**INTRODUCTION**

Events such as the immigrant disturbances in Antwerp are a perfect illustration of the dynamic I describe in my book, says VUB sociologist Mark Elchardus in Knack (11 December). The media create the image of the event by provoking the hype around Abu Yahjah and the commotion in the City Council and Parliament. What really happened is of minor importance. In “The democracy of Drama”, Elchardus describes how democracy is lapsing into a sort of reality TV in which politicians are the actors. To be popular, they have to guarantee themselves a leading role in ‘the play’. Preferably in infotainment programmes on TV or in the popular glossy magazines. The long road from olden times via centrefold organisations in which they represented their fellow citizens no longer matters. After all, politicians are made in the media. Why would a people’s representative continue to study dossiers or attend night-time meetings when he is overtaken on the electoral list by a well-known telegenic Fleming, asks Gazet van Antwerpen (9 December). The parties have also evolved in this media-based environment, from members’ organisations into a sort of electoral association where technocrats and communication specialists are in charge. The Purple-Green policy, with its obsession for communication, is the exponent par excellence of this development. Ministers and party chairmen voluntarily enter into debates with each other and announce initiatives by the boatload. Which of these they actually implement seems less important, according to Elchardus. For the journalists, who under Jean-Luc Dehaene were simply ignored or sent away empty-handed, this communicative government, of course, was a breath of fresh air. A critical article in the Dutch NRC-Handelsblad (16 November) paints a picture of journalists who call ministers on their mobiles when they feel like it… that is if the ministers have not already called them. But with elections imminent and the journalists holding Premier Verhofstadt and his team to account over their election promises, the Purple-Greens are experiencing the other side of this open communication. The Premier or his cabinet may well ‘actively intervene among editors’ via a phone call, says the NRC-Handelsblad. And in these election times, questions on this matter from a CD&V opposition member in a Chamber Committee cannot fail to appear, with cameras at the ready, obviously (De Financieel-Economische Tijd, 12 December).

Frank Vandecaveye | editor in chief

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Because the Flemish Liberals failed to ratify all the conference texts at their conference in November, the party met again last weekend. The party leadership was fairly anxious because with 128 votes against 122, the conference supported confederalism. The party leadership had ratified a text which called for the regionalisation of powers such as employment, transport, healthcare and child benefit. According to Party Chairman De Gucht and Minister-President Dewael, this must be the subject of negotiations with the Francophones after the elections. However, the party leadership had never mentioned confederalism. But under the impetus of, among others, Vincent Van Quickenborne and André Denys, confederalism was incorporated into the party manifesto. Confederalism places all powers with the Federal States (the regions/communities) unless they agree to leave some areas under Federal power. For Chairman of the Federal Chamber Herman Decroo the adopted text is a blunder that will rub less pro-Flemish liberal voters up the wrong way. The Liberal party was once a pro-Belgian bastion. On the Francophone side, the VLD’s pro-Flemish attitude was resolutely rejected by partners in government PS and MR (FF).

BART DOBBELAERE/GUIDO FONTEYN • DE STANDAARD • 10 DECEMBER

Consequently, in Het Laatste Nieuws (9 December) Louis Michel sighed yesterday that he no longer understood the VLD and his friend Verhofstadt. ‘Does the VLD actually know what it means to have a prime minister?’ In Le Soir he appeared calmer and called the VLD’s choice nothing more than an election stunt. ‘You just have to learn to live with it.’ The strong man of the other Francophone party, Elio Di Rupo of the PS, was indignant. He gives Belgium little chance of survival if a blue party in which VLD Chairman Karel De Gucht sets the tone wins the next elections. Both Di Rupo and Louis Michel, remain equally clear in their rejection of a new round of state reform after the next elections. ‘Normally there is such a round after every election,’ says Michel. ‘The difference is that this time we are anything but a petitioning party. Thanks to Lambermont, the French Community is over its financial problems, so we can say ‘no’ across the board.’

Opinion

FILIP ROGIERS • DE MORGEN • 9 DECEMBER

When this government came to power, Premier Verhofstadt made two major commitments. First of all, Belgium would no longer be the stage of community disputes. He wanted to show that his generation, the forty-something generation, was perfectly capable of resolving its differences. And secondly, Belgium would become a model country so that the breeding ground for the Vlaams Blok would diminish. One concerned the co-existence of Francophones and Flemings, the other the co-existence of different communities.

There is no positive news on either front. Since last weekend the two biggest parties in Flanders, the CD&V and VLD, have introduced confederalism into their manifestos. Conversely, PS Chairman Elio Di Rupo is calling in no uncertain terms for the ‘abolition’ of the Linguistic Act which dates from 1963. Again the focus is on facilities, which one wants to strengthen, the other abolish. One is solemnly promising a split of social security, the other as solemnly that there will not even be a partial split. It’s difficult when neither side is willing to listen. (…) To regulate equal opportunities, rights and duties between Flemings and Francophones, all parties have invariably held the credo: where there’s a will, there’s a way. And where there is a way, sooner or later there will be a law.

For that other social problem, i.e. equal opportunities, rights and duties of Belgians and immigrants, it is all a little more difficult. There is a law for this (the Constitution), but clearly there is not a way. Improvement is in sight, but there is also the fear that differences of opinion between Flemings and Francophones will snow under any initiative towards a somewhat more daring integration policy over the coming months.

Catholic school not required to provide moral philosophy in newly acquired municipal school

FF EDITOR

When a Catholic school takes over a municipal school that provides moral philosophy and other religious education, it can continue to do so, says the Council of State (De Standaard, 12 December). However, obliging schools to continue these lessons, as stipulated in Minister Vanderpoorten’s draft education decree no. XIV is unfair. By issuing this advice, the Council of State gives the go-ahead to the transitional regulation that the Christian Democratic opposition CD&V is calling for in an amendment to the decree. According to the Council of State, the constitutional freedom of education does not stand in the way of a transitional regulation for the religious package in municipal schools that are taken over. That means that the - now Catholic - school can continue to teach moral philosophy or Islam, for example, to children who attended those classes before the take-over. Once the last pupil to take the subject has left, the school can (again) concentrate on Catholic religious education. Previously, the Council of State stated it is unfair to force a school to continue teaching moral philosophy and other religions all the time, as stated in Marleen Vanderpoorten’s draft decree. Vanderpoorten (VLD) wants to introduce the obligation with retroactive effect from 1 September 2002.
Tobacco advertising banned, arms law relaxed

The fear that other bills such as the eco-tax on disposable packaging or the reduction in corporation tax would be endangered proved unfounded

The bill put forward by the Francophone PS, MR and cdH parties to defer the ban on tobacco advertising until 2006 for the F1 Grand Prix at Francorchamps was voted down by a narrow majority of Agalev, SPA, CD&V, Vlaams Blok, N-VA and Spirit on the Flemish side and Ecolo on the Francophone side. The general ban on tobacco advertising will not be tampered with from July next year, even though the European Directive offers respite until the summer of 2005. In exchange for a relaxation of the planned new Act on arms exports, the Francophone Liberals and Socialists, the main advocates of the deferment of the advertising ban on Tobacco products, have reconciled themselves to the result of the vote. Premier Verhofstadt (VLD) can once again heave a sigh of relief. The fear that other bills such as the eco-tax on disposable packaging or the reduction in corporation tax would be endangered by discord among the Purple-Greens proved unfounded. That very same day the Chamber voted on the corporation tax reform. The vote on the eco-tax and eco-bonuses Act was postponed until Friday by a delaying manoeuvre of the CD&V opposition. The opposition won 51 votes to request a recommendation from the Council of State on two amendments to the bill. However, Joos Wauters, Parliamentary Party Leader of Agalev, the green advocate of this Act, is not worried about the successful outcome (FF).

Opinion

BART STURTEWAGEN • DE STANDAARD • 11 DECEMBER

The Purple-Green majority has finally elected not to stumble over the tabacco ban dossier. That would have been the low point of this obscene display. The finish to the story is therefore the same as what was decided under the previous coalition in 1997, i.e. no more tobacco advertising as from next year. The political establishment’s standing has been seriously damaged because the impression was given that politicians and parties react to the slightest snap of the fingers by scheming figures of the like of Formula 1 tycoon Bernie Ecclestone. The people who brought the matter to a head, as a result of which the battle was drawn out for weeks, with intense discussions between members of the majority, had a serious responsibility in the matter. The same has to be said of those who changed their voting behaviour in the Senate since they also allowed the humiliating spectacle to drag on for so long. The worst was when it looked as if the promoters of the advertising ban deferment were prepared to attach a fragmentation bomb to their proposal. Refusal to ratify the deferment would then lead to a refusal to ratify the eco-bonuses Act which means the reform of corporation tax, the administrative simplification and the whole series of Acts prepared by the Purple-Greens would have been derailed.

Obviously, things could not be allowed to go that far, and so yesterday the affair blew over,… as could be predicted. A little more tinkering with an arms Act that itself was the final piece in a poorly managed quarrel within the coalition and Bob’s your uncle. Given that an imminent EU Directive is bringing the ban on tobacco advertising forward to mid-2005, in the end it involved only one single Grand Prix. That made the whole exercise even more ridiculous than it already was. Ultimately it was a question of how deeply people were prepared to dig in their box of tricks to be successful. This was politics at its most narrow-minded. And therefore we should have been spared this ignoble spectacle.
Agreement on illegal weekend houses

Residents of a weekend home in woodland or conservation area, can continue to live there until the last resident has left the home.

In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of Flemings built a second home in woodland or conservation areas. The government turned a blind eye to this practice even though the regional town and country plans that were drawn up from 1974 onwards specified that building in woodland or conservation areas is not permitted. For a long time, the Flemish Government gave the problem a wide birth and postponed unpopular decisions. Meanwhile, the residents of these estimated 13,000 to 15,000 illegal buildings had united in a national committee calling for their homes to be legalised. Under the impetus of the Minister of Town and Country Planning, Dirk Van Mechelen (VLD), the majority parties have now agreed on a settlement scenario in the Flemish Parliament (FF).

MARK DEWEERDT • DE FINANCIEEL-ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 12 DECEMBER

At the end of June, Town and Country Planning Minister Dirk van Mechelen (VLD) submitted a policy plan entitled ‘The Problem of Weekend Homes’ to the Flemish Parliament with the aim of making the people’s representatives come down on one side or the other. He evidently succeeded. The four majority factions (VLD, SP.A, Agalev and Spirit) have agreed on a settlement scenario. Residents of a weekend home in vulnerable areas, such as a woodland or conservation area, can continue to live there until the last resident has left the home. The building will subsequently be demolished. Sale and inheritance are not possible.

To take advantage of the regulation, the owner must report to the town hall and provide a list of the composition of his/her family. The owner must also demonstrate that the weekend home was built before the regional programme came into force. The majority factions enshrined their approval in a draft decree that will be put before the Flemish Parliament shortly. Since most of the residents are elderly, it is expected most of the illegal dwellings will have disappeared by 2015.

Striking Civil aid antagonises minister and public opinion

The right to strike is inviolable, but what the Civil Aid (Civiele Bescherming) did last week will not do for Federal Budget Minister Johan Vande Lanotte (SP.A). When large areas of the Westhoek (west of West Flanders) suffered flooding and cellars, houses and roads lay under water, the Civil Aid teams refused to help. They did not even make their equipment available. Vande Lanotte finds that unacceptable and is refusing to negotiate further with the Civil Aid’s trade unions. However there is no question of curtailing their right to strike, such as that of the police or army. A great deal of the Civil Aid’s equipment and manpower was in Spain last week, where the Civil Aid was helping to clear up the oil from ‘The Prestige’. Meanwhile, the Christian trade union, the CCOD, has called off the strike. In Flanders this means that urgent work will be carried out, but no administrative work (FF).

In addition to the Civil Aid, other vital public sector services also enjoy an absolute and uncurtailed right to strike: fire services, public hospitals, public sanitation services, prison staff. The government has not passed one single Act enabling it to protect the population from the consequences of strikes in these services. In the private sector, however, there are ways to curtail the right to strike. The staff of the Civil Aid are striking for higher pay and an improved status. The strike has been dragging on for ten days already. The staff’s status is that of technical employee. According to the trade unions, this generally includes people of whom equivalent knowledge is required, but who do not take the same risks in their job. ‘Our pay approaches that of the fire service but they can earn much more through various bonuses such as night shifts. True, they are always the first to turn out, but we take the same risks. Perhaps even greater ones. We are called out when things get really dangerous.’

UNEMPLOYMENT AND NATIONALITY (FIGURES 2000)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Unemployment Ratio</th>
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<tr>
<td>Belgians</td>
<td>6.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>From Neighbouring Countries</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other South-Europeans</td>
<td>9.0</td>
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<td>Italians</td>
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<td>Turks</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Moroccans</td>
<td>33.9</td>
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SOURCE: VDAB, MTA, RSVZ

THE UNEMPLOYMENT RATIO IN FLANDERS ACCORDING TO NATIONALITY (IN %)
Onkelinx refuses to cooperate on Flemish integration courses

Minister Onkelinx announced that the refusal to learn Dutch was not a sufficient reason to suspend an unemployed person

Flemish Employment Minister Renaat Landuyt (SP.A) is at odds with his Socialist colleague, the Labour Minister in the Federal Government, Laurette Onkelinx (PS). Onkelinx is refusing to cooperate with the integration decree which the Flemish Government ratified last week. According to that decree, new immigrants, but also other unemployed immigrants will be forced to follow an induction course, including a crash course in Dutch and a job training. Anyone who refuses will be considered as unwilling to work by the Flemish Employment Services and Vocational Training Agency (VDBA) and risks losing his/her unemployment benefit. The suspension of unemployed people is, however, the job of the ‘Belgian Employment and Placement Service’ (RVA), which falls under Minister Onkelinx’s authority. Minister Onkelinx, however, announced that the refusal to learn Dutch was not a sufficient reason to suspend a person. It is not the first time that both Socialist ministers have crossed swords. It also happened following the Federal Rosetta Job Creation Scheme, which was conceived with the Walloon region in mind, but not Flanders. It also happened following the extra bonuses for time credit that Landuyt introduced in Flanders and following the possibility of concluding Flemish collective labour agreements (FF).

BART ECKHOUT • DE MORGEN • 7 DECEMBER

Onkelinx’s unwilling attitude has not gone down very well with the Flemish Government. ‘We are accepting our responsibility and we hope the Federal Government will do likewise,’ reacted Flemish Minister Landuyt coolly. ‘Mrs Onkelinx is obviously entitled to instruct the VDBA not to take sanctions. However, she should also realise that in so doing she is undermining our social security. People have rights, but also duties. Moreover, it is dangerous because the public might think the Federal Government is sabotaging our policy.’ Landuyt underlined that the measure was not intended to target or discriminate immigrants. ‘On the contrary, we are making every effort to help them find jobs. That involves duties for those concerned.’ According to Landuyt, the dismissive attitude of his Federal colleague Onkelinx is partly prompted by the tensions between Flanders and the Federal authorities on other employment measures. The discussion on whether or not to reach Flemish collective bargaining agreements is an underlying factor. Minister-President Dewael (VLD) sees the row as a chance to lend further weight to his community requirements. ‘Employment that becomes a power of the Regions is one of the issues in the next step in state reform.’ Onkelinx’s attitude will only increase our appetite to engage in this discussion.’

Opinion

ERIC DONCKIER • HET BELANG VAN LIMBURG • 7 DECEMBER

With her comments, Laurette Onkelinx, as Renaat Landuyt rightly pointed out, is undermining our Belgian social security system which is based on rights and duties. Clearly, Onkelinx only sees rights. That is a typical Walloon mentality. We Flemings are in favour of rights and duties. After the elections, employment must be regionalised. Minister-President Patrick Dewael must guarantee this.
Philips Hasselt and Flemish government never say die

The trade unions were unable to elicit a single concrete promise from the Vice-President of the Philips group, Arthur van der Poel, in Amsterdam

The trade unions of the Philips plant in Hasselt, which is threatened with closure, have persuaded former director Geboers to talk to his contacts to bring new ITC activities to Hasselt. In this way they hope to keep the current know-how (600 highly skilled workers) in the area. Even the current management of the Hasselt plant is keenly looking for partners who want to start new activities in the Hasselt area. They are also concentrating their efforts on jobs with other firms. An employment unit headed by the company’s personnel division is establishing contacts with other firms in Limburg that have vacancies. With this in mind the management of Philips Hasselt has listed all the existing know-how and infrastructure in the company. A mailing containing this information is due to be sent to other companies in the same sector shortly. Philips is also promising training for its workers who have to be retrained. For Philips’ less-skilled workers, Justice Minister Verwilghen (VLD) had good news last week. There will be 331 vacancies in the new prison in Hasselt. Flemish Minister for Economic Affairs Jaak Gabriëls (VLD) is also keeping his end up. He is working on a plan to begin a platform for digital TV together with the American Motorola group and other Flemish partners. A study into this must be ready within five weeks. (FF).

Motorola wants to collaborate on a platform - with various parties - to develop digital television in Flanders. The meeting included, among others, Managing Chairman Duco Sickings of Telenet Vlaanderen, a representative of the office of Minister Van Mechelen (Media and Budget, VLD) and Minister-President Dewael (VLD). As is known, Telenet Vlaanderen [with the commercial broadcaster VTM] and VRT [with the national telecoms operator Belgacom] are already busy with experiments in digital TV. The big plus point is the high degree of TV cabling in Flanders. ‘Despite the poor state of the ICT sector, digital television is one of the niches in which we believe,’ says Gabriëls’ Principal Private Secretary Martin Hinoul. ‘Motorola also believes that digital TV has a chance in Flanders and is extremely interested.’ The study must ultimately lead to a large platform with different players. Apart from Motorola and Telenet Vlaanderen, Gabriëls’ office is also thinking of the software company Real Software, university institutions, VRT and Flanders Multimedia Valley (Hasselt). ‘And why not Philips, which is also already involved in digital television,’ says Hinoul. The question is whether the creation of a platform for digital TV can provide an alternative to Philips’ departure from Hasselt. Philips is in fact already involved in digital TV, but the centre of knowledge for Belgium is based in Bruges.

The march on Amsterdam on 12 December, involving one thousand Hasselt Philips demonstrators, had little effect. The trade unions were unable to elicit a single concrete promise from the Vice-President of the Philips group, Arthur van der Poel. Philips Amsterdam is not considering setting up initiatives itself in Hasselt. As a result, the trade unions have announced tougher action.

Opinion

FRANS CROLS • TRENDS •
12 DECEMBER

Wieze lies 120 km from Hasselt. The centre of the village houses the world’s largest chocolate factory: It has been providing jobs for generations and will continue to do so at the end of the 21st century - at least if the trade unions keep their demands below gross margin growth. The production of chocolate is an art and the Belgians have made this art their own. Belgian Chocolate is an international success. The 720 Flemish workers at Barry Callebaut live on mid-tech and earn comparable wages and salaries as the Philips workers in Hasselt. Why then is Philips perishing and Barry Callebaut thriving? After a pioneering period, hi-tech is quickly mature, and the cost competition is great. CD-ROMs do not require generations of established tradition and craftsmanship. The disks can be produced more cheaply in low-wage countries as soon as the teething troubles are over. Distinguished Belgian confectionery is more home-loving, the cost competition is not as fierce and ‘Made in Belgium’ helps set the selling. Is the comparison between Philips and Barry Callebaut fair? Yes and no. No, because there are many Philips’s in this country. You can count the Barry Callebaut’s on the fingers of two hands. Yes, because the term knowledge economy has to be stretched beyond technology. Back to a technological Neanderthal? No. But in a sophisticated society such as Flanders, the economy is becoming more local and service-oriented. It is symbolic that 350 former Philips workers are able to find work as prison staff. Prison guards, hairdressers, actors, museum directors, nightclub managers, restaurant keepers and sports school owners are the producers of the future. In spite of internationalisation, a greater percentage than in 1952 and 1902 of what a town or region produces is consumed in the same town or region. Localisation is just as trendy as globalisation. WWW.PHILOS.BE
Houses of the Economy in Flemish cities

The Flemish Government has approved the establishment of ‘Houses of the Flemish Economy’ (Huizen van de Vlaamse Economie). The aim of these houses is to be the sole office to which entrepreneurs can go for government information and services. They will house Export Vlaanderen, the Regional Development Agencies (Gewestelijke Ontwikkelingsmaatschappijen, GOs) and the Flemish Institute for Entrepreneurship Training (Vlaams Instituut voor het Zelfstandig Ondernemen, VIZO). The first houses will open next year in Ghent and Bruges (FF).

WIM VANDE VELDEN • DE FINANCIËLE- 
ECONOMISCHE TIJD • 7 DECEMBER

At one point she has the appearance of a lush courtesan, at another of a mystical penitent. At one point she has the appearance of a lush courtesan, at another of a mystical penitent.

The Museum of Fine Art in Ghent recently bought a canvas by Belgian artist Alfred Stevens (1823-1906). The painting shows a young woman with long hair pressing a skull to herself. It is a 19th century version of the Biblical character Maria Magdalena, who symbolises woman as a repentant sinner. For Barbara Baert, Robert Hoozee and Bruno Fornari, the purchase was reason to set up an exhibition in the museum. ‘Maria Magdalena, Sinner from the Middle Ages to Today’ is a small but interesting exhibition of paintings, sculptures, miniatures, drawings and etchings, that give a good idea of how Western society has seen women, and how women have seen themselves through the centuries. Maria Magdalena totters between sensuality and detachment. At one point she has the appearance of a lush courtesan, at another of a mystical penitent (FF).

BERT POPELIER • TIJD CULTUUR • 11 DECEMBER

The exhibition in Ghent on Maria Magdalena is also the history of the image of women. It opens with four illuminated manuscripts from the Middle Ages. Maria Magdalena was the patroness of prisoners and of fallen women. In Germany, Bohemia and the Low Countries many centres and improvement homes were established from the 15th century, especially for women who had given themselves over too much to ‘luxuria’. Young women had to retrain and learn to walk the remorseful path of Maria Magdalena. It is no surprise that by 1898 Fernand Khnopff drew her as a veiled woman with an incense holder in her hand, by renowned Brussels woodcarver Jan Borman, from around 1495. The figure is carved entirely after the ideal of female beauty during the Late Gothic period: a domed forehead, a high bosom and a bulging belly. Maria Magdalena would become increasingly worldly during the 18th and 19th centuries. In a painting from around 1690 by the Italian Luca Giordano, Maria Magdalena is pulling at a string of pearls around her neck. Her dress is falling open at her bosom. By exposing her breasts she is trying to emphasise her asceticism. Her long blonde hair recalls the vain beauty she is renouncing. The skull in the lower left corner is a typical 17th century emblem for the vanity of life. For many painters from the 19th century, Maria Magdalena’s lush hair recalls the secrets of female sexuality. As a character between innocence and lasciviousness she enters the salon of polite society. In a dry-point etching from 1887, James Ensor depicts her with an exposed upper body. In 1898 Fernand Khnopff drew her as a veiled woman with an incense holder in her hand. Félicien Rops (1833-1898) went even further. His ‘Christ’s Love’ shows a naked Maria Magdalena embracing the cross whilst squatting on the ground.
The Ghent exhibition also includes three contemporary depictions of Maria Magdalena, the work of Marlene Dumas [1953], Kiki Smith [1954] and Maria Magdalena, the work of Marlene Vielger, Jan Van Mechelen, Museum of Modern Art, Ostend, info: 059/50.81.18

• Until 5 January: Portraits of Flemish and Senegalese Folk singers on tour in Flanders, Heusden-Zolder, Ghent, Leuven, Mol, Ternat, Lokeren, Aalst, Bruges, Bornem, Brussels, info: 09/265.91.65

• Until 22 December: Festival 'Postkarte Berlin', with concerts, performances and installations, Recyclart and Raffinage, Brussels, info: 02/502.57.34 www.recyclart.be

• Until 3 January: Rosas XX, twenty years of Rosas Dance Company, PSK, Brussels, info: 02/507.84.66 www.rosas.be

• Until 6 April: Maria Magdalena, sinner from the Middle Ages until today, exhibition, Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent, info: 09/222.17.03 www.museumglinde.be

• Until 19 January: Antoon De Clerck, retrospectiv exhibition, The Museum of Deinze en de Liefkenshoek, Bornem, info: 012/67.03.55

• Until 16 February: Beaches and glances, a photo exhibition about Ostend, Venetaanse Gaanderijen, Ostend, info: 059/56.20.15

• Until 9 January: Benoit, cartoonist, Zwarte Huis, Knokke

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