



FLANDERS TODAY

MARCH 7, 2012

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The boon of Boon

Flanders fetes one of its most famous writers during the centenary of his birth

Bjorn Gabriels

Louis Paul Boon was one of Flanders' most influential writers of the 20th century, though his name strikes a different chord with different people. Some call him unequivocally one of the most talented authors in the Dutch language who ever lived, while others find him an "issue author" – too nihilistic to be great. Those who know him only by media reports of the last couple of decades – and they are many – judge him by the controversy of *Fenomenale Feminateek*, a collection of erotic images he amassed and that make up one of the hundreds of events of the centenary festival Boon! 2012

On 15 March 1912, Louis Paul Boon sees the light of day in Aalst, in a world limping between sluggish continuation and the changes decades of labouring through the Second Industrial Revolution have brought about. Soon this world embarks on the War to End All Wars. A host of shattered lives and crushed illusions later, Private Boon finds himself in the middle of the Second World War, yet another manifestation of man's destructive nature.

He is made a prisoner of war for a few months in the earliest stages of the German invasion of Belgium, and then returns home. He paints, draws and finishes writing what will become his debut novel, *De voorstad groeit* (The City Grows), a history of progress and decay in a modern city. With this publication, the small-statured writer from a lower-middle-class background already makes a name for himself. But there is much more to come.

The personal is political

The very next year, 1944, Boon published the bleak artist novel *Abel Gholtaerts*, based on the life of Vincent van Gogh. He develops several other texts, including what will eventually become *De Kapellekensbaan* (Chapel Road), his most famous work – and of the few ever published in English. In the meantime, Boon starts working as a journalist, writing a weekly war-time chronicle. These columns will be juxtaposed in his 1947 book *Mijn kleine oorlog* (My Little War), a montage of stories that exposes the horrors of war and people's inability to change for the better.

In the following decades, the writer produces a vast oeuvre. As a journalist with a knack for individual stories that serve as a sign of the times, he writes about big stars as well as common people. These observations, but also his coverage of the arts, glitter and glamour, literature, food and music, fuel his probing novels. He sees himself as a journalist and novelist but also as a progressive activist, and he eagerly combines these occupations.

Boon becomes a celebrity; he appears on TV quizzes, works in the visual arts, flirts with a Nobel Prize. He describes himself as a "seismograph", detecting the displacements of a striving, yet stranded modern society. He also begins to amass a collection of erotic and pornographic photos of women – a study, he says, of how society views women. But the massive collection of images becomes hugely controversial and serves – unfairly – to define Boon and his work, even today.

Boon eventually saw "barbarism" as gaining ground, and he retreats to his rural property outside of Aalst, forming his social circle from a few brothers in arms, says professor of literature Kris Humbeek. He is Boon's biographer and director of the LP Boon Documentation Centre at the University of Antwerp. Together with Britt Kennis, coordinating editor of Boon's collected works, he is the curator of a double exhibition in Antwerp and Aalst on the life and work of Louis Paul Boon.



FACE OF FLANDERS

Alan Hope



Johan Thijs

The profession of banker these days is about as popular as tax inspector, but somebody's got to do it. KBC, the Leuven-based bank insurer, announced last week that its new CEO from 3 May, replacing Jan Vanhevel, will be Johan Thijs, until now head of the Belgian business unit. Thijs' appointment completes the change-over at the top of the bank. Last year chairman Jan Huyghebaert was replaced by Thomas Leysen, and CFO Luc Philips by Luc Popelier. Thijs was born in Limburg in 1965 and studied applied mathematics and actuarial science – the mathematics at the basis of insurance and finance – at the University of Leuven. He started his career with ABB Insurance, which a decade later was merged into the group now known as KBC. He joined the board of the Belgian division in 2008, and a year later became a member of the management committee and CEO of the division. His appointment brings to an end the uncertainty over the composition of the triumvirate at the head of the bank, and in particular the place of Vanhevel. He postponed his

retirement in 2009 to step into the CEO job, at a difficult time for KBC. According to a statement, Vanhevel, who had been criticised for lack of leadership, has now taken the opportunity to step down. Last week KBC divested itself of the Polish Kredyt Bank, the last major sale imposed on the bank by the EU Commission in return for the grant of aid from the federal and Flemish governments. KBC traditionally appoints from the inside, and Thijs' previous experience means there will be little transition required before he can start operating at full capacity. KBC, following its imposed slim-down, will now also be turning its attention more to the domestic market, so his three years as head of the Belgian division now looks almost like a grooming period. "With Johan Thijs, the board has chosen an energetic leader with a proven track record of success throughout his career," Leysen said. "With the support of his colleagues in the Executive Committee, I believe he will lead KBC to a new level of performance."

News in brief

Flemish heritage minister Geert Bourgeois announced that he will **apply to Unesco to request protected status** for 28 sites in West Flanders associated with the commemoration of the First World War. The sites are situated in seven clusters: the Passchendaele battlefield, the flooded area between the Ijzer River and the former railway line known as Frontzate, the Geluvelde Plateau, the Wijtschate Salient, Houthulst forest and the West Flanders Heuvelland.

Television cable company **Telenet has scrapped four main channels** from its cable package across Flanders. Analogue viewers will no longer have access to BBC1, BBC2, ZDF and France 2. Other channels are also being removed according to the region, in an effort, the company said, to free up bandwidth for internet and digital TV services.

Dimitri Verhulst is the sole Flemish author to be nominated for this year's Golden Book-Owl prize, the successor to the Golden Owl. Verhulst is nominated for his novel *Monoloog van iemand die het gewoon werd tegen zichzelf te praten* (Monologue of Someone Who Got Used to Talking to Himself), which imagines the last days of cyclist Frank Vandenbroucke. The other nominees are Dutch authors Jeroen Brouwers (who won in 2001), Stephan Enter, Herman Koch and David Pefko. The €25,000 prize will be awarded on 5 May.

The Fort Breendonk memorial in Antwerp province, which commemorates the Jews and others deported to concentration camps during the Nazi occupation, is holding a study day on 22 March **to examine the question of children visiting such memorials**. The day will involve a talk by Luk Sanders, a philosopher at Antwerp University, as well as

staff of the Holocaust museum in Mechelen, which opens in September. Reservations for the event can be emailed to mm@breendonk.be.

The federal police needs to include tougher **action against violence directed at gays and lesbians** in its new security plan, announced last week, according to Jan Roegiers, a member of the Flemish parliament. "We don't have to wait until someone is killed; we need to take action now," Roegiers said. The plan, launched by federal justice minister Annemie Turtelboom and interior minister Joëlle Milquet, prioritises action against armed robberies, violence and drugs. Gay bashing is on the rise in Brussels and Flanders, and last weekend saw physical violence erupt at the doors of a gay party in Leuven. Roegiers was one of 36 prominent Flemings to sign an open letter in *De Standaard* calling for more action against violence and harassment of gays.

Flemish comedy sketch TV show ***Wats? (What If?)* has been nominated for a Golden Rose** at this year's annual television festival in Lucerne, Switzerland. The show, produced by independent house Shelter, makers of the hugely successful Benidorm Bastards, imagines surreal scenarios such as "What if shopkeepers were like civil service employees?" and "What if football referees were like swimming guards?" The show is competing in the same category as Britain's *Black Mirror* and *The Saddest Sketch Show in the World* from Israel.

Flemish public broadcaster VRT and *MO** magazine have won this year's **Intercultural Media Awards**, handed out by the Minderhedenforum, or Minority Forum. The VRT won for *Triq Slama*, a two-part portrait by

journalist Loufti Belghmedi and filmmaker Mohammed Ikhan about Mohamed Abdeslam, who came to Belgium as a guest worker from Morocco 50 years ago. The *Koppen* episode on makers of short films also won an award, and children's channel Ketnet was praised for its portrayal of ethnic diversity as an element of daily life. *MO** magazine won for an article by journalist Samira Bendadi on the effects of racism on children.

News anchor Freek Braeckman has been named this year's **Strafste Gentenaar**, a prize given to the personality considered the best example of the city's qualities. In 2009, Braeckman won the title of *Slimste mens ter wereld* (Smartest Person in the World) on the popular TV quiz show, and last year came first in the annual Dutch language dictation in Amsterdam.

Two volunteers working for the nature conservancy organisation Natuurpunt were last week attacked by the occupants of a car annoyed at being stopped while the volunteers were helping toads to cross the road as part of the annual migration to breeding grounds. Two suspects were later arrested. Natuurpunt last year organised 206 such road crossings involving more than 178,000 toads and other amphibians.

Flanders Today Survey

Want to help out a Flemish student with her dissertation on Flanders Today and express your opinion on our weekly newspaper at the same time? Then please fill out an online survey. It only takes 10 minutes, and all data is anonymous.

FLANDERS TODAY

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EDITOR Lisa Bradshaw
DEPUTY EDITOR Sally Tipper
NEWS EDITOR Alan Hope
AGENDA EDITOR Robyn Boyle
ART DIRECTOR Paul Van Dooren
PREPRESS Corelio AdPro
CONTRIBUTORS Rebecca Benoot, Robyn Boyle, Leo Cendrowicz, Sabine Clappaert, Courtney Davis, Katy Desmond, Nicholas Hirst, Stéphanie Duval, Andy Furniere, Anna Jenkinson, Catherine Kusters, Katrien Lindemans, Marc Maes, Ian Mundell, Anja Otte, Tom Peeters, Monique Philips, Marcel Schoeters, Christophe Verbiest, Denzil Walton
GENERAL MANAGER Joske Plas
PUBLISHER Corelio Publishing NV

EDITORIAL ADDRESS
Gossetlaan 30 - 1702 Groot-Bijgaarden
tel. 02 373 99 09 - fax 02 375 98 22
editorial@flanderstoday.eu

FREE SUBSCRIPTIONS
subscriptions@flanderstoday.eu
or sign up online at www.flanderstoday.eu

ADVERTISING
Evelyne Fregonese
02 373 83 57
advertising@flanderstoday.eu

VERANTWOORDELIJKE UITGEVER
Joske Plas

OFFSIDE

Alan Hope

Belfius transformius!

What's in a name? Quite a lot if you're a bank that's been afflicted with bad debt, that made a loss of more than €11 billion last year, and that needs to do something drastic to win back the confidence of the public. Quite a lot, too, if you're the sort of consultancy that specialises in corporate branding. The troubled bank Dexia had such problems with its image that when word spread that it was seeking a new name, one of the most popular suggestions from members of the public was Toxia. Last week, the bank announced its new name: Belfius. "My son thought the name came from a Harry Potter film," joked one commentator on Twitter. "Belfius? Wasn't he the bass player in Dexia's Midnight Runners?"

quipped another. A common thread was dairy products: "There's something about it that reminds me of a pot of yogurt," someone tweeted. "Toxia with active Belfius for an improved intestinal transit," said another. The name-change cost the bank €35 million, not only for the fees to Ghent-based communications consultancy Remarkable, but also for the replacement of everything from neon signs to headed notepaper. "The 'Bel' stands for

Belgium; the 'fi' stands for finance, and the 'us' refers to the English word" explained CEO Jos Clijsters. The ending "fius" also has an echo of "fides" – the Latin for "faithful". The new name will begin being introduced next month and should be on the front of all the bank's branches from June. One change was immediate, though: the footballers of Club Brugge, sponsored by the bank, had the Dexia logo on their jerseys changed to the Belfius logo last weekend.



The boon of Boon

Reconstruction of the author’s house lets visitors choose which side of Boon they want to meet

► continued from page 1

Wolf’s den or fox hole?

“By the late 1940s, Boon has become unhappy with his position in society,” says Humbeeck. “He leaves the hectic city life and buys a piece of land in Erembodegem, on the outskirts of Aalst. It is striking to see the writer who challenges modern city life start saving money to realise the archetypal bourgeois dream of a house in the country.” But, notes Humbeeck, this was not a sign that he was giving up the good fight. “It’s a tactical withdrawal in order to gather his strength, sharpen his poisonous pen and strike back in his critical works.” In the late 1960s and into the ’70s, Boon experiences more and more difficulty retaining the combative spirit that led him through his scathingly critical novels and kept alive in him a sense of idealism. “He believes himself,” says Humbeeck, “to be on the losing end of the struggle”. The exhibition in Antwerp, *Villa Isengrimus*, shows “Boon’s path from the industrial city of Aalst to his writer’s retreat just south of the city,” which he calls Ysengrimus after the wolf character in the famous 12th-century set of Latin fables – a character always undermined by the fox Reinardus. “*Villa* reconstructs parts of Boon’s home and ultimately lets visitors decide which side of the writer prevails: the fox-like saboteur or the wolf figure, bound to lose.”

Is *Villa Isengrimus* meant to challenge existing preconceptions about Boon’s work?
Kris Humbeeck: Yes, but the most important aspect is that visitors make up their own minds. They can literally enter his villa through



Louis Paul Boon, in a photo taken by his son, Jo Boon, in 1974

activist notion of literature – not only offering a poetic interpretation of the world, but also trying to change it for the better – is a form of naive idealism, as he concluded himself, or that he did manage to have an impact. Boon’s standards were high – too high, surely – but perhaps he did enhance the awareness among

his readers that, despite what some people claim, all is not well. Besides a Boon parade and public celebrations, Aalst will hosts the other half of the exhibition. How do the two of them relate? The exhibition in Aalst also focuses on Boon’s retreat from the modern world. He not only escapes to the countryside, but he also flees into the past, through historical novels. Here, the same paradox of his withdrawal comes into play: Boon uses a literary strategy to confront his readers with pertinent issues at hand. The title character in *De bende van Jan de Lichte* (The Jan de Lichte Gang) is a sympathetic criminal and

icon of human rebelliousness, who revolts against the established order. However, in the end, Jan de Lichte is crushed by the law and executed on the main square in Aalst. The rebellious role models Boon portrays all share a sense of failed uprising. Boon did engage in years of meticulous research about why Flanders never seemed to have had a cultural climate that would allow for a successful revolution – in the meaning of liberty, equality and fraternity. Boon concludes that since the Fall of Antwerp in 1585 – and with William of Orange to blame – Flanders has been surrendered to intellectual and material poverty, whereas the Northern Republic could

thrive. Revolution is an honourable enterprise, but doomed to fail. As one of the most influential writers in the Dutch language of the 20th century, what is Boon’s position now internationally? The first translation into English of *Chapel Road* in the 1970s – which leaves a lot to be desired, according to experts – was important for the international introduction of a more modern Flemish literature. Almost parallel with Hugo Claus, he broke through the language barrier with works that tackled modernity rather than rural life. But up to then, Boon’s international exposure mainly came through translations into German and the Scandinavian languages.

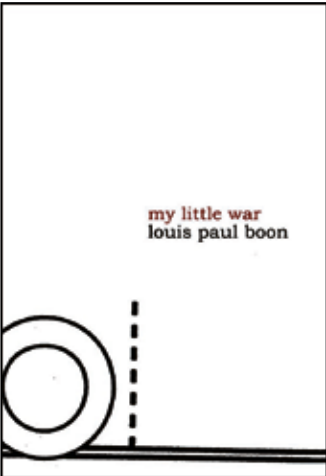
Recently, British translator Paul Vincent won an award for his translation of Boon’s *My Little War*. Do you think this could posthumously stimulate interest in Boon’s work?
It is not impossible, but I doubt it. The fact is that a writer who is deceased is far more difficult to market than someone you can send out on a publicity tour. During his life, Boon didn’t like to travel, so that would always have been an issue. But, all in all, his translations came too late in his career, near his rather early death. No one’s to blame, really, but the fact is that there has never been a conscious effort towards a translation policy. New translations – there’s also a new one in German on the way – are to be applauded, but a genuine worldwide breakthrough is difficult.

What work would you recommend for future translations?
It has always amazed me that no one has ever tried to publish the two parts of Boon’s magnum opus in one binding. [*Summer in Ter-Muren* was a companion piece to *Chapel Road*] I understand the volume of it poses difficulties, but a publication like that in a number of major languages – supported by a proper campaign, such as the advocacy of esteemed authors in the respective languages – might spark the interest in Boon’s oeuvre.

“Boon perhaps did enhance awareness among his readers that, despite what some people claim, all is not well”

its original terrace doors and opt for which Boon they prefer. The question is whether Boon’s almost

LOUIS PAUL BOON IN ENGLISH



My Little War Originally published in 1947, this evocation of the common man’s Second World War cuts between Boon’s observations and conversational fragments to expose human barbarity and society’s failure to fend it off
Chapel Road The first part of what Boon called “an illegal novel for the common man” appeared in 1953. Boon challenges traditional narration through a carefully constructed chaos of characters and alter-egos. *Chapel Road* interweaves three storylines: a young girl named Ondine, a present take on the medieaval story of Reynard the Fox and parts of the author’s life.
Summer in Termuren Published three years after *Chapel Road*, it continues where that book left off. His characters are still discussing how to portray Ondine, a married woman now. The diptych is a quintessential work in Flemish literature.
Minuet In the grim short novel *Minuet*, originally published in 1955, Boon delves into his own autobiography, blending fact and fiction. The monologues of three characters in a love triangle mix with newspaper headlines to arrive at a more symbolic reading of human urges and the stagnancy of modern life.

Complete Boon bibliography and more from the Louis Paul Boon Documentation Centre:

► www.lpbooncentrum.be

BOON! 2012 MAIN EVENTS

- Kick-off celebration, hosted by journalist Freek Braeckman, 15 March, De Werf, Aalst
- Exhibition Rebellen, Aalst City Museum ’t Gasthuys, 17 March to 30 September
- Exhibition Villa Isengrimus, Letterenhuis, Antwerp, 18 March to 4 November
- Exhibition Fenomenale Feminatreek, De Werf, Aalst, 16 March to 17 June
- Re-enactment of Jan de Lichte’s trial, Aalst, 22 April
- Boon’s World parade in Aalst, 23 June
- The Big Boon Marathon, KVS, Brussels, 7 October

Complete list of events and activities:

► www.boon2012.be

Flemish government saves €500 million

Most of budget savings come from a postponement of new spending

Alan Hope

The government of Flanders has made €500 million in budgetary savings without having to make too many severe cuts in existing spending. Instead, most of the savings comes from proposed new spending being postponed. The hole in the budget comes as a result of growth forecasts which were revised downward after the original budget for the year was drawn up. Part of the savings was covered by the use of reserves intended to cope with sudden budget shocks. In other measures not affecting spending, inheritance taxes will now be levied one month earlier than before, which will bring in €60 million. The government has also proposed doubling the so-called division tax – paid when one of the owners of a home buys the other out – from 1% of the price to 2%, for a saving of €30 million. Part of the working resources of the government –

somewhat by the feeling that we were expecting more ambitious structural measures from the government than they have presented,” said Jo Libeer, director-general of Flemish Chamber of Commerce Voka. “This is indeed a careful budget revision, but it is not far-reaching enough.”

Unizo, the organisation that represents employers in Flanders, praised the decision to make savings on spending rather than increasing taxes. “In that way, the economy is, to an important extent, spared the effects,” a statement said. Unizo also applauded a decision by ministers to take a 2% pay-cut.

Meanwhile, the new budget found room for €12 million to go to increased subsidies for renovations that include the installation of solar water heaters and insulating windows, announced Flemish energy minister Freya Van den



Energy minister Freya Van den Bossche and minister-president Kris Peeters

not including staff costs – will not be subject to indexation in line with inflation, and administration costs in general will be cut, for an estimated €104 million saving.

More savings are to come from public transport authority De Lijn, and a proposed child benefit will be postponed, with a saving of €15 million. No cuts have been made to spending on culture or on research and development.

“Our satisfaction at seeing the budget balanced is overshadowed

Bossche. At the end of last year the federal government ended tax-relief on energy-saving renovations other than roof insulation, and the two new measures have been introduced to close that gap to some extent. The subsidy for windows goes up from 20-30% to 30-40%, depending on income, with a ceiling of €15,000 for the total investment cost. For solar heaters, the subsidy is increased to €200-€500 per square metre, which cuts the earn-back time from 20 to 10 years.

Riders saddle up for horse shelters

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters last weekend launched an online auction in aid of the Stichting voor paarden in nood, or Horses in Need Foundation. From now until 22 April, bidders can post an offer for a private lesson from one of 22 top horse-riders in Flanders.

Flanders is well-known as a region for equestrian sport and for a love of horses in general, with 3% of all families owning at least one horse. However, shelters are suffering overcrowding as a result of an increase in the abuse of horses, as well as more and more

horses being taken into care for other reasons, such as legal seizures of property. The centres lack the space to accept more horses and the resources to look after the ones they have.

Members of the public are invited to adopt a horse in care at the Old Horses Lodge refuge centre in Laarne, East Flanders. The latest initiative involves equestrian stars, including dressage rider Jeroen Devroe, event rider Joris Vanspringel and show jumpers Judy-Ann Melchior and Harrie Smolders. At the close of bids, each of them will arrange with the winning bidder to give a one-hour lesson in aid of the charity.

“This is an action I’m glad to get behind,” said world champion jumper Philippe Le Jeune at the launch of the auction, which took place during the annual Flanders Horse Expo in Ghent. “I promise whoever wins an afternoon they won’t forget. Apart from the lesson, I’ll also give a demonstration with Vigo, the horse on which I became world champion.” As *Flanders Today* went to press, Le Jeune was a clear head in front of the rest of the field, with a bid of €100 for the hour.

“Our top riders clearly have their hearts in the right place,” Peeters said. “While they’re accustomed to riding world-class horses, they also care about horses that have done less well in life.

► www.vlaamspaardenloket.be



World champion show jumper Philippe Le Jeune with Vigo

Teachers may protest pension plans

Teachers’ unions are threatening to strike on Wednesday, 28 March unless they are presented with satisfactory terms governing their retirement age, following last week’s budget revision. The current system allows teachers in Flanders to retire two years earlier – at age 58 – than the general retirement age of 60. The budget package last week scraps that early retirement option. Only pre-school teachers will be able to retire two years early; they were previously allowed to take early retirement at age 56.

The decision was “simple arithmetic,” said Flemish education minister Pascal Smet. “Everyone who has been following the debate knows that working longer was on the cards.” Minister-president Kris Peeters called on the parties to enter into talks before taking action, but stressed that, while there might be room for negotiation, the government does not intend to revoke decisions already taken.

FIFTH COLUMN

Anja Otte

Balloons and cuts

This year’s budget control is more than a formality for the federal government. As this publication went to press, the ministers sat together to find the €2 billion in cuts needed in order to meet the 2.8% deficit Europe allows. This operation would not pass painlessly, vice prime minister Steven Vanackere (CD&V) warned. Whenever a situation like that arises, balloons are released.

Balloons, in Flemish political lingo, are ideas put forward by some party or other, not in government meetings but in public. By doing this, parties test how their coalition partners – as well as public opinion – react to them. But most balloons are filled with nothing but hot air, and they often end up being shot down.

In the past weeks, one of the balloons concerned the index mechanism, which increases wages automatically in accordance with the rising cost of living. Christian-democrats and liberals believe the wage index is up for some adjustment, as it makes for higher wages than in our neighbouring countries, rendering Belgium less competitive. They were vetoed by the socialists, however. So far for that balloon.

A socialist idea, then, was to make large companies pay a minimum of tax. Although Belgium is known as a country with some of the highest taxes in the world, upon closer scrutiny you find that many large companies pay very little tax, if any at all. The reason is a multitude of tax deductions. Even Voka, the Flemish Chamber of Commerce, named some that could easily be scrapped, such as golf club memberships.

In return, Voka asks for more transparent – and especially lower – taxes. Introducing yet another tax, they argue, does not help. Moreover, liberals warned, it could scare off foreign investors, who look no further than the basic tax rates. So much for the corporate tax balloon.

According to leaks, the government is considering a series of new taxes, including VAT on lawyers’ fees, a higher VAT rate for cafés, restaurants and hotels, an extra aviation tax and some adjustments on the notional interest deduction, another almost inexplicable but very generous system for companies. All of them come at a cost: the catering sector is already struggling, flight companies threaten to leave Brussels Airport, and foreign investors might prefer other countries over Belgium. If these balloons are still up in the air by the time you read this, that is.

THE WEEK IN FIGURES

70%

of people in Flanders read at least one book in the past year outside of work or studies, according to a survey announced by the culture ministry. Women (81%) read more than men (61%), and the 18-24 age group reads the most

1.2 million

square metres of office space in Brussels is unoccupied, 9.2% of the city’s total available space, said the Regional Development Agency. The worst areas are around the North and South trains stations and outside of the city centre

€360,143

paid for the average house in Pepingen, Flemish Brabant, now the most expensive municipality in Flanders for home buying. Menen in West Flanders was cheapest, with a house costing on average €121,000

837

companies in Flanders went bankrupt in the first two months of the year, Graydon reported, compared to 784 in the same period last year. Wholesale traders and garages were the worst affected

€65,651

in court-ordered damages to be paid by a man in Harelbeke, West Flanders, for illegally uploading a yet-to-be-released CD to the internet for distribution. The man had also downloaded more than 1,000 other music and movie files

Website to limit roadwork disruption

Compensation to shopkeepers was €2.5 million last year

Alan Hope

The Flemish Institute for Mobility (FIM) has launched a new website aimed at limiting the disruption caused by roadworks by creating a standard pattern for reporting how much trouble the works, even small-scale projects, are likely to cause.

The FIM began in 2010 by producing a manual and a questionnaire for those involved in roadworks – contractors, study bureaux, roads agencies and commissioning authorities like local councils – in order to help standardise the procedure of reporting work sites and determining how much disruption they are going to cause, as well as for how long. At each stage of the process, the parties involved are asked to consider if there are ways to reduce disruption to a minimum.

The website also provides a number of examples of best practice, where the FIM considers that a project was handled in such a way as to minimise problems. They include works in the centre of Mol in Antwerp province, works on the Lummen interchange on the E313 & E314 motorways, and a look back at works on the Antwerp Ring carried out in 2005.

The minimising of disruption caused by roadworks is of interest to commuters and residents, but of particular importance to business, as figures released by Unizo, the organisation that represents the self-employed, last week reveal. Last year, 1,289 small businesses in Flanders applied for compensation for losses incurred as a result of

public works that forced them to close. More than 43,000 days were lost to closures, of which the businesses concerned (which only receive compensation for works that go on for longer than seven days) were compensated for 34,139 days. The total bill for the Participation Fund, a federal credit institution for the self-employed, came to €2.5 million, compared to €1.9 million the year before – although the level of compensation (€73.95 per day of closure) is so low that the true cost to business is much higher.

Until January 2010 there was no compensation available at all. Shops and other businesses disrupted by public works, such as pavements being dug up making access by customers difficult, were left to make do as best they could. In many cases, businesses simply could not cope with the blow to their income. In the first nine months of the system, the Enterprise Agency, which handles claims, approved 170 demands, for

a total of €1.36 million, more than half of them in West Flanders. Last year, the total was much higher, partly as a result of approaching municipal elections, when local councils tend to carry out works, and partly because of tough winters in recent years, which have severely affected road surfaces, water pipes,

drains and other installations.

Unizo offers information on its website for businesses that may be affected by public works.

► www.minderhinderplatform.be

► www.unizo.be



Transport group makes cost-savings suggestions

Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters has The public transport users' group TreinTramBus (TTB) has proposed a series of savings measures for Flemish public transport authority De Lijn, aimed at providing an alternative to ongoing cuts in services.

TTB has already welcomed De Lijn's energy-saving initiatives and a decision to clamp down on fare-dodgers, designed to save the company €600,000 a year. In its latest suggestion, TTB calls for better traffic flow at crossroads, using light-influencing technology that ensures a green light for trams and buses. Such measures, said chairman Jan Vanseveren, could mean De Lijn running 60 fewer trams in Antwerp alone without affecting services.

Meanwhile, De Lijn recently announced plans to cut services in and around Turnhout, Antwerp province; a proposal to do away with night buses at weekends in Ghent; the loss of 991 buses running into the city centre of Antwerp; and the halving of bus lines in Mechelen from 16 to eight.

Fare increases are one of the likely consequences of the decision by the government to seek savings from De Lijn as part of its package of budget measures. According to Vanseveren, De Lijn's fares are already among the lowest in Europe. "We'd rather see fares go up slightly than have buses and trams scrapped," he said.



Flemish arms exports down

Exports of weapons for military use from Flanders fell drastically last year to €200 million, from €320 million the year before, according to a report compiled for the government of Flanders. In 2011, sales dropped back to the level they were at in 2006. Flanders does not export complete weapons but deals in parts and materials for military use. All of Europe saw a severe reduction in exports last year.

According to the Flemish Peace Institute, the slump is a delayed effect of the global economic crisis. Because arms traders work on the basis of long-term contracts, the crisis of 2009 is only now making itself felt. The Flemish industry makes components for larger, and therefore more expensive, weapons systems, whose programmes are more susceptible to being cut, or at least delayed, in times of economic difficulty.

Also according to the report, no export licences were refused in 2011, although the authorities did block one transit shipment, consisting of parts worth €8 million coming from France and destined for Egypt. Licences were also denied for shipments of weapons from Israel to the army in Honduras, and from Turkey to the government of Gambia.

Licences were granted to exports to Afghanistan, Algeria, Georgia, Israel, Kosovo and Pakistan, either to the local military, defence companies or international organisations. Much of the material concerned is computer software and hardware.

THE WEEK IN BUSINESS

Banking

► KBC

Flanders largest financial institution has finalised the sale of its Polish subsidiary Kredyt Bank by merging it with Bank Zachodni, an affiliate of Spain's Santander bank. The deal values KBC's stake at some €820 million and delivers a €100 million book profit. It also leaves KBC with a small stake in the newly merged group.

Biotechnology

► Galapagos

Mechelen-based biotech company Galapagos will receive \$150 million (€114 million) following the signing of a contract with US pharmaceutical group Abbott to develop and market an anti-rheumatic drug. The deal could be worth up to \$1.35 billion (€1 billion) if results meet expectations.

Interiors

► Kvik

Sweden's Kvik group, specialised in the building and installation of kitchens, bathrooms and wardrobes, plans to open franchises in Aalst and Oostende later this year. The company already operates 11 stores throughout Flanders and Brussels.

Mining

► Nyrstar

The Brussels-based mining and smelting group has sold its stake in an Australian lead smelting facility to the country's Renewed Metal Technologies for some €60 million.

Pharmaceuticals

► Omega

Ghent-based Omega Pharma, specialised in the production and distribution of over-the-counter (OTC) products, has made a bid to acquire the OTC activities of Britain's GlaxoSmithKline, a deal valued at some €250 million.

Pharmaceuticals

► UCB

The Brussels-based bio-pharmacy group has started building a €250 million unit in Switzerland to produce its Cimzia drug against rheumatoid polyarthritis. The new facility is expected to come on stream in 2015.

Supermarkets

► Aldi

Discount supermarket chain Aldi plans to start selling brand-name products next to its current selection of low-price goods. The chain will begin selling products by Ferrero, including Nutella, and is likely to move later to products by Danone and Mars, among others. The change comes as a result of the success of own-brand products in larger supermarkets like Delhaize and Carrefour.

Creative differences

The title may be ambiguous, but the intentions of #YTLF! are clear

Courtney Davis

#YTLF! Can you guess what this acronym means? Perhaps it stands for “Your Tiny Little Feet!” Or “Yesterday Tomorrow Let’s Fly!” Maybe “Young Talent Loves Flanders”?

Ask the actual creator of this acronym, Toon Carpentier, what it means, and he will just shrug. “Mostly I say: ‘If you think hard enough, you can discover the meaning for yourself,’ and then I get a lot of interesting ideas. But in truth, it doesn’t stand for anything.” It may be maddeningly meaningless, but it was the name of a huge event that took place in Hasselt last weekend. “I have attended a number of larger, expensive marketing events, and it was old people telling other old people what young people were doing,” says Carpentier. “I realised there was no organisation for young creative people, whether they are scientists or entrepreneurs. I wondered what would happen if we brought these people together in one place.”

Generation gap

The 26-year-old works for Creative Class, an organisation that encourages more entrepreneurial creativity and more creative entrepreneurship in Limburg province. The older Creative Class board members didn’t necessarily understand the younger people in the industry, but they understood their importance. Toon proposed an event by and for younger people and was given responsibility for organising it.

“We worked really hard to turn this into a co-creation concept,” he explains. “At every step we worked with a continually growing group of young people to really make it an event they would love. Everything – from video to the website to the graphics was made by young creative people.”

As was the menu. “It annoys me that conference food is always fancy

and not very tasty. So we had fries and pizza and dessert.” While this is a simple element, he is driving at a larger point: the importance of understanding young people and speaking to them directly.

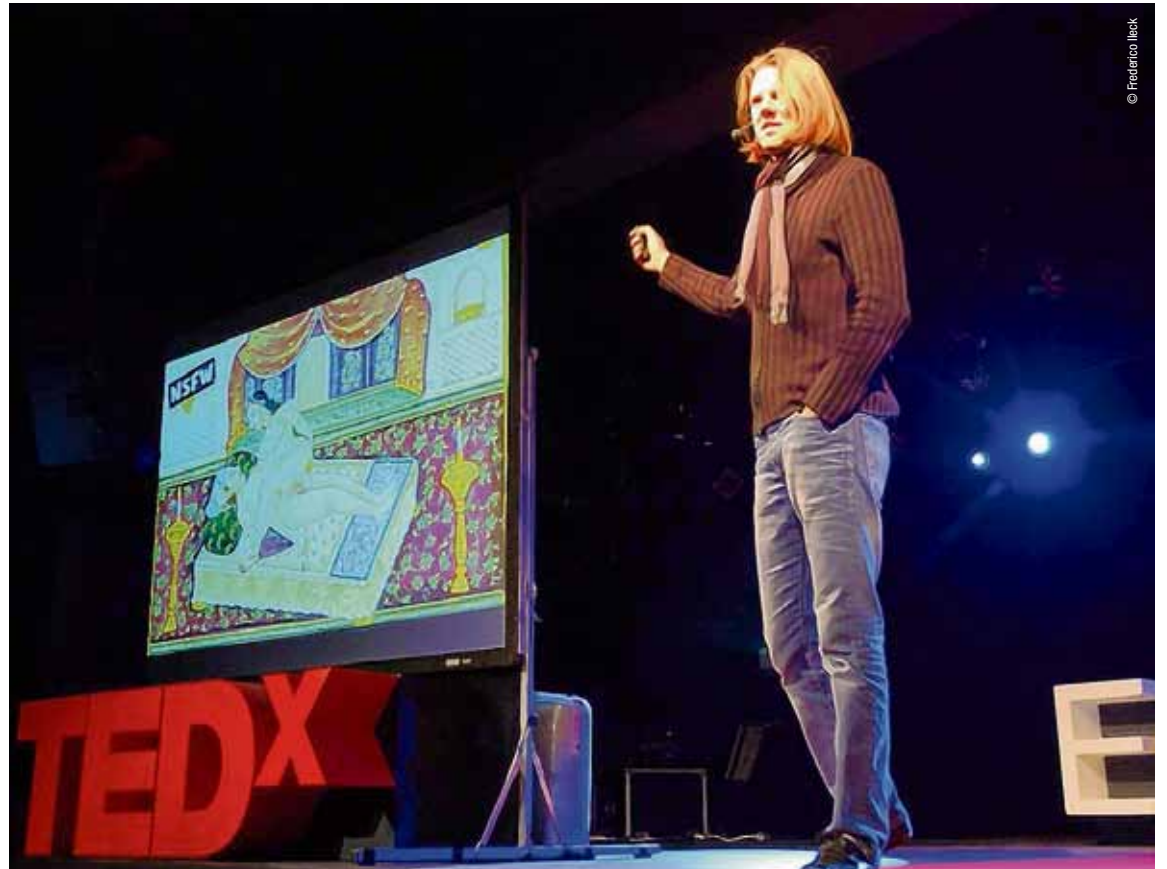
School’s out

#YTLF! was also staged in a completely different way. “For young people, sitting an entire day in a lecture is boring, and it’s what they hated from school,” continues Carpentier. “So we did it like a festival, with different stages and various things happening at the same time. You could walk around and immerse yourself or be surprised; leave if you don’t like something and try something new.” With hundreds of creative types attending, all under 30, this festival atmosphere is entirely appropriate. Now the name makes more sense. “We’re doing something that hasn’t been done before, so there isn’t a word for it,” Carpentier explains. “It is simply young creative people coming together. We’re defining it.” He won approval from Creative Class, as young people are one of their target groups. This event is an ideal example both of connecting with that segment of the population and of a general acknowledgement that creative people are crucial to a vital economy.

“It is difficult to attract talent to the

“For young people, sitting an entire day in a lecture is boring; it’s what they hated from school”

Limburg region, and it’s the reason I started Creative Class in 2008,” says Nick Decrock, 38. “We wanted to be a platform for a creative economy in this region, and north to Maastricht in the Netherlands. The economic crisis was great for creativity – it



Creative Class founder Nick Decrock at last month's TEDxEutropolis in Hasselt

furthered our message about the need for innovation. We helped policymakers in Belgium and the Netherlands to form a different view of the creative industry here. There

“Flanders DC formed a year after us, and we immediately sought cooperation from them,” says Decrock. “We do a similar thing – events, workshops, and seminars.

could be brought to the Limburg region. “We don’t want to constantly reinvent the wheel,” notes Decrock. “For example, Maastricht hosts a well-organised Pecha Kucha [quick-fire presentation event] four times a year, and we just hosted one in our town. We did the same with TedxEutropolis, normally hosted in the Netherlands. Last month, we brought it to Hasselt. Basically, it’s about changing behaviour. We’re looking beyond the typical and broadening our horizons.”

► www.creativeclass.be

Change at the top of farmers’ organisation

Marianne Vandenberghe has taken over from Geert Wallays as chair of VEVA, the pig farmers’ association. Wallays, who has held the post for three years, is stepping down to concentrate on his own farm – and well he might: Pig farmers are going through one of the toughest times in recent history. Pork production in Flanders accounts for half of all livestock farming and 60% of all farming income, minister-president Kris Peeters told the Flemish parliament in January. Flanders has almost 6.1 million pigs, managed by about 5,900 farmers. Exports in 2010 brought in €1.2 million net, with most sales going to other countries in the EU.

But the sector is suffering a crisis because of prices. Despite its reputation for high quality, the meat produced by Flemish farmers has trouble raising enough of a price to cover costs. Part of the reason is competition from Germany, which imports carcasses from Flanders, which it then processes and exports again. As a result, sales of butchered meat from Flanders have slumped.

VEVA also blames the supermarkets, which put pressure on producers because of the position they hold on the home market, where independent butchers are a disappearing breed. Last summer, VEVA organised a headline-grabbing

demonstration outside the distribution centre of Delhaize in Asse, when they dumped about 100 pig heads in the road to protest at the chain’s intention of pushing down prices.

“There’s nothing going wrong in pig farming, the problem is in pricing,” said Vandenberghe. “How much farmers get for their pigs and how that price is set – that’s where it’s all going wrong.”

Germany, she continues, “with its low-wage policy, has become the main centre for the processing and export of pork in just a few years. And that’s also where prices are being manipulated by a number of slaughterhouses, despite more than half of them having roots in the cooperative movement.”

The situation, Vandenberghe says, requires a “new way of thinking” from farmers. “A lot of farmers are going to have to change their way of working and become more calculating: How much does it cost, and how much does it bring in? The farmer of the future is going to have to be more of a businessperson than a farmer, just to survive.”

Alan Hope

► www.veva.be



The glass is half full

Challenges lie ahead for Flemish wine producers, but also great opportunities

Tom Peeters

Flanders lies just above the critical 50th degree of latitude, only under which, common wisdom dictates, the growing of wine grapes is possible. So viticulture used to be a tricky investment in the region. But, encouraged by the side-effects of climate change, a passionate hobby became a flourishing industry. To stimulate the sector, the government of Flanders has, together with growers, just launched a viniculture working group

Hidden behind the Zoete Waters, between the popular walking spots of Meerdaalwoud and the Heverleebos, lies the soft sloping land of Chardonnay Meerdaal. It is winter, so the grapevines are still barren. But earlier vintages here have proven that the sparkling wine produced here, just south of Leuven, can hold its head up alongside that of the Champagne region. “A recent blind tasting between four top-class Champagnes and four Flemish sparkling wines didn’t show any significant quality difference whatsoever,” says Joyce van Rennes from the Wine Castle of Genoels-Elderen in Limburg province. “The only difference is price.”

Van Rennes was one of the many wine-growers invited to Chardonnay Meerdaal last month by Flemish minister-president Kris Peeters for a first round-table discussion between the wine sector and local policymakers. There’s a good reason he mentioned the booming sector in last year’s policy document. It is one of the few market segments that’s doing fairly well in these times of crisis, even without financial support. But there’s a much bigger potential, and Peeters, whose portfolio includes agriculture and rural policy, wants to actively support wine-growers in facing their particular problems and challenges.

Little supply, much demand

One of those challenges is, in fact, too *much* business. Van Rennes recently extended her vineyard from 14 to 22 hectares, but it’s still not enough to keep up with demand. “Slowly, we built up a clientele of approximately 300 restaurants, wine shops and delicatessens in Belgium,” Van Rennes says. “But to supply them all, we had to decide to stop exporting our wines. If a foreign restaurant wants to put us on its wine list, they have to come round for the bottles themselves.” She doesn’t see the situation improving, she admits. “Even in three or four years’ time, when we can harvest the new vine plants, I don’t think we will be able to export more. The Flemish people still don’t realise how good our local wines are, but, with the increasing interest,



The Wine Castle of Genoels-Elderen is continuing a wine-making tradition in the area that dates back to Roman times

they will find out, and we will need our stock to supply them.”

According to recent data from the Federal Public Service Economy, there are 119 hectares of vineyards in Belgium. Together they produce 468,703 litres of wine a year, of which 90% is white wine. Our climate favours the production of white grapes because the harvest can take place more quickly; for red grapes, you need more sunshine.

Most of the 68 vineyards in the country are in Flanders, and almost all of them produce wine with a controlled designation of origin (appellation) or a protected geographical indication. Since 1997, Flanders has designated four official appellations: Hagelandse wine, Haspengouwse wine, Heuvellandse wine and Flemish sparkling wine, all referring to the specific region where they are grown.

There’s also a quality label. Herman Troch from Domein De Kluizen in Herdersem, a district of Aalst, grows this *Vlaamse landwijn* and is delighted with the label. “People used to call it just table wine. That wasn’t a very good trademark. Since I received this quality label, which is checked every year, our sales have improved. Restaurants in particular were more eager to put us on their wine list.”

As it often goes, Troch inherited the

passion for wine from his father, who considered his 60 vine plants a hobby. Troch the younger started producing wine in 1997 and now has a vineyard of 2.8 hectares.

Ripe for the picking

Because he can compare past and present, Troch is the right person to explain why the quality of local wines may even be improving. “My father’s grapevines blossomed at the beginning of July. My plants are blossoming in June, and last year even in early June,” he says. “But we keep on reaping the grapes in October. The grapes grow slowly, and if you pluck them cold, the peel, which contains the tannin, will be thicker. That’s the reason Flemish wines have a freshness and a pleasant sourness that even beats wines from the south of France. I’m sure, as the climate changes, more varieties will be introduced.”

Currently, 15 varieties of grapes are permitted under the quality label, of which Müller-Thurgau, Chardonnay and Pinot noir make up the majority. But wine producers are not blind to the obstacles in their path. Last year, as a teacher at the Syntra training centre in Ghent, Troch witnessed the first students graduating with a winemaking degree. “The structure of the schooling is just fine, but there’s still a lack of practical skills,”

he says. “For deeper practical knowledge we still have to go to France or Germany.”

Peeters is aware of the problem. “We already invite foreign teachers to our schools, but of course it would be better if we can implement their know-how here. That’s a future goal.” Another problem potential wine producers is the scarcity of land. Troch: “Even I have difficulties finding new land: I cannot buy or lease a suitable property in my own neighbourhood. And there are simply no businesses to take over, because everyone’s doing so well.”

It all depends on where your vineyard is located, says Jos Vanlaer from Wine Cellar Kluisberg, one of the family businesses in the Hageland. “Here, and certainly in the triangle Diest-Halen-Bekkevoort, plenty of fertile land is available.” Hagelandse wine is grown over 11 hectares of vineyards, Haspengouwse wine over 25 and Heuvellandse wine over eight.

Quality, not quantity

According to a recent analysis, the maximum surface for viniculture in Belgium is 600 hectares: That’s five to six times the surface of land used for viniculture today. The figure includes available land that has the right soil structure, position in relation to the sun and angle of

inclination.

So there is space for growth, but it’s not endless. Flanders cannot compete with other wine-producing countries or regions in terms of quantity; no wonder the main focus of the local authorities lies on facilitating quality.

The new viniculture working group will build a bridge between the sector and expertise centres and investigate more specific problems encountered by wine producers, such as the fungal infection mycosis. The plant disease can cause major difficulties and even ruin entire harvests. “Together with the sector, we want to set up an observatory for an integrated control,” says Peeters. “It will be favourable not only for the environment – because wine producers will need fewer chemical products – but also for their wallets.” Another action could be an expanded collaboration with Flanders’ Agricultural Marketing Board, which recently pursued publicity campaigns for local pears and pork.

But with or without the government, Flemish wine producers know that for a good glass of wine, you don’t have to cross a southern border any more. And they’re convinced local consumers will soon follow.

LOOKING AHEAD IN TECHNOLOGY

R&D as a driver for a prosperous and healthy Europe

Much of what was science fiction a few decades ago has become reality. "One of my favourite science fiction movies is *The Fantastic Voyage*," says Gilbert Declerck. "It was made in 1966 and shows how a miniaturised submarine and its crew remove a blood clot from a man's brain. So the idea of 'smart pills' was popularised 40 years ago. But no one at that time would have thought it possible that we really would have them one day."

Declerck is the former CEO and president of imec, Flanders' premier R&D centre for nano-electronics. Today, at 65, he's as busy as ever. Meeting with colleagues from other European R&D centres, giving presentations at industry gatherings, preparing strategy documents, studying.



Gilbert Declerck, Executive Officer and Member of the Board of imec International

"I planned to spend more time with my family, but this work is so fascinating and absorbing, I cannot leave it at that!" Declerck exclaims. "We're laying the groundwork for a new wave of innovation. But in this fast-moving, globalised world, we have to act now – get the people that matter around the table and get them to collaborate. Because if we can collaborate, we can solve any problem. And we can solve it here, in Europe."

One way to predict how technology will evolve in the next decades is to look back at the trends of the recent past to see which of them persist or have even accelerated. One trend has been the growing influence of microelectronics, an evolution that imec has witnessed from the front row.

Starting out with only a few dozen large computers across the whole world, there are now a few dozen chips per person – chips that you may not even be aware of. An average car, for example, may have more than 50 microprocessors that together make the car safer, smarter, and greener. Declerck: "From what I see at imec, I'm convinced that we are on the brink of some really amazing technological advances – advances that will help to solve some of the challenges our society faces. Advances, for example, that will lead to technology for smart, personalised and efficient health care. Think of ultra-small chips, the size of a grain. You can patch them on to your skin, and they measure your heart rate, blood pressure or glucose level. Then they send the results via wireless to your doctor. Science fiction today, but reality tomorrow."



THE ROLE OF EUROPE

What will be the role of Europe in this new technology wave? From looking at the names on today's electronics, we get the idea that most electronics are developed and fabricated elsewhere. It's true, "most of the big electronics and chip manufacturers are not European," confirms Declerck. "But we do have many very successful companies. Chip factories around the world are run with the help of European equipment, for example. And we have a whole network of companies that develop smart, innovative solutions. Thanks to European companies and research institutes, we are leading in many areas. Think, for example of communications, consumer electronics, industrial machinery and the automotive industry." And, importantly, "in Europe, more than 100,000 people are employed by companies related to the chip industry".

In the next decade, the European chip industry has a unique chance to play an even more important role. "But keeping – or even strengthening – our position will ask for a concerted and coordinated

action," notes Declerck. "An action that includes all the EU's top institutes and companies. An action that builds on competences and strengths."

Recently, the European Commission has taken an important step in that direction. In November of last year, it proposed Horizon 2020, a framework that sets a number of ambitious goals. Its aim is to strengthen the EU's leadership in science

"We are on the brink of some really amazing technological advances that will help solve some of the challenges our society is facing"

and innovation, and a major part of the proposed budget goes towards addressing major concerns that we all share, such as health and well-being, and clean and sustainable energy.

"But to make these programmes successful, all top institutes and companies in Europe will have to be engaged," insists Declerck. "And that means an engagement based on their expertise, not only on their location. There is an important role here for the Europe administration to cut some of the red tape, to take care that procedures and national interests do not fragment and weaken the R&D. And to set up efficient mechanisms for European funding for cross-border cooperation." Imec has the ambition and expertise to play an important role in Horizon 2020. "We are uniquely placed for a number of reasons," explains Declerck. "Thanks to our collaboration with leading international companies, we have been able to collect an impressive library of intellectual property – patents that are uniquely relevant to some of the goals of Horizon 2020. In addition, our people are world experts in their domains. And we are regularly one of the most important contributors to the industry's top conferences."

► www.imec.be

On 16 February, European Commission vice president Neelie Kroes visited imec. Luc Van den hove, imec's CEO, presented the work and goals of the research institution. He highlighted imec's expertise in nano-electronics, and how the institute uses state-of-the-art technology to look for solutions for the increasing cost of health care, for an aging society and for sustainable energy. He also explained imec's open-innovation model, a unique collaboration that brings leading international companies to Europe to do advanced research.

One of Van den hove's key messages was that there is a way for Europe to stay competitive in technology – by working together with leading international businesses and research institutions in an open-innovation mode.



Imec CEO Luc Van den hove shows EC vice president Neelie Kroes around the imec facilities

Publisher:
Katrien Marent
for imec



Roll up for the midnight love tour

Discover Marvin Gaye's connections to the Flemish coast with a new walking tour

Christophe Verbiest



Marvin Gaye came to Ostend to get himself together, with the help of concert promoter and friend Freddy Cousaert

Ostend, Valentine's Day, 1981. A grey blanket of clouds smothers all the love that's in the air. The ferry that connects Dover to the queen of the Belgian seaside resorts carries Marvin Gaye, one of the most famous American soul singers of the previous two decades. It wouldn't have been surprising if he had been humming "Mercy, Mercy Me" when he descended the gangway, because he would have needed it.

Despite commendable attempts, the Motown artist hadn't been able to make an album that rivalled his 1971 masterpiece *What's Going On*. His love for drugs wasn't helping his creativity any, and his second marriage, to Janis Hunter, had been abandoned earlier that month. He owed the taxman \$4 million. At the beginning of 1981, after Motown released *In Our Lifetime* without Gaye's consent (he wasn't happy with the sound mix), he swore never to work again with the label he had been with his whole life. But how on earth did all this drive him to Ostend? It didn't, at first. After a disastrous tour of the UK in 1980, he became stranded in London, where, infamously, he was late for a show hosted by Princess Margaret. Flemish concert promoter and businessman Freddy Cousaert

had known Gaye for some years and felt the singer wouldn't recover in the British capital, where he was exposed to all possible temptations. "I almost didn't recognise him," Cousaert said in 1994. "He was pale, skinny, nervous and broke." He invited Gaye to Ostend, where Cousaert ran a hotel, to get his life together. Arno, now the grand old man of the Belgian rock scene, but then struggling to start up TC Matic (which would become the seminal Belgian band of the 1980s) was working in the hotel's kitchen. Gaye adored Arno's chicken curry. "He always told me I was cooking real soul food," Arno recalled a few years ago when he cooked Gaye's favourite dish for a food show on Flemish television.

Sanctuary by the sea

Though Gaye gained nearly seven kilos during his first months in Ostend, he did more than eat. He got himself together, and Cousaert convinced him to stay longer than the few weeks they had first agreed on. Gaye started working again. "I'm here to write. I need the peace and quiet of Ostend," he said in 1981. In an apartment on the promenade, Gaye came up with the majority of *Midnight Love*, the album he later recorded in a studio near Brussels. In the meantime, Cousaert helped him land a three-album deal with CBS. The company's vice-president,

Larkin Arnold, travelled to Ostend to see how the singer was doing. "I wanted to check if he still had it artistically, and if he was able to finish the product within budget and on time," he said.

Because Gaye's tourist visa ran out in August of 1982, the final touches to *Midnight Love* were made in Germany. By that time, the singer had fallen out with Cousaert, and there's no mention of the promoter on the album, not even a simple thank you.

Mike Butcher, the engineer of *Midnight Love*: "Without Freddy, the album wouldn't have existed. Freddy did care about him, but things went badly in the end." Arnold, on the other hand, had no problem acknowledging Cousaert's importance to the album. He sent Cousaert a golden record with a note saying: "Because you deserve it".

The success of *Midnight Love* – two million copies sold – brought Gaye back to the US and won him his first Grammy Awards. But he relapsed and, while moving in with his parents might have seemed a good idea at first, ultimately it ended in tragedy. The relationship with his father, Reverend Marvin Gaye Sr, was very tense, and the latter shot his son on 1 April, the day before his 45th birthday.

It's dark irony that Gaye not long before that fatal day had expressed a desire to return to Ostend because

he felt it was a way to get his life in balance again. Despite their falling-out in 1982, Cousaert didn't hold a grudge. In those previous 18 months, they had built up a very strong relationship. As Cousaert described it afterwards: "We did everything except go to bed together."

Take a walk on the Gaye side

The Marvin Gaye Midnight Love Tour is a documentary walk through Ostend via places where Gaye worked and lived during his stay in the city. For €5, you can pick up an iPod at the city's tourist office (across from the Casino). It leads you to 12 places in the city that mark as many moments in Gaye's Ostend life.

Or almost. One stop is called Studio Katy, but it's no use looking around for it at the Monacoplein: Studio Katy, where Gaye recorded *Midnight Love*, lies in Ohain, a village south of Brussels. But the recording of that album forms a crucial part of the story and had to be included, and it's done so smoothly.

Stop number seven is Residence Jane on the Albert I-promenade, where Gaye wrote one of his biggest hits, "Sexual Healing". You're not supposed to disturb the residents, but you can catch a glimpse of the apartment from the outside. Time has been less kind to other

spots related to Gaye: Freddy Cousaert's Hotel Mercury is now a nameless apartment building on the corner of Koningsstraat and Kemmelbergstraat, while De Floride is no longer the pub it was in 1981.

Still, this is a highly informative and entertaining tour. For every stop, the iPod offers two videos to watch. The main one, lasting about five minutes, tells the official story: Edited together, they'd form a documentary that could be broadcast on television. It's a mix of new interviews – the daughters and brother of Freddy Cousaert and *Midnight Love* engineer Mike Butcher – plus photos and archive material, mainly of Cousaert (who died in 1998), taken from a 1994 BBC documentary, and of course Gaye himself, whose life in Ostend was documented by Belgian filmmaker Richard Olivier in *Transit Ostend*.

The second video is more like an outtake but is still entertaining, especially the one at number six, Café De Floride. When a patron asks Marvin Gaye for *une chanson*, he starts singing the French national anthem: "Allons enfants de la Patrie..."

Set aside at least two hours if you want to watch all the videos. A reservation for the tour is recommended.

► www.marvingaye.be



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“Nothing is impossible”

In honour of International Women’s Day, we talk to sister Jeanne Devos, who works every day to improve the lives of Indian children

Sabine Clappaert

While the world marks International Women’s Day on 8 March, one of Flanders’ most inspirational women quietly continues her work helping some of India’s most disadvantaged people. Former Nobel Prize nominee Jeanne Devos, 77, founded India’s National Domestic Workers Movement in 1985 and is still based in Mumbai today.

Jeanne Devos radiates the warmth of India, the country she has called home for the past 50 years. I meet her on one of her trips back to Flemish Brabant, where she was born in 1935. It is a blustery afternoon that sends clouds racing across the sky and whips leaves over the desolate lawns of the mission house in the Leuven district of Heverlee.

As Jeanne bustles me into the visitors’ lounge, she glances at the ominous sky, clearly impatient to return *home* – to India, the country to which she has dedicated her life, defending the rights of its domestic workers, most of them children born to families too poor to feed them.

“In India, 45 million children under the age of 14 are employed as domestic workers in homes, hotels and restaurants. Forty-five million...” her voice trails off. “Can you imagine asking a young servant girl what she would most like to do and to be told: ‘to cry, Sister. Because if I start to weep in the house where I live, the lady tells me I should be working, not weeping.’” Devos shakes her head in disbelief. “Your biggest wish is being allowed to cry.” It is this disbelief that defines her mission “to defend the dignity of every life”.

Jeanne founded India’s National Domestic Workers Movement in 1985, “and that is what I will continue to campaign for, for as long as I can.” She smiles. “It’s funny, it is only now, through my work, that I realise this is exactly what my parents were trying to teach us all along: respect for other human beings, regardless of who they are.”

On childhood

“Being allowed to be a child – that is the most important thing about childhood. Being allowed to play, to have adults care for you and help you grow; that is every child’s right.” The most heartbreaking aspect of children working as domestic help in India, she says, is that “many of them have no one – no parents, no aunt or uncle, no teachers to turn to. They are sold to families where they are commandeered and punished and where they often live in fear. Is that a life for a child? In Western countries, children have parents who care for them, and teachers who know almost as much about



“I believe that every day we help to create the world, that solidarity is stronger than impotence, and that nothing is impossible if only we work together”: Jeanne Devos

them as their parents do! There they are allowed to be children.”

One of her most powerful memories, she says, is of an 11-year-old girl she rescued from an abusive family. “As I arrived, she looked up at me and said: ‘Didi [Sister], I knew you would come!’ What a miracle: a child who lives in the worst misery but is still confident that help will come, that there is always a reason for hope.”

On connectedness

Where does she continue to find the energy to keep fighting for her cause, even after all these years, I wonder aloud.

“I’m a war child,” she replies. “I

grew up in a tiny Flemish village [Kortenaken] right after the Second World War. Going through hard times together as a community creates a connectedness that my father, who served on the town council, was instrumental in maintaining. ‘This is our town,’ he used to say. When we brought home our school reports, his first question was always: ‘What about the other kids? Did everyone pass?’ To him it was never about being first or best, but about everyone.”

Her parents’ deeply held sense of community manifested itself in every aspect of their lives. “We lived on a farm, and I remember that my father kept a sack of grain behind the

door for people who needed food. He would tell them: ‘You can take as much as you need, but remember, there are others who come after you.’ My mother, too, made sure we understood the importance of sharing. Every year we gave our old clothes, socks and shoes to less fortunate children. She was clever about it: ‘Don’t just give the things that are old and worn,’ she used to tell us. ‘Also give two things that you really love.’ These were fundamental lessons.”

On kindness

“Through my work, I have come to appreciate the role of kindness

in life – people helping each other in tiny, everyday ways. That’s very important. We are born with love – we all want to love and be loved. But we have a choice: We can either pull love toward us or give it to others. Choosing to give love to others also brings immense happiness.”

She pauses, and her gaze drifts around the silent room as if searching for her next words. “This morning I visited a seven-year-old boy who has kidney cancer. There are so many things he’s not allowed to do or eat during his treatment. It must be a hard thing to go through that as a mother,” she sighs.

“Do you know what she did?” Devos continues. “She told her son to make a list of all the things he loves to eat – anything he could think of. Then she told him: ‘As soon as you are better, we’re going to a restaurant every week until you’ve eaten everything that’s on your list.’ That is a beautiful example of a simple way of passing on love.”

On faith

Devos lives in one of the world’s most densely populated countries, surrounded by some of its oldest religions: Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism. Does a Catholic nun from Flanders still believe Catholicism is the only path to eternal life?

Her gentle smile tells me it is not the first time she has been asked. “The kingdom of God does not barricade itself behind the walls of one religion; it is open and welcoming. I came to India to spread a gospel of love. When you walk into a slum and see that there is so much love, that people care for each other in so many wonderful little ways, you realise: That which I have come to teach is what I will learn. It teaches you respect for other religions.”

On finding your place in the world

In honour of International Women’s Day, I ask Devos what advice she would give other women on finding their place in the world. She doesn’t hesitate: “Follow your intuition. I started out believing that I should follow the rules and regulations – adapt to this, adjust to that,” she shrugs. “But by doing that, you’re denying that you have an intuitive approach, and it’s that first feeling that is usually right.”

But that’s not her only advice: “Believe in your female strength. Don’t abandon your sisters. And let us, as women together, defend the rights of every child and every human being. Yes, that would be my message.”

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Peter Paul Rubens

Self-portrait © Rubens House, Antwerp



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The struggle for pleasure

Thirty years ago, Wim Mertens refused to conform and changed the musical landscape in Belgium

Tom Peeters

"Thirty years is a long time," says Wim Mertens, thinking back to his first steps as a composer and a recording artist. It makes him curious. How will his ensemble cope with the distance between his earliest works – written at the end of the '70s and recorded in the early '80s?

"For some of them, it will be a fun reunion, for others a first meeting. That makes it interesting."

The Flemish pianist, guitarist, singer and composer is about to perform his triptych *At Home-Not at Home, Vergessen* and – his classic – *Struggle for Pleasure* as part of Ancienne Belgique's Rewind series, which focuses on key records in Belgian music history.

Which seems a bit strange, considering that Mertens' three albums were released only on mini vinyl records and hardly anyone noticed.

"In Western Europe, contemporary classical music had to be rational and conceptual," explains Mertens (*pictured*). "The score was treated as the holy grail and had become much more important than the actual sound. And everyone was so self-assured. Producers, composers, publishers, they all looked in the same direction. But working that way, the gap between the audience and the music kept on growing."

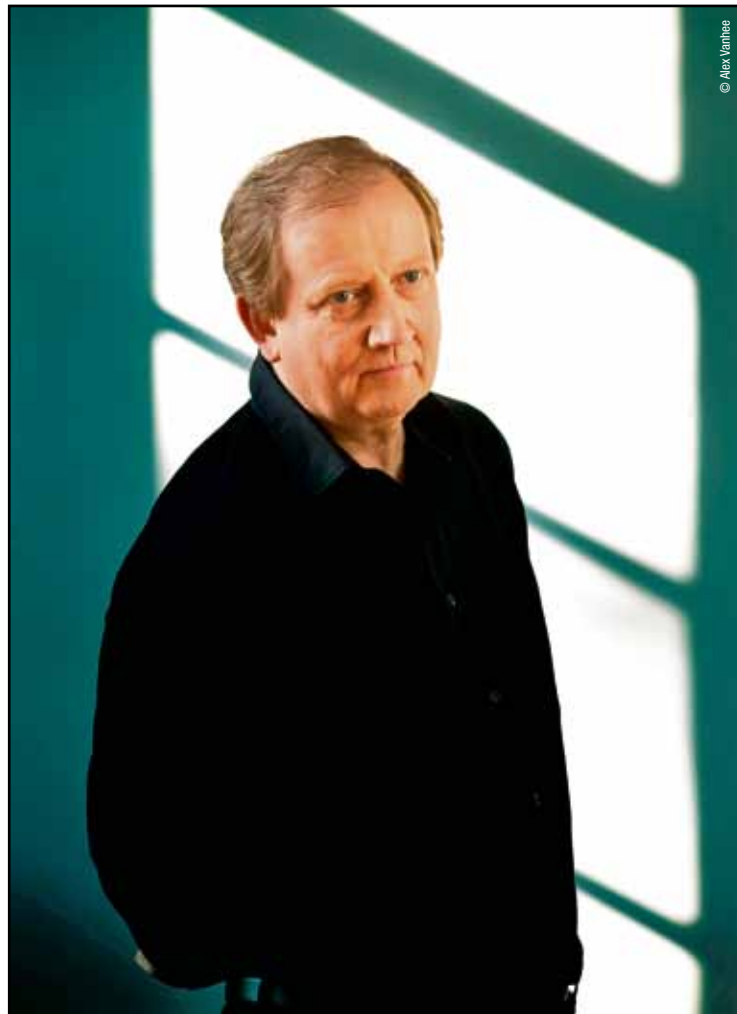
his first albums as "some kind of attack" on the rigid structures of classical music.

Freedoms and repercussions

In the 1970s, Mertens earned degrees in social and political sciences at the University of Leuven, musicology at Ghent University and music theory and piano at the Ghent Conservatory and the Royal Conservatory of Brussels. He absorbed all kinds of music, from the experimental jazz of Steve Lacy and Cecile Taylor, to rock and world music to Stockhausen and Boulez, and even wrote a major essay on American minimalist music.

"One of the big differences between me and my contemporaries was that I never wrote for a standard line-up," he says. "So there has always been an enormous freedom in the studio concerning the choice of the instruments. My music became flexible: I can play a solo piano concert, tour with a chamber music ensemble or even involve a symphonic orchestra."

At the same time, he continues, "my music is very intuitive. It's a combination of coincidences and accidents. I was one of the few who dared to compose by starting from the voice. Listening to the title track



© Alex Vanhee

be an added challenge to live in a world without Mertens. With 62 albums on his discography, they need not fear.

Though not everything is for easy consumption: The composer realises that without the success of his more accessible pieces, a complex and ambitious cycle like *Qua* (covering 37 CDs and investigating the relationships between groups of musical instruments) would never have been possible. "I would rather elaborate on one good idea that can manifest itself in numerous parts and all sorts of appearances than write in 12 distinct styles. So on one hand, there's this notion of continuity in my oeuvre, while on the other hand, there's this drive to constantly make holes and ruptures." This is distinctive of how Mertens tends to look at life. He has what he calls a *zweierlei* approach. "A lot of composers would say: 'This is the only way it can be played.' I say: 'No, it can also be played the other way around.' This approach is not because of doubt, but because of a fundamental belief that you can develop things in different ways. Even staying close to your composition, you can change the *tempi* dramatically or make your music less horizontal, or even present it from right to left instead of from left to right. I've always believed that with such an attitude, a career of 30 or 40 years must be possible. And basically it's just about one idea – though it's not always very detectable."

► www.wimmertens.com

"My music is very intuitive. It's a combination of coincidences and accidents"

Mertens' music was an antidote to this rigid attitude. People weren't used to hearing, for instance, different layers of the same instrument. When he shifted from music theory to practice, his compositions were influenced by avant-garde and experimental music, but the repetitive, melodic structure was very accessible. The Limburg-born composer refers to

of *Struggle for Pleasure* you'll notice that the instruments could as well be voices. I simply didn't want to use the tricks teachers taught me for how to write contemporary music." But being a pioneer comes at a price. "There were repercussions for my musicians and for the choice of venues. We ended up in mainly Mediterranean countries, like Italy, Spain and Portugal, and later in

Mexico and Latin America. These cultures connect better with a vocal repertoire. Without the support of the fans in these countries, I probably would not have made it. The first interest in my music in Belgium only surfaced in the late 1980s."

The Greenaway breakthrough

That was largely due to British avant-garde director Peter Greenaway using some of Mertens' compositions for the soundtrack of *The Belly of an Architect*. This gave Mertens' music a context that

sparked the interest of directors and producers in radio, television and advertising. Most notably, *Struggle for Pleasure* became the theme song for the Belgian Proximus publicity campaigns.

Above all, for music supervisors of television documentaries it would

15-16 MARCH, 20.00

Struggle for pleasure

Ancienne Belgique, Anspachlaan 110, Brussels

► www.abconcerts.be

"Just measure it in inches"

A massive collection of Andy Warhol memorabilia is on show in Ypres

Christophe Verbiest

Warholites are invited to the public library of Ypres for an exhibition of memorabilia of Pop art master Andy Warhol (*pictured*), collected by local graphic designer Diederik Vandenbilcke. More than 20 years ago, Vandenbilcke received *The*

Andy Warhol Diaries as a gift, a book he read from front to back in no time. He had already been fascinated by the iconic image of Warhol's "Campbell's Soup Cans" during an art history class.

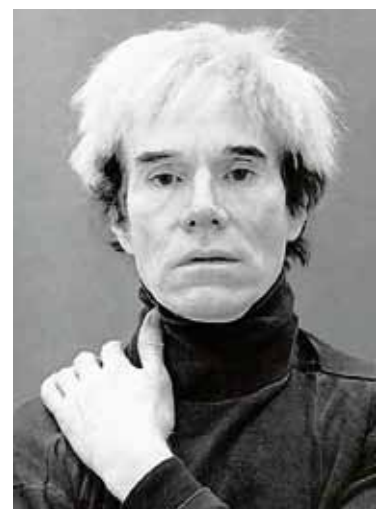
"I started looking for other books on Warhol, went to exhibitions

and collected everything related to him," says Vandenbilcke. "I was attracted by the controversies that surrounded him. He was a man of contrasts: fascinated by glitter and glamour, but he lived very modestly with his mother. He was surrounded by people doing drugs, but he himself stayed clean."

Vandenbilcke has collected a huge pile of Warhol-related objects, all on view in *Warholia*. "Catalogues, exhibition posters, street banners, gadgets, CDs, DVDs, you name it." In a special display Vandenbilcke shows his collection of soup cans. Campbell's Soup, that is. "When I travel abroad, I buy a local can of

Campbell's Soup. Or one of their mugs; they have a whole range of products."

There's no genuine Warhol art to see in Ypres, although the artist himself might have said that all this memorabilia related to him are part of one vast artwork. "I don't have the means to buy a real Warhol," explains Vandenbilcke. Wouldn't he have preferred one original Warhol instead of this whole collection? He doesn't have to think a second about the answer. "No!" But he adds: "If I ever get rid of my collection, I might buy a Warhol. But that's not under discussion now."



UNTIL 17 MARCH

Warholia

Weverijstraat 9, Ypres

► www.bibliotheekieper.blogspot.com

Our demons come home to roost

Offscreen Film Festival

Andreas Illegems

Lock your doors and shutter the windows, this year's Offscreen Film Festival infiltrates the domestic sphere with a programme of haunted houses and home invasion movies, while celebrating its fifth anniversary with a live soundtrack orchestra.

The haunted house subgenre has been around since movies began, endlessly fascinating to moviemakers, writers and audiences alike. Ancient ruins, old manors and castles have long been considered the perfect setting for many gothic-inspired horror films such as the Vincent Price vehicle *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1960), the Henry James-inspired *The Innocents* (1961) and *The Haunting* (1963), which introduced the now cult legendary Hill House. Roman Polanski's *The Tenant* (1976) and Dario Argento's *Inferno* (1980) offer a contemporary approach to the genre.

All these films and more are on the programme of this year's Offscreen, which is scattered around cinemas in Brussels, with a home base at Cinema Nova. The Home Sweet Home section offers no less than 30 screenings on this subject matter,

spread across Cinema Nova and Cinematek.

The house theme was inspired by the 1977 Japanese horror movie *Housu*, says Dirk Van Extergem, one of the organisers of the festival. "To widen the concept, we also added home invasion movies to the menu, a subversive genre of exploitation cinema that was highly popular in the 1970s." A classic example is the controversial *Straw Dogs*, in which a young American (Dustin Hoffman) comes to rural England with his wife and faces increasingly vicious local harassment.

But the programme boldly goes beyond the classics. There are peculiar gems such as *Lady In A Cage*, an evils-of-modern-society film that finds Olivia de Havilland stuck in her luxurious home's elevator; Italian director Elio Petri's luridly erotic *A Quiet Place In The Country* or bonafide grindhouse flicks like *Fight For Your Life* and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*.

The surreal *Keyhole* from Canadian director Guy Maddin opens the festival. A modern-day home appears to be the base of 1940s gangsters, led by a man who must



navigate his way to the upper floor to find his trapped wife – a much tougher job that it sounds.

Van Extergem would also like to draw your attention to the 2003 film *The Room* by American director Tommy Wiseau. "This is a classic example of an atrocious film," he says, "yet when people started to watch it in groups, it became this sort of cult phenomenon in the Anglo-Saxon countries and, later on, also in Europe." Three international experts in cult film theory will

explain why during a conference at Cinema Rits.

Furthermore, there is a selection of the best and weirdest short films of 2011, plus a screening of *David Wants to Fly*, a sprightly documentary about the transcendental movement and its spokesman, director David Lynch. Also note the two curious gems from Sicilian director duo Cipri & Maresco.

Guests of honour this year are American animator Suzan Pitt and

prolific B-movie director Umberto Lenzi, known for the *giallo* film *Paranoia* (1970) and the hilarious zombie exploitation flick *Nightmare City* (1980).

Finally, Offscreen celebrates its fifth year with a two concert nights: Italian alternative rock band Calibro35 plays the live soundtrack for Italian thriller *Almost Human* (Umberto Lenzi again), and the psychedelic big band B-Movie Orchestra from the Netherlands plays its first-ever concert in Brussels.

5-25 March | Cinema Nova & across Brussels | www.offscreen.be

ACTIVITY

St Patrick's Day Festival

Jubelpark is the place to be for this annual event that celebrates Ireland's patron saint. A pre-parade Irish breakfast starts at 9.30 at the Old Oak Irish Pub in the Schuman area, and festivities begin in the park at noon. Irish sports (Gaelic football, hurling...) and live music should work up an appetite for the sausage barbecue provided by Brussels' Irish butcher Jack O'Shea. You'll also find Guinness and cider on tap. The annual parade begins at the park at 13.30.

Once the outdoor activities are over, the festival continues at a couple of different locations: the Meeting Point near Schuman metro is the place for live jazz, ragtime and Irish melodies. Brasserie 1898 also joins in the fun with live music and dancing. Fortunately, you have six days to rest before St Patrick's Day on 17 March. It will be very difficult to escape the leprechauns, shamrocks and all things green that day. Even Manneken Pis, Brussels' wee statue, will be dressed in green...and will pee Guinness! **Katrien Lindemans**



11 March, from 9.30 | Jubelpark and Schuman area, Brussels

www.brussels-st-patricks-day-parade.be

MORE ACTIVITIES THIS WEEK

Kasterlee (Antwerp province)

The Forests of the Kempen: This "theatre walk" by moonlight is led by actor and storyteller Jos Finks, who tells you all about the odd happenings in the deep, dark forests in this part of Flanders (in Dutch)

MAR 9 19.30-22.22, begin at Provincial Park Hoge Mouw, Lichtaarsebaan 45

www.hogemouw.be

Sint-Truiden

De Fruitqueeste: Walk among the fruit trees in the Straten nature area and find answers to questions posed by a brochure provided by the town's tourist office. For kids and their parents

Until DEC 31 Guide from tourist office in the Grote Markt

www.toerismesinttruiden.be

CLASSICAL

Unesco Music Day

That Ghent has music oozing out of its cobblestones has long been obvious to anyone living in Flanders. In 2009, Unesco made the fact official by designating the town a "Creative City of Music", a distinction also shared by Seville, Bologna and Glasgow. The idea is to encourage these places to exchange ideas and know-how, and that's exactly what's on the agenda of the first Unesco Music Day, a Baroque music event that brings three of these musical cities together (Glasgow is not taking part). Each city will be represented by one orchestra – Ghent has elected B'Rock, Frank Agsteribbe's feisty seven-year-old ensemble – and showcase one local composer, the more obscure the better. So if you've always secretly longed to find out more about Juan Francès; Padre Martini, who once taught Mozart; or Jakob Loeillet, one of a long dynasty of Flemish composers, now's the time. All three orchestras will share the stage in the heart-warming finale, a performance of Handel's first *Concerto Grosso*. A compendium of various national styles, it's a vibrant symbol of European unity composed nearly three centuries before the words "agricultural policy" or "debt crisis" entered our vocabulary. **Marie Dumont**



11 March, 16.00-23.30 | De Bijloke, Ghent | www.debijloke.be

MORE CLASSICAL THIS WEEK

Brussels

Gli Incogniti: The ensemble, founded in 2006 by French violinist Amandine Beyer, performs Bach's chamber music

MAR 9 20.00 at Miniemen Church, Miniemenstraat 6

www.bozar.be

National Orchestra of Lille: The French orchestra pays homage to film composer Georges Delerue

MAR 7 20.15 at Flagey, Heilig Kruisplein

www.flagey.be

FOOD & DRINK

Spring Concert

Ghent’s vegetarians know where Panda restaurant is, but the rest of us have never laid eyes on it, hidden as it is at the back of a shop filled with herbs and salves and organic food. To celebrate its 28th year running, Panda is hosting an all-organic buffet. Dishes include chestnut pie, chickpea soufflé, spring rolls, oyster mushroom croquettes, filo dough borek stuffed with spinach and feta, grape leaves, goat cheese-pesto triangles, broccoli quiche, seasonal salad. Though normally all veggie, the restaurant is also providing a lamb in curry sauce exceptionally for the occasion. Throughout the feast, young talented musicians will provide classical accompaniment on piano and accordion. Profit from the event goes to Viadagio, an organisation that promotes “a durable, conscious, aesthetic, poetic, respectful, harmonious and quality way of living together”. In this spirit, Viadagio is offering free round trips in their exquisite, man-powered wooden boats on Ghent’s canals following lunch. Cost is €55 for adults, half that for kids 12 and under, and there is a discount for groups of four or more. All you have to do is reserve in advance. **Robyn Boyle**



11 March, 20.00 | Panda, Ghent

► www.viadagio.be

Reservations: 09.225.07.86

MORE FOOD & DRINK
THIS WEEK

Antwerp

Wallonia in Flanders: Free holiday and gastronomy fair featuring tastings of regional products from Wallonia, njam! cooking demonstrations by top chefs and a tombola
MAR 9-11 at Central Station
► www.wallonieinvlaanderen.be

De Haan

Tasty Belle Epoque: Walk along the coast with samples of local products from De Haan; free as part of a hotel arrangement or €12 per person (€6 for kids)
MAR 11 11.00 from Tourism De Haan, Leopoldlaan 248
► www.dehaan.be/tastybelleepoque

EVENT

Booby Track roller derby

Attending a roller derby bout is like stepping back in time to the 1950s. Girls flit past on roller skates, others sell cupcakes and hot dogs, and the rest pull on knee and elbow pads as they gear up for combat. The gym is filled with fervent fans donning red and black (Ghent’s team colours) and a fair share of rockabilly hairdos. There’s an exciting buzz in the air as the ladies step onto the track and the ref blows the whistle. It’s an all-out sprint as the players move to get ahead of the pack while doing laps, and hip checks are allowed. Some hit the floor, others spin out of control and go sliding out of bounds. But when the jammer (point-scorer in derby lingo) breaks away, the crowd goes mad. Roller derby is a sport you just have to see to believe. And this particular bout promises to be a real battle. Fourteen strong women from the Brighton Rockers are in town, but the Gent Go-Go Roller Girls will be more fired up than ever, as this match is for a good cause: Proceeds from ticket sales (€8 in advance online or at Les Filles in Ghent’s Zuiderstationstraat; €10 at the door) will be donated to the Think Pink! breast cancer awareness foundation. No matter the outcome, everyone is invited to the after-party at Foley’s cellar bar on Ghent’s Graslei from 22.00. **RB**



10 March, 19.00 | Sporthal Hoge Wal Ertvelde (East Flanders) | ► www.gogogent.be

MORE EVENTS THIS WEEK

Bruges

Cinema Novo: Annual world film festival, this year focusing on the cinema and social issues of India

MAR 8 20.00 at Ciné Liberty, Kuipersstraat 23

► www.cinemanovo.be

Ghent

Mind the book: The annual “international meeting of minds between writers and readers”. Discover fiction and non-fiction through debates, interviews and more interactive events with renowned authors and speakers

MAR 9-11 at Vooruit, Sint-Pietersnieuwstraat 23

► www.mindthebook.be

Hasselt

SuperBodies: The third Hasselt triennial exploring the fascination of many artists and designers with the ways in which our bodies mould and shape our experiences

Until MAY 27 across Hasselt

► www.superbodies.be

DUSK TIL DAWN

Katrien Lindemans

Happy Birthday
Café de la Presse

Café de la Presse, located at the very end of Louizalaan (no 493), will celebrate its first birthday on the evening of Friday, 9 March. Instead of its fresh salads, coffee and bagels, it will serve up concerts and a DJ set.



Activities in fact take place a few meters away in a “secret” location; you’ll just have to show up to see where. It starts around 20.00 with a fashion-inspired exhibition by local 18-year-old photography phenomenon Charlotte Abramow. Around 22.00, Flo De Lavega and Jérémy Frérot will take a stage in Brussels for the very first time – two good-looking guys, one with the voice, and the other with the guitar. The big party starts soon after, with a rock-pop dansant DJ set – expect to hear The Cure, Radiohead and Bob Dylan. Owner François Lafontaine will be there, too, and might even make an appearance behind the decks. The man seems to know exactly what *Brusselaars* like, judging from his popular City Aperos during the summer, the Coffee Company lunch place in the centre and of course his successful Café de la Presse – or CDLP as the hip kids call it. Only a couple days after the opening a year ago, it was clear that this would become the hottest spot in the area. The place is packed from morning until evening with coffee addicts, lunching business people and afternoon shoppers in need of

a sweet treat or a place to relax with some free wifi. Coffee, cake, a bunch of international newspapers and magazines, comfy sofas in all colours and friendly staff ... what’s not to like? It will be a crowded night on Friday, which is free entry, by the way, so arrive early if you want to enjoy the festivities inside – or bring an extra jumper if you don’t mind dancing on the street.

► www.coffeecompany-brussels.be

BITE

Robyn Boyle

L'Estaminet ★★☆☆

Robyn Boyle

If you find yourself in a new town and famished around mid-afternoon, you are either destined for a faceless brasserie or left to the mercy of locals. Luckily for my friend and me, the particular local we ask for a recommendation in Bruges sends us to L'Estaminet. Not only do they serve food at all hours, but the place looks like it hasn't changed a bit since it opened as a café more than 100 years ago. Aside from its location across from the green and leafy Astrid Park, there's not much about the building to grab your attention. It appears dark inside, the kind of place where you imagine the room falling silent as soon as you walk in, glassy-eyed clients staring you down from their bar stools. Instead, we are greeted with a warm smile, a cosy seat next to the stove and a couple of menus. The beams on the ceiling are low and draped in dried hops. Cloudy antique mirrors hang from vintage wallpapering. And the subtle background music – from Serge Gainsbourg to Johnny Cash – couldn't be more appropriate. We order a sparkling water and a Straffe Hendrik, a potent tripel from the local Halve Maan Brewery. The menu is limited to a number of time-honoured dishes like lasagne, spaghetti (including a veggie version) and croques. But we opt for two hefty bowls of homemade soup: one fish and one onion. I also fall for a salad with goat's cheese croquettes. The soups arrive first, piping hot in earthenware bowls. My onion soup comes straight out of the oven with a slice of toast on top covered with bubbly, golden-brown cheese.

Underneath is a thick, hearty soup filled with chunks of sweet white onion in a thick, savoury broth. My friend, meanwhile, is sinking her teeth into tender pieces of a variety of fish, including salmon and cod. The soup's onions and leeks pack a lot of flavour, as does the red broth, presumably a tomato-based stock. There's a side of grated cheese that melts right into the soup when added. And just like a traditional bouillabaisse, it comes served with garlic-infused rouille, a creamy, spicy spread to go on the grilled slices of bread. My salad is extremely fresh, not to mention colourful, with lettuce, red cabbage, red onion, tomatoes, alfalfa sprouts, red peppers, cucumbers, corn and sliced apple. It's doused in sweet honey vinaigrette and topped with two goat's cheese croquettes that are nicely crisp on the outside and warm and gooey on the inside. We finish off with a freshly tapped Stella and another glass of water and are pleasantly surprised to pay only €15 each.

► www.tinyurl.com/LEstaminet

- 📍 Park 5, Bruges; 050.33.09.16
- 🕒 Tue-Sun, 11.30-3.00 (Thurs 16.00-3.00)
- 💶 Mains: €8-€12.50
- 📖 A non-touristy Bruges institution with wonderfully simple food and a timeless atmosphere



TALKING SPORTS

Leo Cendrowicz

Bekele's chance

Runners will invariably pound the streets rain or shine, all year round, but the official cross-country season takes place in the cold months, from September to March. And this year's finale for the Lotto Cross Cup – Belgium's cross-country running championship – is on 11 March in Ostend, with the title on a knife edge. The Ostend event is the last of eight that kicked off in Ghent in October, and it is no surprise to see Pieter Desmet at the top of the rankings. Desmet, 28, from Kortrijk, won the Cross Cup four seasons in a row until last year, when Jeroen D'Hoedt clinched the title. But Desmet, who has accumulated 115 points so far,

has to share the current league leadership with Atelaw Bekele, the Ethiopian-born European champion who became a Belgian citizen in 2008. No relation to Kenenisa Bekele, who has dominated the world cross-country events in the past decade, Atelaw Bekele (pictured) left Ethiopia for Belgium when he was just 16. A member of Atletiek Vlaanderen (Athletics Flanders), which supports up-and-coming athletes, Bekele's personal bests of 29:47.60 and 13:43.20 in 10,000m and 5,000m respectively are relatively modest. But last December he set a marker for his international rivals when he took Belgium's first-ever gold at the European Cross Country

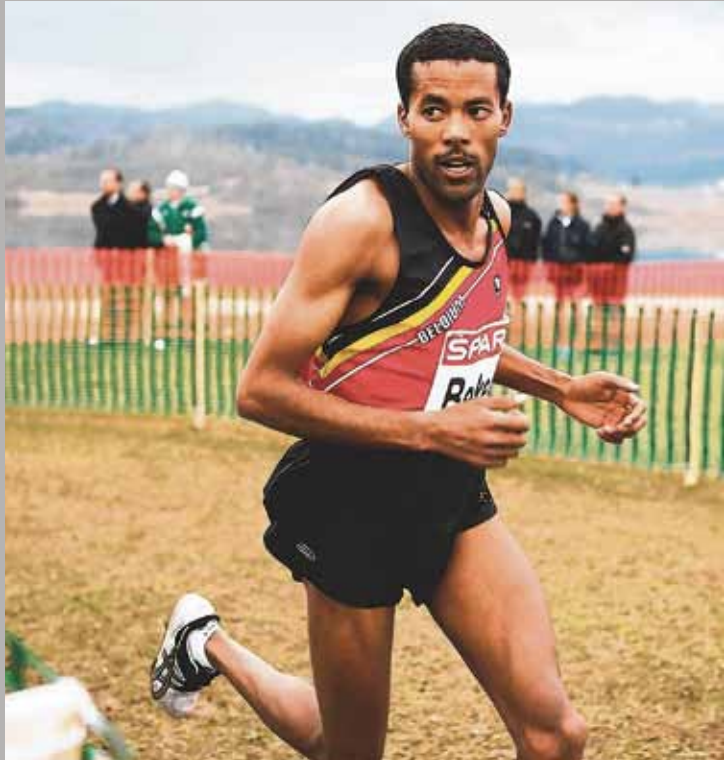
Championships in Velenje, Slovenia. Having trained for a month at altitude in Ethiopia, the 24-year-old proved particularly adept on the uphill sections of the course. Desmet's experience may prevail in the deciding race in Ostend, but right now, the momentum is clearly with Bekele. On the women's side, there is little suspense: Veerle Dejaeghere, who dominates female cross-country in Belgium, only needs to finish the Ostend race in the top 10 to secure her 11th title since 1998.

► www.lottocrosscup.be

Nokere Koerse

Meanwhile, further east, Nokere Koerse may not have the status and prestige of the Tour of Flanders, but it makes up for it in conviviality. The one-day semi-classic cycle race, this year on 14 March, has been held since 1944, initially as the Grand Prix Jules Lowie in honour of 1938 Paris-Nice winner, who was born in Nokere. The 196km circuit is the racing highlight of the year for the Nokere community, which pulls out all the stops to make it a great day out. The route always ends in Nokeredorpstraat, the main street of the village, where there is a 400m uphill finish on a 6% gradient over cobblestones. Won last year by Hasselt-born Gert Steegmans, its winners are rarely giants of cycling, but they are definitely local heroes.

► www.nokerekoerse.be



The last word...

Voicing her opinion

"When I watch TV, I'd rather see an elephant or a whale in the wild. I would never watch *The Voice*." An Lemmens, VTM presenter of ... *The Voice*

Kindred spirits

"Hello from another Leterme. Are there more of us in Paris?" Yves Leterme, now deputy director-general of the OECD, tweets to 18-year-old Céline Leterme

Strong language

"You called us a lot of less attractive names, but we can't print those here, as there may be children reading." Belfius, previously Dexia, in their advertising this week

Elite group

"I only know two or three." Céline replies to the former prime minister

NEXT WEEK
IN FLANDERS TODAY

Cover story

Because of its location in northeast Antwerp province, Turnhout is a destination more than a stop-over, which has infringed upon its tourist success. But there's no better time to visit the little city than now, as it becomes Flanders' second-ever City of Culture

Science

As these words are written, it's snowing in Flanders. In March. And everyone is talking about it. What better choice of guest, then, for de Rand's next multi-lingual Speakers' Corner than meteorologist Frank Deboosere? We talk to the weatherman about his work – and his predictions for the rest of March

Living

Many think of Broodje Brussel as a series of concerts during lunchtime. But in fact, the organisation hosts numerous kinds of activities, in an effort to get Flemish people more involved in their capital city