the Woudlaan to reach the fringes of the Zoniënwoud. A ten-minute ramble brings you onto silent woodland trails that seem a long way from the city. Yet you can hear the distant rumble of trains running on a line that cuts through the forest. Pick up the next one to stop at the little Bosvoorde station.

online

www.delijn.be
www.nmbs.be
www.mivb.be

learned there was a brand new train station right down the street we didn't even know about. The Diesdelle stop on the corner of Waterloosesteenweg and Prins de Lignelaan is served by the NMBS

commuter cars that clog up the Ukkel roads.

Line 26, in fact, which travels from Mechelen in Antwerp province to Halle, just south of Brussels, is the fastest way to get around Brussels from north to south. As you travel, you can gaze out the window at an unfamiliar side of the city, and then connect up with the network of trams and buses at the transport hubs surrounding the stations. See the box above for line 26 highlights.



Fantastic views of Ostend's train station and harbour await travellers on the coast tram

The Dead Poets Society

How poetry can save the environment



Poetry in motion: the Lappersfort Poets set off to save the trees

Steven Tate

In the Netherlands and Flanders, 31 January marks Gedichtendag, a celebration of poetry in all its forms. More than 300 activities are planned to mark the ninth edition of this festival, modelled on Britain's National Poetry Day. Words will flow from Utrecht's House of Poetry, and a Poetry Marathon will be staged in Groningen. There will be a poetry-inspired art exhibition, workshops for children at the Heist-op-den-Berg Public Library and an evening devoted to "Kamagurka", the *Humo* cartoon, in Leopoldsburg. There will even be a European Constitution event in Brussels.

But possibly the most interesting gathering will be in Bruges, where the Lappersfort Poets Society will lead a walk in the woods, showing how words can inspire people to action.

"Every day Belgium loses the equivalent of one football field of forest," says Luc Vanneste, the Society's secretary, citing figures from the Vereniging voor Bos in Vlaanderen, the Flemish organisation to preserve forests. "Our group wants to turn the tide."

The Lappersfort Poets Society was founded in 2001 to protect a forest on the outskirts of Bruges. "We protest through poetry and non-violent actions such as civil disobedience in the face of the

bulldozers," Vanneste says.

Back in August of 2001, trees were scheduled to be felled in the Lappersfort forest, a few kilometres from the heart of Bruges. "A group of anarchists came together to face down the developers, who had planned a bus depot for public transport authority De Lijn," remembers Vanneste. Environmental groups and locals sympathised with the anarchists' goals, and – with a little help from the Internet – a Flemish satellite of the green belt network was born.

The Lappersfort Poets Society aims to keep conservation in the minds of the public. With some 70 members, the society works with Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth

and other environmental organisations to spread the word. "It's important to keep at the government," says Vanneste, who claims lip service is been paid to preserving Flemish forests by decision-makers, but deeds have lagged behind the words. "Ten thousand trees have been scheduled to be planted – of which 5,000 have been... but another 4,000 have been cut down." With a net increase of 1,000 trees at present, the Society and other groups are arguing for the government to plant another 9,000 trees – and not to cut down any more that would offset the increase.

In the soundbite–YouTube–MySpace era, poetry might seem too refined a tool to take on developers – especially when developers have economic progress as one of their arguments for clearing woodlands for office space and factories. But poetry has a soft-sell value that many appreciate, says Vanneste. "Poetry is the last resort. The anarchists say, 'No compromise' when it comes to saving trees. We champion sustainability through our poems: conservation does not have to be the enemy of progress."

To become a member of the Lappersfort Poets Society, applicants must write a poem about their appreciation of nature or green issues. "The group's name was inspired by the film *Dead Poets Society* with Robin Williams," says Vanneste, "but when we started out in 2002, we didn't have any dead poets." Then fate intervened. "In 2002, we lost Mark Braet,

translator of the poems of Pablo Neruda and a member of the resistance during World War II, who died of old age. Then unfortunately two other members – Melanie Vanbrugge and Jotie T'Hooft – took their own lives." A special commemoration of the two poets will form part of the Lappersfort walk on 31 January.

The walk through the woods will feature poetry posted on select trees to acquaint participants with the lyrical beauty of nature. The work of two English poets – Marcus Cumberledge and Martin Burke – will be featured along with works by Flemish poets taking part in the walk.

Turning words into action – be it political in terms of saving the earth, or personal in terms of appreciating it – will remain the Lappersfort Poets Society's aim for years to come. "Two or three years ago, we approached the city of Bruges with the idea of having a city poet," Vanneste remembers. "But the city declined, saying they didn't want to do something just because it was in vogue." Despite this lack of civic recognition, Vanneste and the society will keep on working to make sure that they have the last word when it comes to saving our woods.

online

www.gedichtendag.org
www.regiobrugge.be/lappersfortpoets.php

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putting people first

Classical & new music**Brussels**

Astoria Hôtel
Koningstraat 103; 0900.28.877
JAN 27 11.00 Diederik Suys, viola; Filip Martens, piano: Brahms sonatas

Bozar (Paleis voor Schone Kunsten)

Ravensteinstraat 23; 02.507.82.00, www.bozar.be
Concerts at 20:00:
JAN 24 Liège Philharmonic, conducted by Pascal Rophé, with Frank Braley, piano: Copland's Appalachian Spring, Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue, Varèse's Amériques
JAN 25 Belgian National Orchestra, conducted by Walter Weller, with Tim Fellner, piano: Schubert's Symphony No 3 D 200, No 4 D 417, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 5 op 73
JAN 27 Martin Grüninger, percussions: Koppel, Grüninger, Xenakis, Abe, Miki

Espace Senghor

Waversesteenweg 366; 02.230.31.40, www.senghor.be
JAN 27 11.30 Todor Todoroff, electro-acoustic

Flagey

Heilig Kruisplein; 02.641.10.20, www.flagey.be
JAN 25 12.30 Bl!ndman
JAN 27 15.00 Vlaams Radio Orkest, conducted by Hannu Lintu, with Alexander Toradze, piano: Prokofiev's Cinderella excerpts, Symphony No 5, Rachmaninov's Paganini Rhapsody

Kaaithéater

Saintelettesquare 20; 02.201.59.59
JAN 29 20.30 Champ d'Action & Slagwerkgroep Den Haag: Organised Sound, percussion by Iannis Kiriakides, Dimitri Kourliandski and Serge Verstockt

Get your tickets now for...

**Zita Swoon**

February 28, Koninklijk Circus, Onderrichtsstraat 81, Brussels. Tickets from 02.218.20.15 or www.koninklijk-circus.org. (Also play Antwerp on February 29)

If Cat Stevens was younger and Belgian, he'd probably sound a bit like Zita Swoon. The Flemish band is tough to pin down, which is part of its delectable flavour: mix one part pop, one part folk, one part electronic and throw in a dash of twang. Founded by Stef Kamil Carlens (pictured), former member of dEUS, Zita Swoon has been made up of a revolving door of musicians over the years, adding to its eclecticism. This Band in a Box tour showcases them in halls and entryways, off-stage and barely amplified. If you missed the last sold-out show at Koninklijk, don't make the same mistake twice.

Kapel van de Miniemens

Miniemensstraat 62; 02.507.82.00, www.minimes.net
JAN 27 10.30 Ensemble Chapelle des Minimes, conducted by Philippe Gérard: Bach cantatas BWV 171, 195
JAN 31 20.00 Collegium Vocale Gent soloists, conducted by Philippe Herreweghe: Lassus' Lagrime di San Pietro

Royal Museum of Fine Arts

Regentschapsstraat 3; 02.508.32.11
JAN 23 12.40-13.30 Sébastien Walmier, cello; Eliane Reyes, piano: Lysight, Rachmaninov
JAN 30 12.40-13.30 Guarneri Ensemble: Mendelssohn, Schubert

Royal Music Conservatory

Regentschapsstraat 30; 02.507.82.00
JAN 26 20.00 Pierre Hantaï, harpsichord; Marc Hantaï and Barthold Kuijken, flute; Jérôme Hantaï and Wieland Kuijken, viola da gamba; Sigiswald Kuijken, violin; Sara Kuijken, viola: Marais, Couperin
JAN 28 20.00 Nicholas Angelich, piano: Schumann's Arabesque op 18, Fantasia op 12, Brahms' Fantasia op 116, piece for piano op 119
JAN 30 20.00 Lorenzo Ghielmi, fortepiano; Vittorio Ghielmi, viola da gamba: JS Bach, CPE Bach
JAN 31 20.00 Hungarian Day, tribute to violinist André Gertler: Sebastian Strings, conducted by Katalin Sebestyén: Dohnányi, Kocsári, Weiner, Seiber, Bartók

Antwerp**Amuz**

Kammenstraat 81; 03.248.28.28
JAN 25 21.00 La Roza Enflorese, Sekretos de mi alma: traditional and contemporary Sephardic songs
JAN 27 15.00 Vlaams Radio Koor conducted by Celso Antunes: Bach, Dallapiccola, Schnebel, Villa-Lobos

deSingel

Desguinlei 25; 03.248.28.28
Concerts at 20:00:
JAN 23 Collegium Vocale Gent, conducted by Christoph Siebert, and Muziektheater Transparent in Ruhe by Josse De Pauw: adapted from lieder by Schubert
JAN 24 Belgian National Orchestra, conducted by Walter Weller, with Till Fellner, piano: Schubert's Symphony No 3 D200, Symphony No 4 D417, Beethoven's Piano Concerto No 5 op 73
JAN 25 International Society of Contemporary Music Dag, including work by Kris Defoorte, Annelies Van Parys, Filip Rathé and Serge Verstockt
JAN 30 Tenebrae chamber choir, conducted by Nigel Short: Renaissance and contemporary music

Bruges**Concertgebouw**

't Zand 34; 070.22.33.02
Concerts at 20:00:
JAN 24 Capilla Flamenca & Het Collectief: Stockhausen's Tierkries
JAN 25 dePhilharmonie, conducted by Martyn Brabbins, with Patricia Kopatchinskaja, violin; Piet van Bockstal, oboe: Clerck, Kodály, Bartók
JAN 26 Guy De Mey, tenor; Claire Chevallier, fortepiano: Schubert's Winterreise

JAN 30 Schönberg Ensemble, conducted by Reinbert de Leeuw: Kagel's Divertimento? - Farce für Ensemble, Goeyvaerts' Zum Wassermann, Abrahamsen's Schnee

Onze-Lieve-Vrouw ter Potterie Museum

Potterierei 79; 070.255.055
JAN 23 20.00 Vlaams Radio Koor, conducted by Celso Antunes: Bach, Dallapiccola, Schnebel, Villa-Lobos

Ghent**Handelsbeurs**

Kouter 29; 09.265.92.01
JAN 30 20.00 Jean-Philippe Collard, piano: Ravel, Messiaen, Mussorgsky

Hasselt

Virga Jesse Basiliek

Kapelstraat

011.22.99.33
JAN 29 20.00 Vlaams Radio Koor, conducted by Celso Antunes: Bach, Dallapiccola, Schnebel, Villa-Lobos

Ostend

Ostend Kursaal (Casino)
Monacoplein; 070.22.56.00, www.sherpa.be
JAN 25 20.00 Vlaams Radio Koor and I Solisti del Vento, conducted by Paul Hillier: Milhaud, Weill, Stravinsky, Hindemith

Opera**Brussels**

De Munt
Muntplein; 070.23.39.39
Until FEB 7 Freiburger Baroque Orchestra in Giulio Cesare in Egitto, conducted by René Jacobs, with Lawrence Zazzo, counter-tenor; Marijana Mijanovic, alto
Until MAR 9 La Monnaie Symphony Orchestra & Choirs in Wozzeck by Alban Berg, conducted by Mark Wigglesworth, with Dietrich Henschel/Werner Van Mechelen, bass-baritones; Martina Serafin, soprano; Douglas Nasrawi, tenor

Antwerp

deSingel
Desguinlei 25; 03.248.28.28
JAN 25-26 20.00 Dido & Aeneas by Purcell, staged by Jan Decorte, with B'Rock, conducted by Richard Egarr

Jazz & blues**Brussels**

Archiduc
Dansaertstraat 6; 02.512.06.52
JAN 26 Pierre Anckaert Trio

Flagey

Heilig Kruisplein; 02.641.10.20, www.flagey.be
JAN 24 21.30 Jacky Terrason Solo, piano

Jazz Station

Leuvensesteenweg 193; 02.733.13.78
JAN 23 20.30 Dacosse
JAN 26 18.00 François Decamps Quartet
JAN 30 20.30 Musicazur

Le Grain d'Orge

Waversesteenweg 142; 02.511.26.47
JAN 25 C. Sharp

Sounds Jazz Club

Tulpenstraat 28; 02.512.92.50
Concerts at 22:00:

JAN 24 Ben Dubray Quartet **JAN 25-26** Marco Bardoscia Quartet
JAN 28 Master Session with Erik Vermeulen, Mimi Verderame, Sal La Rocca **JAN 29** Da Romeo Band **JAN 30** Chamaquindo, salsa **JAN 31** The Singers Night

The Music Village

Steenstraat 50; 02.513.13.45
Concerts at 20:30:
JAN 23 Sir Trio **JAN 24** Greg Houben Trio **JAN 25** Jazzyfaction **JAN 26** Super Sax Battle **JAN 30** Groovepact **JAN 31** Jean-Philippe Collard-Neven/Jean-Louis Rassinfosse Duo

Bruges**De Werf**

Werkstraat 108; 050.33.05.29
JAN 25 20.30 Jan Rzewski & Fabian Fiorini/Erik Vermeulen Trio

Strombeek

Cultural Centre
Gemeenteplein; 03.235.04.90
JAN 30 20.15 Rzewski-Fiorni Duo & Erik Vermeulen Trio

Pop, rock, hip-hop, soul**Brussels**

Ancienne Belgique
Anspachlaan 110; 02.548.24.24
JAN 23 20.00 ManManMan
JAN 27 20.00 Georgie James

Typhoon + Pete Philly & Perquisite **JAN 27** Arid **JAN 28** Jimmy Eat World

Atelier 210

Sint-Pieterssteenweg 210; 02.732.25.98, www.atelier210.be
JAN 30 21.00 Dan Miller

JAN 31 21.00 Two-Star Hotel + The Banshee + The Vismets

Café Central

Borgval 14; 02.513.73.08
Concerts at 23:00:
JAN 24 Central Electric: Radio Tuxedo with Monsieur L & Madame G **JAN 25** I'm Your Fan#3 with Doktor Igor & Guests **JAN 26** Dgeranium **JAN 31** Central Electric: Trap-Roach with Harry Poppins & Roachbugincan

Fuse

Blaesstraat 208; 02.511.97.89
JAN 26 23.00 Alexi Delano, Xpansul, Dj Pierre + Electronic art presents: Kirk Degiorgio, Sam Ostyn, Trish van Eynde

Jacques Franck Cultural Centre

Waterloosesteenweg 94; 02.538.90.20
JAN 26 20.00 Attica, Work and Mrs Okkido

Koninklijk Circus

Onderrichtsstraat 81; 02.218.20.15
JAN 25 20.00 Babel Live: Ensemble Musiques Nouvelles with E

Truffaz, An Pierlé & Koen Guisen, Pascale Comelade, Franz Treichler Electronique, Boyan Vodenitcharov, Dhruba Gosh

Le Botanique

Koningstraat 236; 02.218.37.32
JAN 30 20.00 James Deano

Recyclart

Ursulinenstraat 25; 02.502.57.34
JAN 24 20.00 Trash the Blues: The Legendary Stardust Cowboy + Dead Elvis

Antwerp

Lotto Arena
Schijnpoortweg 119; 0900.26.060
JAN 28 20.00 Deathstars + Flyleaf + KoRn

Queen Elisabeth Hall

Koningin Astridplein 26; 0900.26.060
JAN 29 20.15 Off The Wall - The Spirit of Pink Floyd

Zuiderpershuis

Waalse Kaai 14; 03.248.01.00
JAN 26 20.30 Rap night

Borgerhout

Hof Ter Lo
Noordersingel 30; 03.543.90.30
JAN 26 19.00 Militia + Aural Holograms + Troum + Savage Republic **JAN 29** 20.30 Alter Bridge

Ghent

Handelsbeurs
Kouter 29; 09.265.92.01
JAN 26 20.00 De Kift

World, folk**Brussels**

Ancienne Belgique
Anspachlaan 110; 02.548.24.24
JAN 23 20.00 ManManMan
JAN 27 20.00 Georgie James

Au Stekerlapatte

Priesterstraat 4; 02.512.86.81
Concerts at 21:30:
JAN 24 Oli Cima, flamenco
JAN 26 Ursoluso, Portuguese music
JAN 31 Zwiebel

Charliermuseum

Kunstlaan 16; 02

handen, musical fairytale written and staged by Josse De Pauw (in Dutch)

Ghent

Capitole

Graaf van Vlaanderenplein 5; 0900.84.100

Until JAN 27 Cyrano de Bergerac, staged by Bruno Van Heystraeten (in Dutch)

Hasselt

Cultural Centre

Kunstlaan 5; 011.22.99.33

JAN 28 20.00 Olympique Dramatique in De Geruchten by Hugo Claus, staged by Guy Cassiers (in Dutch)

Leuven

Stuk

Naamsestraat 96; 016.32.03.20

JAN 23 20.30 For All the Wrong Reasons by Lise Pauwels (in English with Dutch surtitles)

JAN 30 20.00 Toneelhuis in Winterverblijf, staged by Lotte van den Berg (in Dutch)

JAN 30-31 20.30 Lazarus in Iets Anders! (in Dutch)

Sint-Niklaas

Stadsschouwburg

Grote Markt 1; 03.766.39.39

JAN 29 20.00 LOD in Liefde/zijn handen, musical fairytale written and staged by Josse De Pauw, music by Jan Kuijken (in Dutch)

Visual arts

Brussels

Algemeen Rijksarchief

Ruisbroekstraat 8; 02.513.76.80

Until FEB 16 Congo S.A./N.V., documents and photographs about Belgian enterprises in the Congo in the 19th and 20th centuries

Arts en Marge

Hoogstraat 312; 02.511.04.11

Until FEB 16 Anarchitecte, constructions by outsider artist Richard Greaves pictured by Swiss photographer Mario del Curto (see also Brussels' CIVA)

Baronian-Francey Gallery

Isidore Verheydenstraat 2; 02.512.92.95 Until MAR 1 Landscape photography by Florian Maier-Aichen

Bibliotheca Wittockiana

Bemelstraat 23; 02.770.53.33

Until JAN 30 La Nuit bleue, books by the late Belgian poet Pierre Lecuire

Bozar

Koningsstraat 10; 070.22.52.29

Until FEB 2 Encompassing the Globe: Portugal and the world in the 16th and 17th centuries, 180 art works, maps, navigational instruments and early printed books from the time of Portugal's trading empire and voyages of discovery

CIVA

Kluisstraat 55; 02.642.24.71, www.civa.be

Until FEB 16 Anarchitecte, installation by outsider artist Richard Greaves (see Art en Marge related listing)

Until MAR 9 MAXXI Museum Rome: Zaha Hadid Architects, models, photographs and video presenting Rome's future Museum of Art for the 21st century

Clockarium Museum

Reyerslaan 163; 02.732.08.28

Until JAN 28 Steen-Goed: From Art Nouveau to Art Deco, ceramics by Edgard Aubry and Roger Guérin

Costume and Lace Museum

Violettestraat 12; 02.213.44.50

Until JAN 27 Gerald Watelet, retrospective of work by the Belgian fashion designer

deBuren

Leopoldstraat 6, www.deburen.be

Until FEB 8 90dagenrotterdam: Exhibition of photographer Friederike

von Rauch's work in Brussels and Rotterdam

Elsene Museum

Jean Van Volsemstraat; 02.515.64.21

Until JAN 26 All Roads Lead to Rome. Artists' travels from the 16th to the 19th centuries, paintings, texts and a variety of objects related to travel

Until JAN 27 Ontmoetingen: 1997-2007 (Encounters, 1997-2007), photographs by Géraldine Langlois

Espace Architecture La Cambre

Flageyplein 19; 02.642.24.50

Until FEB 24 European Supermarket: 50 years, from the opening of the first self-service store in Belgium in 1957 to the construction of supermarkets all over Europe

Gallery Garden

Stevinsstraat 206; 02.734.64.38,

0479.01.69.47, www.tonyclerkson.com

Until FEB 22 In the City, images of Brussels, Paris, London, Glasgow and Budapest by Scottish photographer Tony Clerkson

Huis voor Hedendaagse Kunst

Kartuizers (HHKK)

Kartuizersstraat 26-28; 02.513.14.69

Until JAN 26 Kevergraphics, works by Nadia Kever

Husson Gallery Bookshop

Alsembergsesteenweg 142;

02.534.33.54

Until JAN 31 People in Motion by Michel Dusariez

Indigo Studios

Overwinningsstraat 96; 02.534.75.72

Until JAN 31 Golden Years-Rock 70/80, photographs by Paul Coerten

ISELP

Waterloosesteenweg 31; 02.504.80.70

JAN 25-MAR 22 Rue de la Comtesse de Flandre, paintings by Bernard Gaube

JAN 31-APR 5 Ceramics by Laurence Deweer and textiles by Delphine Grand'ry

JAN 31-APR 5 Serre les dents, works by François Jacob

Jewish Museum of Belgium

Minimstraat 21; 02.512.19.63

Until FEB 24 Sarah and her Brothers, history through the eyes of the Kaliskis family of artists

Koekelberg Basilica

Basiliekvoordein 1; 02.420.55.05

Until MAR 15 Leonardo Da Vinci: The European Genius, paintings, mechanical models, original drawings and manuscripts

Le Botanique

Koningstraat 236; 02.218.37.32

Until MAR 2 Un certain regard, works by artists from CRÉHAM (creativity and mental handicap)

Royal Library

Kunstberg; 02.519.58.73

Until FEB 8 Formatting Europe: Mapping a Continent, maps from the Middle-Ages to the 20th century

Royal Museums of Art and History

Jubelpark 10; 02.741.72.11

Until MAR 2 Beauty Singular-Plural, 5th Design Triennial, on the theme of beauty, its criteria, diversity and subjectivity

Until APR 20 La Chine sous toit/Onder dak in China, 2,000 years of funerary architecture and furniture from China's Henan museum

Until APR 27 From Gilgamesh to Zenobia, highlights from the museum's collection of ancient art from the Middle East and Iran plus twelve masterpieces from the Louvre

Royal Museums of Fine Arts

Regentschapsstraat 3; 02.508.32.11

Until JAN 27 Rubens: A Genius at Work, major show of works by the Flemish master and his workshop

Until MAR 30 Alechinsky from A to Y, retrospective of work by the Belgian artist on the occasion of his 80th

birthday

Until MAR 30 Quadrum: International Magazine of Modern Art, tribute to Ernst Goldschmidt, curator and publisher

Tour & Taxis

Havenlaan 86C; 02.549.60.49

Until JAN 27 Antiquaires 2008, antiques and fine arts fair

Until FEB 15 The Building of Europe, a Vision on Heritage, photographs of past winners of the Europa Nostra Award for restoration and preservation of cultural heritage (part of Europa-europa)

Until MAR 23 It's our History!, multi-media exhibition on the development of the EU and the lives of Europeans citizens since 1945

Antwerp

Contemporary Art Museum (MuHKA)

Leuvenstraat 32; 03.238.59.60

Until FEB 10 Collection presentation XXI, with works by Charif Benhelima, Suchan Kinoshita, Sergei Bratkov and many others

Extra City

Tulpstraat 79; 0484.42.10.70

JAN 25-MAR 30 Mimétisme, contemporary art group show with work by Paweł Althamer & Artur Zmijewski, Elisabetta Benassi, Charif Benhelima, Lieven de Boeck and many others

Mayer van den Bergh Museum

Lange Gasthuisstraat 19; 03.232.42.37

Until JAN 27 Facing death, drawings of the artist's dying wife by Eugène van Mieghem (1875-1930)

MoMu

Nationalestraat 28; 03.470.27.70

Until FEB 10 Exuberant fashion designs by Bernhard Willhelm

Rockox House

Keizerstraat 12; 03.201.92.50

Until FEB 10 Samson and Delilah: A Rubens Painting Returns, the famous painting shown along with other works of art originally owned by Antwerp mayor Nicolaas Rockox

Ghent

Huis van Alijn

Kraanlei 65; 09.269.23.67

Until JAN 27 Gent in bewegend beeld, video

Museum Dr Guislain

Jozef Guislainstraat 43; 09.216.35.95,

www.museumdrguislain.be

Until APR 27 Sick: Between Body and Soul, the links between mental and physical pain

Stedelijk Museum voor Actuele Kunst (SMAK)

Citadelpark; 09.221.17.03

Until FEB 17 Head Shop/Shop Head, Paul McCarthy retrospective 1966-2007

Hasselt

Z33

Zuivelmarkt 33 (in begijnhof);

011.29.59.60

Until FEB 10 Nr17 Slow: Looking at things differently, video installations by designer Marina Yee and work by artists who have inspired her, including Léon Spilliaert, Luc Tuymans and Erik Verdonck

Knokke

Pascal Polar Gallery

Zeedijk 811; 050.68.56.23

Until JAN 31 Photography & Photomontage, photographs by Olivier Christinat, Godfried Donkor, Claude Fauville and others

Leuven

Stuk

Naamsestraat 96; 016.32.03.20

Until FEB 3 Video works by Keren Cyttar

Lier

Stedelijk Museum Wuyts-Van Campen & Baron Caroly

Don't miss this week

MY FLANDERS

Mit Philips

Mit Philips is a doctor who's been working for Medecins sans Frontiers (known in Dutch as Arsen Zonder Grenzen), or Doctors Without Borders, for 20 years. We ask her about where our donations are really going

How does Doctors Without Borders work?

It's an international health-care organisation, and the main goal is to bring effective health care to those people most in need. We see in the field that worldwide solidarity doesn't always lead to actual health improvements for people. In a way, we build a bridge between the people who support us at home and the people we want to help. It's essential that we avoid becoming bureaucratic or disconnected from people's reality. We remain connected to our 18 different sections and supporters worldwide. This broad support and funding base guarantees our independence, flexibility and effectiveness. We pool our cutting-edge expertise and experience, dispensing up-to-date information to our field teams. It's a major advantage of our supportive network. We can get a health centre up and running in one or two days.

Where do your funds come from?

Three-quarters comes from the general public, which is essential, as we don't have to wait on funds before taking action. And public support gives us the freedom to tackle some highly unpopular issues that governments might not want to touch. On the other hand, governments are sometimes very eager to help certain countries for political reasons. But we refuse to offer humanitarian aid as an image booster or as an excuse for political inaction. We really don't want to get entangled in those hidden agendas. Win hearts and minds? No way.

Recently you've stopped your project in Rwanda after 14 years of presence in the country.

There are enough other organisations present now in Rwanda. During the genocide, Doctors Without Borders and the Red Cross stayed while others got on the next plane. That gave us credibility in the eyes of the local people and authorities. We have come a long way since, and we think it's time to move on to other crises.

What is happening now in Congo?

That huge country has so many problems, and so little is being done. The great speeches are there, but the funds don't come through. The World Health Organisation has calculated that a basic health-care package costs €23.50 a year per person. But less than €3.50 is spent. In other post-conflict countries, like Afghanistan and Sudan, €6.75 to €10 is spent, which is still too low. In Europe, we spend around €1,346 per person. But the additional problem in Congo is that health funds will be put into a system where patients pay to obtain basic care. It will lead to reasonably functioning but empty hospitals. We saw the same thing happening in Redemption hospital in Liberia. People coming out of conflict simply cannot afford to pay for the care they need. Sixty-five cents for a consult seems like nothing, but not if you earn 13 cents a day. We don't want to force people to choose between a doctor or food for their children.

So, free access to health care is the only way forward?

It is. The problem and the solution are understood, but nobody seems to feel the urgency for change. In Congo hospitals, a popular saying goes that mothers are only able to leave the hospital by the time their babies can walk, as they first have to pay the bill. They keep patients hostage in some ward until the family pays. Those hospitals have piles of repossessed bikes, agricultural equipment, etc.

That's madness!

Even worse, if you go to a hospital in need of a caesarean, and you can't pay, you'll die in the waiting room. So, I can't understand that donors want to pour money into such a system! The principal goal of humanitarian help is to assist communities according to their needs, regardless of politics or economical value. You can't imagine European patients being withheld treatment because of their economic potential. To live in a poor country should not condemn you to poor health.

So does aid make a difference?

It can make a lot of difference, but the rules of the game need to be adapted to make it more effective. Mozambique, nicknamed "donor's darling", receives many international funds, but the International Monetary Fund (IMF) strongly advises finance ministries to limit their budgets in line with the domestic financial resources of the countries being funded. Incredible, but true. The IMF's argument is sustainability. If local governments can't keep up free health care without international funds, it's considered better not to start

Sofia Stevens



it. Which is the most paralysing philosophy you can imagine.

Is anything being done to change this philosophy?

There is a huge international drive for change. The funds are there, let's use them. A healthy population is vital to a healthy economy. But the IMF still seems to see patients as a bottomless pit of expenses, not as an investment. At this point some politicians, even Belgians, continue to actively block the spending of available international funds. The question is: are you committed to worldwide solidarity for a better future or not? When I'm really mad, I call it social Darwinism. They just shrug their shoulders and say: they're poor, of course they die.

A country without people is, of course, more profitable...

[laughs] Yes, let's build new roads leading straight to the diamond mines and palm oil.

Doctors Without Borders publicly denounces these current funding practices, right?

Well, we ask questions. If international donors are paying to improve basic health care, and patients are kept from using it because of fees, these funds are not being converted into actual progress. European taxpayers should hold their own governments accountable for the efficient use of their contributions. There's little public debate on the issue. I get upset that Belgium always seems to be last in supporting positive changes in international health care. Why is that?

The UK, for instance, has already decided to support African countries that offer free access to health care.

What role can Flanders play?

More and more Flemish people are travelling to Africa and seeing for themselves what is going on, meeting people just like themselves and seeing how lucky we are. This often leads to effective projects of solidarity, with real life changes for people. Why don't the governments follow their lead and focus on the end beneficiary of its aid? Is it really too much to expect that individual patients enjoy the benefits of our funds?

So in 20 years, you've had a lot of reasons to be frustrated.

I consider myself fortunate because Doctors Without Borders takes responsibility and makes a difference. As part of the Analysis and Advocacy Team, I can stimulate other actors to do the same. Personally, I feel less helpless now than when I worked in the field in Ethiopia, Congo or Sudan. Politics and policies limit what you can do in the field. But, yes, I do get tired and angry at our Belgian or European cooperation – about their attitude towards AIDS or health in the Congo. I just want to shake them and say: Wake up! Times have changed. A life saved matters.

Interview by Monique Philips

online

www.msf.org

THE LAST WORD

what they're saying in Flanders

Strike condemned

"This strike puts the future of the plant in jeopardy"

John Fleming
chief executive of Ford Europe
commenting on the strike at the Ford factory in Genk

Yemen warning

"Everyone needs to realise that travelling to Yemen is dangerous"

Karel De Gucht
Belgian foreign minister after two Belgian tourists were killed in Yemen

No panic

"This was peanuts compared to the Rolling Stones concert"

Hajo Beeckman
spokesman for Flanders traffic control centre, after a fire led to a shutdown in the traffic control room

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