

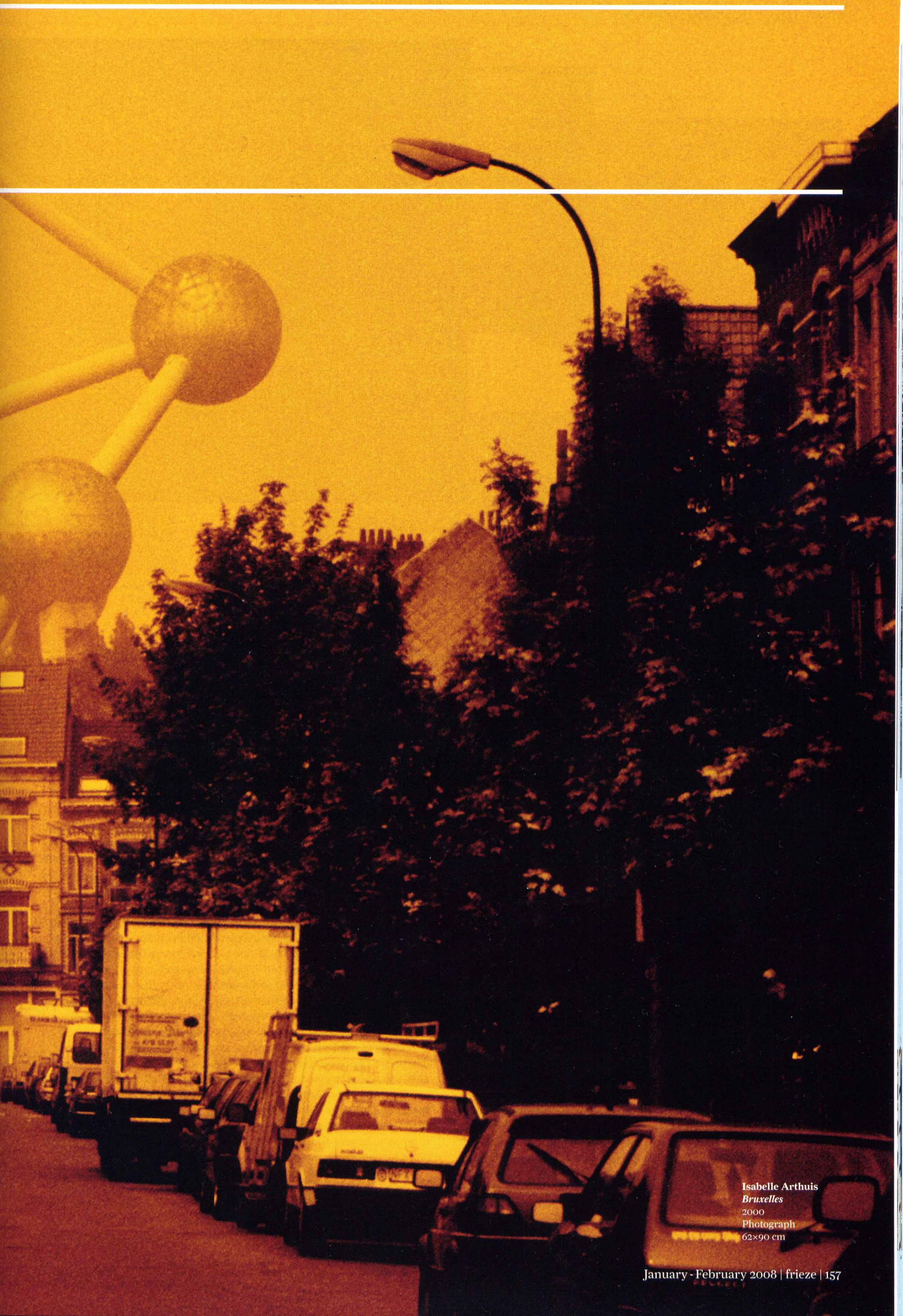
# BRUSSELS

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Why have so many foreign artists moved to the Belgian capital? Is it the cheap rents and sardonic humour, Art Nouveau treasures and postwar architectural eyesores – or the fact that it spent much of 2007 without a government?

*by Aaron Schuster and Vivian Rebberg*





Isabelle Arthuis  
*Bruxelles*  
2000  
Photograph  
62x90 cm





**Gabriel Kuri**  
*Waiting Stub Lettuce*  
 2004  
 Plastic and paper  
 15x15x15 cm



**Left:**  
**Heidi Voet**  
*Stardust*  
 2006  
 Gingerbread, biscuits,  
 meringue, silicone  
 Installation view

**Above:**  
**Rineke Dijkstra**  
*Josaphat Park, Bruxelles,*  
*August 31, 2005*  
 2005  
 C-type print  
 109x127 cm



## Aaron Schuster

*A writer based in Brussels. He co-wrote the libretto for Cellar Door: An Opera in Almost One Act which will be performed in Paris, late 2008.*

When philosophers today speak of the community 'of those who have nothing in common', or of the 'inoperative' or 'unavailable' community, or of the community still 'to come', they might very well be describing Brussels. 'Its formula escapes you,' as W. H. Auden once said: bureaucratically isolated capital of a united Europe, uncertain centre of a linguistically divided country, a kind of alien element within the Belgian state, more than half of whose inhabitants are foreign born, urbanized yet villagesque, land of cheap rents and sardonic humour, an uneven backdrop of art nouveau treasures, pompous colonial remnants, and postwar architectural eyesores.

While plenty of Belgian artists have left their native country and made their careers abroad (Pierre Alechinsky, Chantal Akerman, Georges Simenon ...), in recent years what's more remarkable is the number of foreign artists who have chosen to live and work in Brussels: Pierre Bismuth, Gabriel Lester, Kendell Geers, Gabriel Kuri, Manon de Boer, Beat Streuli and Aglaia Konrad, to name a few. What's the attraction? Though Brussels' inexpensive real estate bears comparison with Berlin, the Belgian capital is much less flashy than the great German metropolis. Its low-key anarchy and lack of strong vision stand in equal contrast with classically hierarchical and institution-minded France. In a word, rather than your standard hyped scene, Brussels is more conducive to individual encounters and idiosyncratic production – a product of the city's 'functional

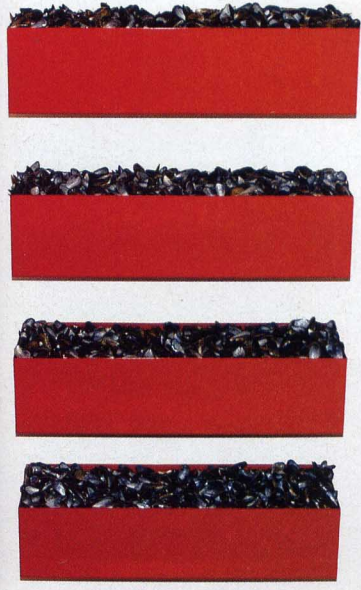
disorganization', affordable living and de-centred spirit.

A fictional news report of the Flemish declaring independence by the RTBF (French Belgian National Television) on 13 December 2006, which incited a minor War-of-the-Worlds-style panic and angry denunciations by politicians, anticipated recent events. Some months after the last elections, with the majority Flemish party promising greater regional powers at the time of writing, Belgium is still without a government (the previous administration is currently overseeing things). Talk of Belgium's demise has filled the media. Are this mad-cap country's days numbered? And – the question on everybody's mind – what will happen to Brussels? No doubt the best conceptual performance piece of the year was the sale of Belgium ('a kingdom in three parts, Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia') on eBay, which fetched a top bid of 10 million euros before it was yanked by the website. Who knows, perhaps the disputed capital and home base of the EU is destined to become the first pan-European city-state.

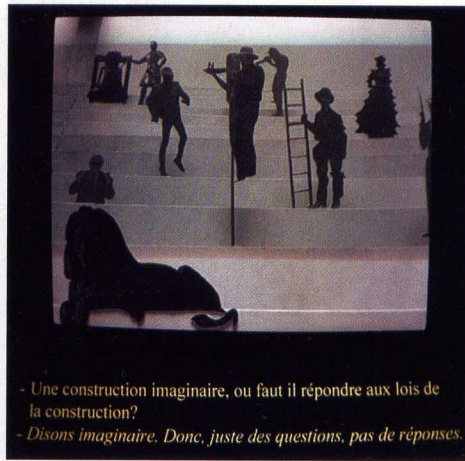
Brussels is famous for contemporary dance, with luminaries such as Meg Stuart and Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker with her experimental dance school PARTS leading the way, yet for its size it also manages a relatively vibrant roster of visual arts events. For easy reference, here is the art traveller's non-comprehensive guide to the city's key attractions.

**Galleries:** Brussels has no centralized contemporary art district; galleries are dispersed throughout the city. To mention two of the most noteworthy: Jan Mot (rue Antoine Dansaert 190) has a particularly sharp roster of conceptual talent, from Deimantas Narkevicius' meditative films, through Mario Garcia Torres' meta-creations and





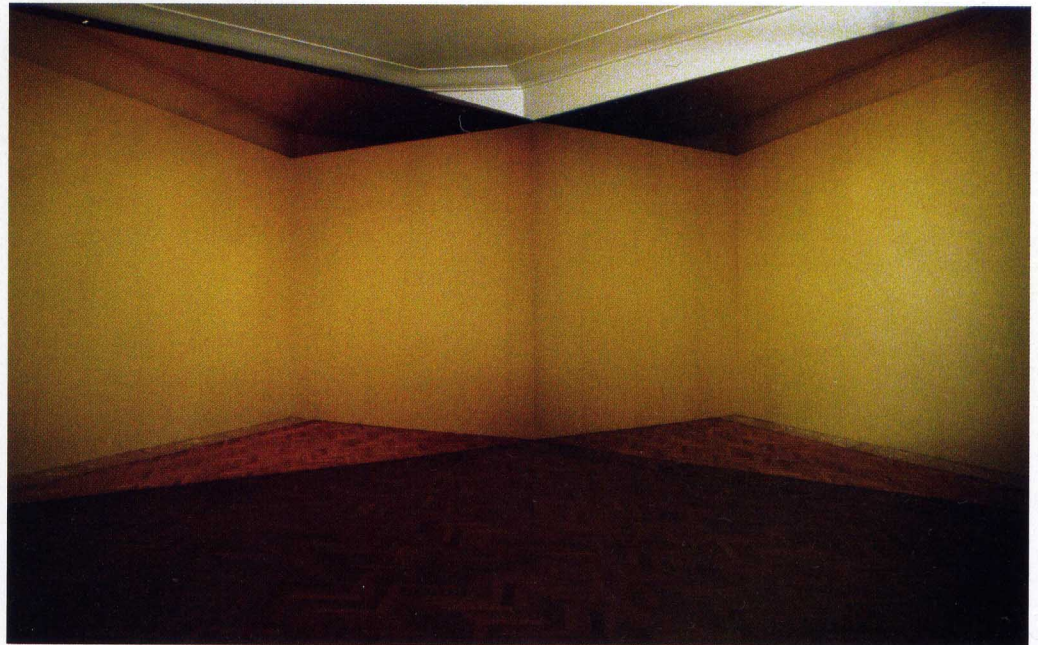
**Right:**  
**Pieter Vermeersch**  
*Untitled*  
 2007  
 Wall painting  
 Installation view



- Une construction imaginaire, ou faut il répondre aux lois de la construction?  
 - Disons imaginaire. Donc, juste des questions, pas de réponses.

**Far left:**  
**Cédric Noël**  
*Modèle vidéographique de l'appareil rêve*  
*(Videographic Model of the Dream Machine)*  
 2007  
 Mixed media  
 Dimensions variable

**Left:**  
**Mira Sanders**  
*L'Atelier*  
*(The Studio)*  
 2007  
 DVD on monitor and projection  
 Dimensions variable



Ian Wilson's conversations, to the performance pieces (one of which was acted out by Mot himself) of Tino Sehgal. The autumn season opened with a solo show by Pierre Bismuth, presenting his new collage series 'Today Is The Tomorrow of Yesterday'. And in 2005, after nine years in Luxembourg, Erna Hécey (rue des Fabriques 1c) installed herself in one of the most beautiful and expansive gallery spaces in the city. Her best exhibitions of the past year have featured Eleanor Antin, Beat Streuli and Olaf Nicolai. Look for a greater focus on Belgian artists in 2008, with a solo show by Lili Dujourie and a special year-long project by Jef Geys.

**Art Centres:** The old Wielemans-Ceuppens Brewery has recently been converted into Brussels' first Kunsthalle, Wiels (avenue van Volxem 354), with the building's beautiful 1930s industrial architecture, including swooping beer vats, lovingly preserved. For the Kunsthalle's second show, Japanese counterculture legend Yayoi Kusama has decked the place out in psychedelically spotted giant pink balloons. Artist residencies coming soon. argos (rue du Chantier 13) is a media archive and multi-tasking centre for audiovisual arts, which organizes shows, film screenings, conferences and the annual argosfestival, revived by its new artistic director, Katerina Gregos. 'Anachronism', curated by Elena Filipovic, which brought together a group of artists dealing with history, nostalgia and temporality (including a cinema installation designed by Tobias Putrih for the screening of Chris Marker's *La Jetée*, 1962) was a standout in 2007. Etablissement d'en face projects (rue Antoine Dansaert 161) is a small and innovative art centre - my favourite exhibition there to date has been the display of a hefty three-volume compilation of the public

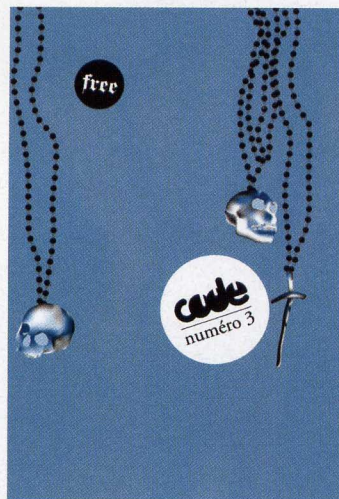
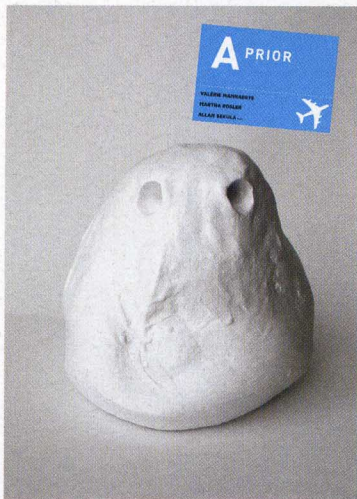
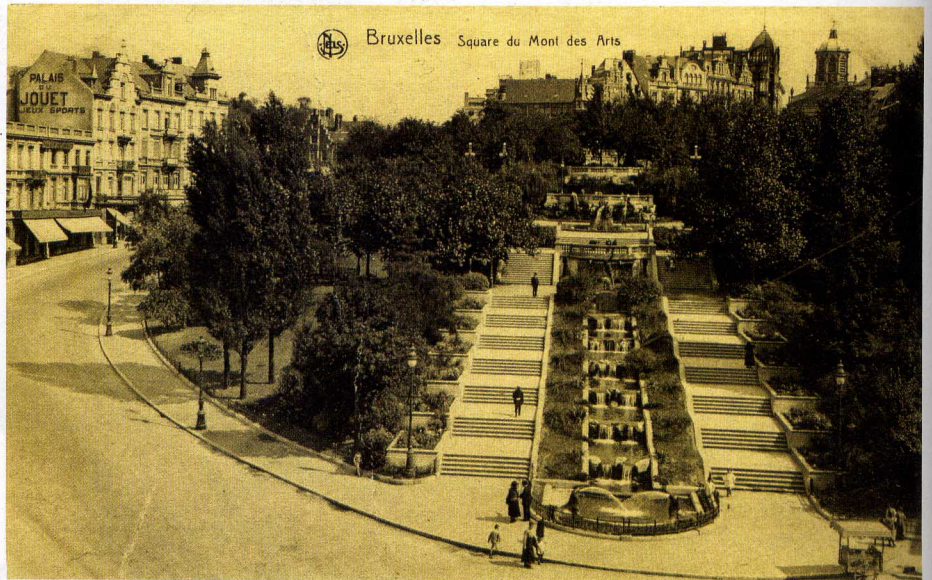
## Belgium was advertised on eBay ('a kingdom in three parts, Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia'), attracting a bid of 10 million euros before it was removed from the website.

speeches of Jacques Chirac, along with over 300 hours of recordings, as an homage to the former French President's rhetorical skill and discursive excess. Nadine (rue du Berger 30) is a workspace and creative platform for performance and new media; practically everyone in performing arts passes through here at some point.

**Publications:** *A Prior* is Belgium's heady art glossy, with lengthy sections dedicated to individual artists and special projects. *CODE* is a free independent art magazine published twice yearly, focusing on the emerging art scene, both Belgian and international. Conceived by a collective of five young curators as a form of 'exhibition on paper', *CODE* also regularly curates shows at different locations throughout the city. **Bookshops:** Tropisme (Galerie des Princes 11) is a stunningly beautiful bookshop to fulfil all your French reading needs, with especially good sections on art, philosophy and psychoanalysis. Posada Art Books (rue de la Madeleine 29) offers floor-to-ceiling shelves of *recherché* art catalogues, used and new. Le Bonheur (rue Antoine Dansaert 196) is an 'audio-visual deli' containing plenty of



A postcard showing the demolished Mont des Arts fountains  
c. 1920



Far left:  
*A Prior* #15  
2007  
(Cover by Valérie  
Mannaerts)

Left:  
*Code 3*  
2006

eye-catching and ear-popping material. And Bolle Bookshop/Bar (rue de Flandre 57) is a cosy café stocked with loads of Belgian and international creative periodicals. **Museums:** the Royal Museum for Central Africa (Leuvensesteenweg 13, Tervuren) is a taxidermy paradise and a magnificent time capsule of the colonial era. Hurry to see the madness of King Leopold II before planned renovations sanitize its out-of-the-past Joseph Conrad feel.

**Eating:** Tomato and shrimps on a baguette in the afternoon at Au Suisse (boulevard Anspach 73-5). La Marée (rue de Flandre 99) offers the best *moules frites* in town. At LAchepot (Place Sainte-Catherine 1) the knife-chopped steak tartare is gustatory enlightenment. And for pure pleasure, dine on grilled sole and scallops on a bed of chicons with truffles at Den Boer (Quai aux Briques 60). La Manufacture (rue Notre-Dame du Sommeil 12-20): avoid gallery dinners here.

**Drinking:** The jazz era L'Archiduc (rue Antoine Dansaert 6), with its swanky oceanliner interior, is still a regular meeting point (skip the tourist/Eurocrat crowd on the weekends), but for an expert Martini try the basement bank-vault bar in the Belga Queen (rue Fossé aux Loups 32). **Dry-cleaning:** De Geest (rue del'Hopital 37). The King's cleaners, since 1846. **Hotel:** Le Plaza (boulevard Adolphe Max 118-126). Headquarters of the Wehrmacht during the war. Conveniently situated in the reassuringly shabby (no Times Square nonsense) porn district near the Gare du Nord. Sip on a cocktail in the plush bar – the rolling seafood cart is an aesthetic masterpiece. **Where to Find an Analyst:** Ecole Belge de Psychanalyse (rue Mercelis 39). A loosely Lacanian, non-Millerian school, with a range of multilingual psychoanalysts ready to unwind your unconscious for a reasonable fee.

**Quirkiest Piece of Public Art:** Tom Frantzen's bronze of a youth rising from a manhole cover and tripping up a policeman (1985) should put you in a suitably slapstick mood. When asked by tourists about the Manneken Pis, misdirect them to Frantzen's statue of the pissing dog (1999) on rue des Chartreux. **Best 1950s Architecture:** The Atomium. Built for the 1958 Brussels World Expo (after an initial proposal for an upside down Eiffel Tower was rejected), and expertly renovated in 2006. Travel from atom to atom as you worship at this bygone era's monument to the brilliant technological future. **Biggest Urban Planning Blunder:** Freewheeling developers and a weak central government have not been kind to the Brussels cityscape. The obvious choice (apart from the covering of the canals and the construction of the three main train stations) would be the demolition in 1965 of Victor Horta's masterpiece and symbol of socialist solidarity La Maison du Peuple (1895-8). But I'm going to go with the destruction of the Mont des Arts, once a beautiful series of cascading fountains (they used to call Brussels the 'little Paris'), now the site of a boxy library and mediocre park. **Stupidest Art Prize:** The Young Belgian Painters Award. Not just for painters anymore. Founded in the 1950s, it has become a major vehicle for the promotion of young contemporary artists. This year an international jury selected seven artists to compete for four prizes, but, on seeing their entries, declined to award the top prize to any of the nominees. 'Ceci n'est pas un prix,' as Magritte might have said. The jury was tight-lipped on the reasons for their indecision, but let it slip that nothing had really grabbed them. Down with the Belgian art scene? I think hang the jury is more appropriate. Let's get rid of it.





argos centre for art  
and media, Brussels  
2007

## Vivian Rehberg

*A Paris-based art historian, critic and translator*

Late last June I took the hour-and-a-half train ride from Paris to Brussels to meet Dutch artist and Brussels resident Gabriel Lester and to attend the opening of the Young Belgian Painters Award exhibition at the Palais des Beaux-Arts. I also planned to spend some quality time with Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793), which few people realize hangs discreetly in a bland lower-level room of the neighbouring Royal Museum of Fine Arts. I hadn't seen the painting since the Belgian *über*-curator Jan Hoet showed it in a tower at documenta IX in 1992, so we had a lot of catching up to do. The Young Belgian Painters Award, for which Lester was nominated along with fellow Belgian residents Virginie Bailly, Koenraad Dedobbeleer & Willem Oorebeek, Cédric Noël, Mira Sanders, Sarah Vanagt and Pieter Vermeersch, is cast as the Belgian Turner Prize, so I figured the event would allow me to acquire a comprehensive perspective on the Belgian contemporary art scene. Unfortunately, the whole affair left me feeling bewildered. It was obvious enough from the works on show that the prize had nothing to do with painting. But then, after sitting through lengthy speeches in the official languages of Flemish and French, it turned out the prize wouldn't even be awarded at all. This year the jury had decided none of the artists deserved the *grand prix* of 25,000 euros. Instead Noël, Sanders and Vermeersch all took home the second prize of 12,500 euros.

From what I could glean at the post-ceremony reception, the audience was thoroughly perplexed and the artists more than slightly

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disappointed. Some folks claimed that this was simply further proof that the whole thing was a sham. Others bitterly regretted that the results would only perpetuate impressions that Belgian artists are second-rate. The next day, while ears burned and mobile phones buzzed with news of the night before, I checked out some of Rineke Dijkstra's recent 'Park Portraits' (2005-7) at Jan Mot's standard-setting gallery, went to see the staggering portrait of Marat, then met Lester for a studio visit. A single overheard phrase of dual significance stuck in my mind: 'The thing you need to know about the Brussels art world is that nobody wants to create a scene.' Suddenly, a treasure like *Marat*, unceremoniously tucked in the basement among less-celebrated works, as if to draw the least possible attention to it, made more sense. Perhaps because I live in Paris, a city that's not exactly known for its humility, I was now officially intrigued.

In August I found myself at Paris's Gare du Nord again, waiting for the Thalys service to Brussels. Even though most galleries were closed and many people had left on holiday, I clutched a list of names and had succeeded in making a number of appointments, thanks in





**Above:**  
**Wiels Contemporary  
 Art Centre, Brussels**  
 2007

**Right:**  
**Yayoi Kusama**  
*Dots Obsession*  
 2007  
 Mixed media  
 Installation view at  
 Wiels Contemporary  
 Art Centre, Brussels



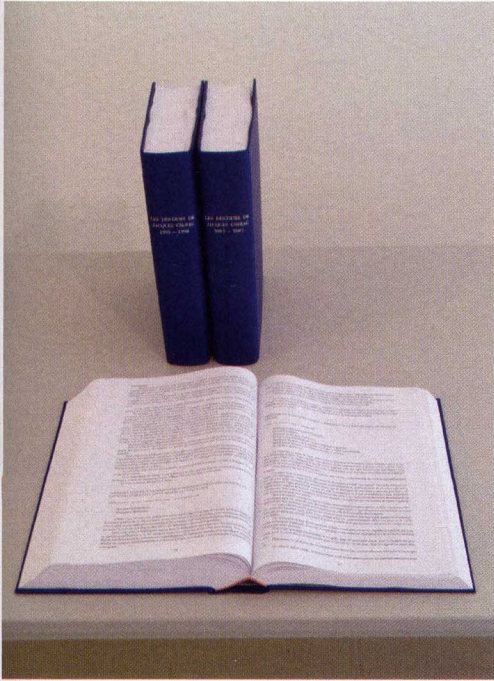
great part to the artist-run *Établissement d'en face* projects. Unsurprisingly, my meeting with the devoted team behind this experimental space in an unassuming storefront was one of the highlights of my trip. While closing up shop for the summer, at the end of an atypically glorious day, they displayed characteristically unpretentious generosity. They sat me down in front of a lap-top with wine in a goblet that had been made out of their plate-glass window on the occasion of Tomo Savic-Gecan's exhibition in 2005, then patiently, and with infectious enthusiasm, walked me through several years of their programming. In addition to hosting an eclectic series of exhibitions, dating back to the early 1990s (including shows with Ann Veronica Janssens, Harun Farocki, Roman Signer and scores of less-established artists such as Masist Gül), *Établissement d'en face* projects organizes lectures and screenings with local and international partners that seem to strike just the right balance between quirky and serious.

At the other end of the institutional spectrum, I was lucky enough to catch Dirk Snauwaert, who gave me a tour through the as-yet-unfinished Wiels Contemporary Art Centre, which he runs alongside Chief Curator Anne Pontégnie. Wiels is housed in Modernist architect Adrien Blomme's looming concrete Wielemans-Ceuppens brewery building, in an industrial complex in the municipality of Forest-Vorst, not far from the South Station where the Thalys and Eurostar trains arrive and depart. The small but poignant exhibition

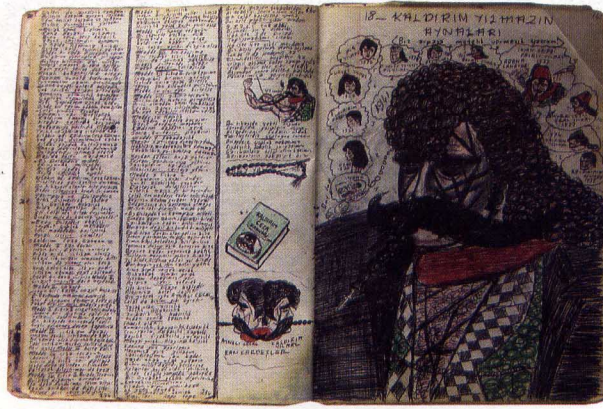
'Expats/Clandestines', which was slated to close a few days later as renovation continued in preparation for the grand opening, stepped squarely into the fraught public debates over immigration that plague so many European cities today. These have particular resonance in Brussels, where tensions between two different linguistic communities and cultural groups – the Walloons and the Flemish – dominate all discussions concerning intercultural dialogue and exchange.

I completed my institutional round with a visit to the argos centre for arts and media. Since I had recently seen the works by Clemens von Wedemeyer on display, I happily focused on learning more about the centre's considerable production, distribution and preservation activities. Katerina Gregos, artistic director of argos, has recently published a book entitled *The Residents* (2007), the premise of which is the significant number of international artists living and working in Brussels. Gregos, like many others, attributes this presence to the affordable housing and good quality of life that is still attainable on a budget, but also to the fact that the absence of hype leads to greater productivity. Echoing the opinion that nobody wants to create a 'scene' – in fact, that the notion of 'scene' doesn't even apply – she cited Brussels-based Mexican artist Gabriel Kuri, who once told her that he sees Brussels in a perpetual state of becoming. This perhaps explains why the scene resists federation and why those who participate in it don't really seem to mind.





Établissement d'en face  
projects  
'Les Discours de  
Jacques Chirac'  
(The Speeches of  
Jacques Chirac)  
2007  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable



Above:  
Masist Gül  
*Kaldırım Destanı -  
Kaldırımın Kurdunun  
Hayatı*  
(Pavement Myth - The  
Life of the Pavement's  
Wolf)  
(detail)  
c. 1980  
Book

Below:  
Freek Wambacq  
*Gravures sur pommes I*  
(*Gibellina Nuova*)  
(Engravings on Apples I  
[*Gibellina Nuova*])  
2007  
Mixed media  
Dimensions variable



My studio visits yielded a necessarily partial, yet enticing, view of this diversity and productivity. Heidi Voet, who lives in Shanghai but returns regularly to her home town, explores enchantment and disenchantment in works such as *Stardust* (2006), a swath of graffiti fabricated out of flat bricks of gingerbread and tiny puffed white meringue stars 'sprayed' across an interior wall of an abandoned hospital, and video installations like *Perfect Present Tension* (2005) that shift the spatial dynamics of the spaces in which she intervenes. Aglaia Konrad travels the globe while amassing an impressive photographic archive of architectural transformations, urban sprawl and its infrastructure, which she enlarges, reduces, crops, projects or prints for specific exhibition displays, installations or publications. Willem Oorebeek, who frequently collaborates with Konrad, Joëlle Tuerlinckx and others, is perhaps best known for his 'BLACKOUT' (2000-ongoing) series of existing press and advertising images. Iconoclasm and iconophilia are both at issue in these works: the layer of black ink he applies preserves the text or image as much as it destroys or prevents us from accessing it.

My final visit was with Freek Wambacq, who showed me his plans for a major public commission for the façade of a tollgate house on a canal at the Oude Beestenmarkt in Ghent. Wambacq's work seems to situate itself on an uncertain border, perhaps even a fault-line, between sculpture, architecture and design. His installations frequently

**A single overheard phrase stuck in my mind: 'The thing you need to know about the Brussels art world is that nobody wants to create a scene.'**

consist of subtractive and additive processes, or discreet interventions that alter the existing space. I was also charmed by his laser engravings of the architecture and public sculptures in the Sicilian city Gibellina Nuova on taut red-skinned apples. These portable keepsakes of concrete monuments built on shaky ground – the original Gibellina was destroyed by an earthquake in 1968 – were presented nestled in their cardboard shipping and storage boxes. Over time, decay had transformed the precise drawings: some of them had been absorbed like scars back into the skin, while others had become more distinct. It sounds trite, but in the end those apples helped me to realize that, when it came to the city of Brussels, I had really only started to scratch the surface.

Find out more about Brussels at [frieze.com](http://frieze.com)