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# KFDA arts festival goes where others fear to tread

by *Jacqueline Fletcher*,

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## SUMMARY

*With shows that promote reflection and debate, Kunstenfestivaldesarts doesn't shy away from asking tough questions amid all the campaign-trail spectacles*

### Brussels features strongly in programme

**I**n a few weeks Belgians will be electing new federal and regional governments and casting their votes for the MPs who will represent them in that most inscrutable of institutions – the European Parliament. Difficult decisions will have to be made about our social, economic and ecological impasses, decisions that will affect our future well beyond the lawmakers' five-year term of office.



The general mood remains grim; scepticism and disillusionment are rife. What we need is something to enliven the imagination. Fortunately, May is also the month during which one of

Europe's most inspiring performing arts festivals takes place.

From 2 to 24 May (the eve of the elections), the [Kunstenfestivaldesarts](#) (KFDA) will fan out across Brussels with a vast array of alternative perspectives for those of us flummoxed by the campaign-trail spectacle.

Juxtaposing an arts festival to the political arena might sound flippant, but KFDA, now in its 19th year, has built a solid international reputation for its ability to assemble a community of artists and audiences willing to collaborate over the space of three weeks to rethink and reinvent the essence of 21st-century life.

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Politicians and mass media generally relegate culture to the realm of entertainment, as KFDA's artistic director, Christophe Slagmuylder, points out. Still, artists across the globe have been reanimating our contemporary discourses in imaginative new ways, while turnout for the ballot box has steadily dwindled.

## Experiences, not spectatorship

The most beautiful thing about the KFDA, and the artists who come to Brussels each year, is that it offers the gift of stimulating the audience's own imagination through innovative, interdisciplinary art forms; we are empowered to engage in the debates and reflections they provoke. KFDA can go where politicians fear to tread.

The city itself features strongly in KFDA. The derelict interior of the once glamorous Cinema Marivaux, now a car park, will be this year's central venue, evoking both a bygone age and the contemporary priorities rapidly transforming our own time. The festival also takes its public out into the street, into private homes, puts them on stages, seats them around tables and entices them on to the dance floor.

KFDA offers experiences rather than spectatorship. The boundaries between fiction and reality are blurred as the public become participants; private bodies reclaim public spaces, confronting personal stories with shared histories and confounding the distinctions between seeming interiors and exteriors.

Consider Sarah Vanhee's *Untitled (Brussels)*, for instance, which allows the public to visit private homes. Or Tim Etchell's *And for the Rest*, which creates a poster campaign around the city, while Benjamin Verdonck – the colourful chameleon of the Flemish arts' scene – surprises the public with *Notallwhowanderarelost*, a

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## Forgotten works on paper by Antwerp artist Jan Vanriet

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“mini-theatre” that can emerge and disappear at random in any location. Meanwhile, in *The Rabbit and the Teasel & Other Works*, urban artist Els Dietvorst explores migration and our altered living conditions, saying farewell to Brussels for a new life in rural Ireland.

## Risk-taking artists

The festival opens with the latest piece of documentary theatre by the German artist collective Rimini Protokoll, *100% Brussels*. One hundred inhabitants embody the city’s demographics and reveal an astonishingly complex picture of cultural diversity, shifting opinions and personal histories. The Antwerp-based collective Berlin also bring us the latest instalment of their cities project, *Perhaps All the Dragons*.

As usual, the festival will be host to performance artists, choreographers, theatre groups and filmmakers from across the globe. A highlight this year is *The Monk from Tang Dynasty*, a new piece by internationally acclaimed film and theatre director Tsai Ming-liang from Taiwan, shown in tandem with a retrospective of his award-winning films.

Meanwhile, Brett Bailey’s South African company Third World Bunfight presents a very original take on Verdi’s *Macbeth*. And *Pindorama*, Lia Rodrigues’ magnificent dance company from the Rio de Janeiro favelas, is really not to be missed (*pictured above*).

KFDA explores our political, social and economic realities, urbanisation, migration and populism, disillusionment and hope, impotence and action, commodification and creation, through a dazzling array of aesthetic forms. In KFDA, artists take risks without compromising quality, mirroring new movements that unfold wherever there is resistance to staid ideas and enfeebled democratic systems.

Brazilian choreographer Marcelo Evelin has created a parade, *Batucada*, derived from the rhythms of the samba, waiting to erupt on to the streets of Brussels from Cinema Marivaux, showing us that a festive carnival procession shares a lot in common with a protest march. As the programme brochure puts it, *Batucada* is “an urban parade, an anti-Olympic procession, a pagan festival, a masked protest, an outbreak of an inner revolution.”

## City portraits

Every new project of the Antwerp-based collective Berlin starts with Yves Degryse and Bart Baele’s arrival in a city or a region. With curiosity, cameras, interviewing techniques and patience galore, they subsequently attempt to film a portrait of the place by allowing selected residents to speak for themselves.

*It's impossible  
to tell if we use  
actors or real  
people*

- **YVES DEGRYSE**

The result is typically a colourful and original perspective, created with a critical eye, subtlety and finesse. *Perhaps All the Dragons [in our lives are princesses who are only waiting to see us act, just once, with beauty and courage],* the

third part of their *Horror Vacui* (fear of emptiness) series, premieres at KFDA.

“It’s a great festival,” says Degryse. “Being there before with our productions *Bonanza* and *Moscow* changed our company to some extent. It introduced us to new audiences and opened doors for international touring. But our work has always had an international dimension; we choose to work in cities across the

globe.”

Their interdisciplinary style places audiences in different configurations with multiple screens. “Spectators often tell us they spend a long time reflecting on the experience afterwards,” Degryse says. “They also ask if we use actors or real people. It’s impossible to tell. We allow interviewees time to express themselves, starting with a list of 40 annoying questions from Max Frisch’s diaries – things like ‘Do you have a sense of humour when you’re alone?’ Then the real stories slowly start to emerge.”

*Perhaps All the Dragons* places the audience around a table, the screens situated directly opposite each chair. “The format for the audience is usually a reflection of the city, its story,” Degryse says, adding that the art collective likes to blur the boundaries between fiction and reality. “*Dragons* has 30 stories we went back and collected from people and situations that interested us. Some of them are re-enacted, but 29 of them are true. Which one is the lie?”

Degryse says that collaborations are critical in Berlin’s work because the collective can spend as much as 18 months on a project and also have to find interviewees. “It’s good to be back at the Kunstenfestival,” he says. “They provide mental as well as financial support and are always interested in future projects. That’s important.”

**2-24 May**

**Across Brussels**

[www.kfda.be](http://www.kfda.be)

*Photo by Sammi Landweer*

Kunstenfestivaldesarts in Brussels asks tough questions amid all the campaign-trail spectacles.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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