

DE APPEL READS #11

Deskism

by gerlach en koop

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*Deskism**

Every time we enter Brussels past the NATO headquarters along the Chaussée de Haecht, heading towards the open gate of the tram depot of Schaerbeek, we see ourselves—just for a fraction of a second—driving straight into this inviting black hole, as if it is one of the tunnels, one of the gateways to Brussels, a different Brussels—but then the road bends a little to the left and we drive past, in the direction of the ring.

By gerlach en koop

Brussels is impossible. It can't exist, but it exists. It is the capital, but is it perceived as such? Brussels sometimes seems to be inhabited by people not from Brussels. A city of minorities, or rather a city without a majority. A city that disintegrates into parts. Is it a city anyway?

Brussels is grey, dirty and ugly, it is not safe and on top of that it rains all the time. That is what you hear often. Without a doubt the city is not making an effort for you. Civilised, but indifferent. It is you who has to make the effort. Not everyone succeeds in that, or not for long, but it is an explanation for the pull it exerts. Work makes it work. Brussels is verb, we heard someone say.

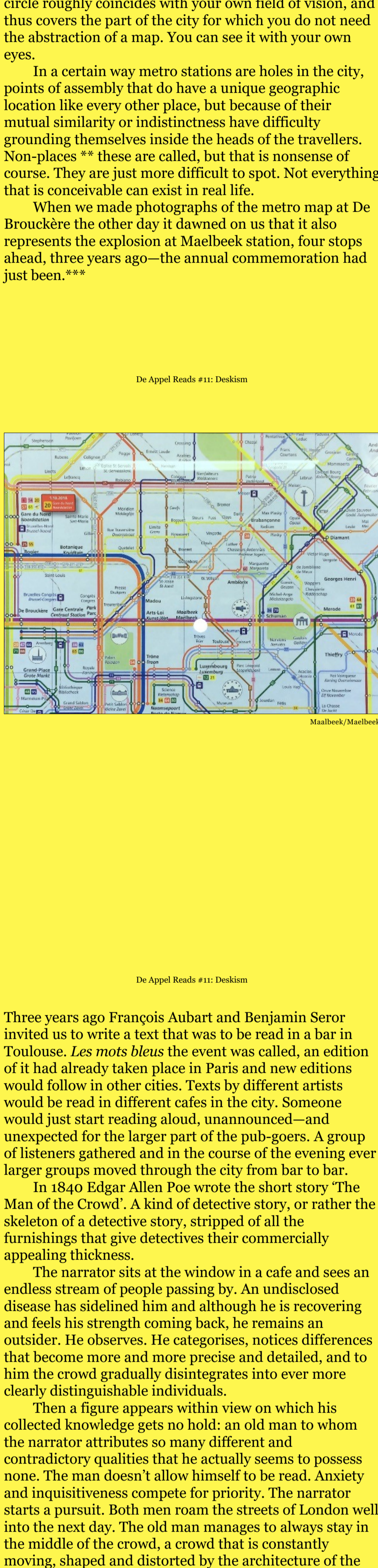
Displacement is something you can share, it allows you to connect with others, even if that may sound contradictory. These connections are unstable however, everyone always anticipates the sudden disappearance of the other. The social circles you move in change continuously. Everything is always temporary, and that explains the initial openness the city shows the newcomer.

Living in Brussel is one thing, becoming Bruxellois is another, that is a profession. As long as you don't exist officially everything is fine as a foreigner, but don't have the nerve to assume some kind of substance, to become visible in one way or another for municipal, regional, or federal services. That is a mistake! Even born Bruxellois try to keep them at bay. As large a distance as possible. The urban mess is so big, in so many aspects, and the different governments have so little control over it, that the moment you are within their reach they never let go again—because of that obviously—and the more you struggle the tighter the bureaucratic network will pull its grip, until you stop moving. Bureaucracies are rationally founded and efficiently organised, but they need constant testing against the real world of course. Not so in Brussels, where the last test—if it ever took place—was executed in a very distant past, resulting in unbelievably inefficient and irrationally operating government services.

Fascinating—for an outsider.

The previous paragraphs can just as well be skipped. Sweeping statements about Brussels are impossible. The complexity of the city does require a clear, comprehensive overview, but the city can't be overviewed. The city doesn't allow itself to be read.

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De Brouckère

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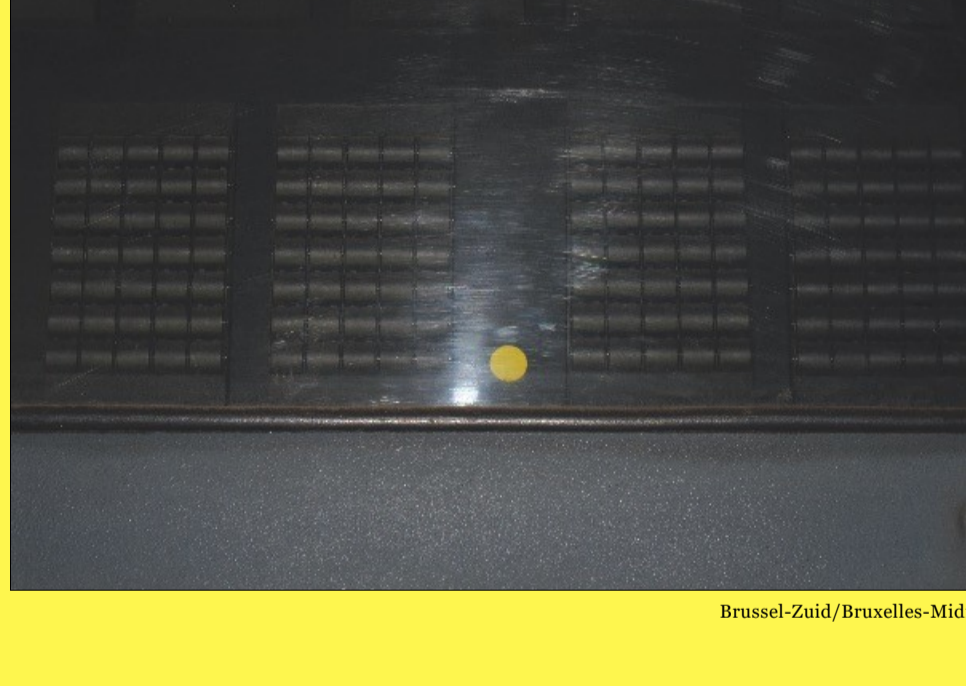
In every station you find light boxes on the walls with the map of all subway metro lines in the city. There is always a circle the size of a euro coin cut out. It is the location of the station where you are at that moment. The elegance of this typographic solution surprised us. We imagined how the remaining circular pieces of the map had been wiped off the desk by hand, into the trash can—or could the anonymous designer have kept them?

Looking at the map in the place where you are is overexposed, like the sun in a clear blue sky. The empty circle roughly coincides with your own field of vision, and thus covers the part of the city for which you do not need the abstraction of a map. You can see it with your own eyes.

In a certain way metro stations are holes in the city, points of assembly that do have a unique geographic location like every other place, but because of their mutual similarity or indistinctness have difficulty grounding themselves inside the heads of the travellers. Non-places** these are called, but that is nonsense of course. They are just more difficult to spot. Not everything that is conceivable can exist in real life.

When we made photographs of the metro map at De Brouckère the other day it dawned on us that it also represents the explosion at Maelbeek station, four stops ahead, three years ago—the annual commemoration had just been.***

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Maelbeek/Maelbeek

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Three years ago François Aubart and Benjamin Seror invited us to write a text that was to be read in a bar in Toulouse. *Les mots bleus* the event was called, an edition of it had already taken place in Paris and new editions would follow in other cities. Texts by different artists would be read in different cafes in the city. Someone would just start reading aloud, unannounced—and unexpected for the larger part of the pub-goers. A group of listeners gathered and in the course of the evening ever larger groups moved through the city from bar to bar.

In 1840 Edgar Allan Poe wrote the short story 'The Man of the Crowd'. A kind of detective story, or rather the skeleton of a detective story, stripped of all the furnishings that give detectives their commercially appealing thickness.

The narrator sits at the entrance to a cafe and sees an endless stream of people passing by. An undisclosed disease has sidelined him and although he is recovering and feels his strength coming back, he remains an outsider. He observes. He categorises, notices differences that become more and more precise and detailed, and to him the crowd gradually disintegrates into ever more clearly distinguishable individuals.

Then a figure appears within an view on which his collected knowledge gets no hold: an old man to whom the narrator attributes so many different and contradictory qualities that he actually seems to possess none. The man doesn't allow himself to be read. Anxiety and inquisitiveness compete for priority. The narrator starts a pursuit. Both men roam the streets of London well into the next day. The old man manages to always stay in the middle of the crowd, a crowd that is constantly moving, shaped and distorted by the architecture of the city, a crowd that merges into other crowds, shrinks, branches off ceaselessly, then out and then grows again, as crowds do, inscrutably for everyone except for this nameless man. The narrator eventually gives up his chase—dead tired by now. "This old man," I said eventually, "is the type and the genius of deep crime. He refuses to be alone. He is the man of the crowd."****

A story like this by Poe would greatly intensify the experience of the urban spaces between the different bars in Toulouse. It would make the walkers susceptible. We were after something like that, and in a sudden fit of unjustified confidence we decided to rewrite Poe's story for *Les mots bleus* but from the perspective of the man of the crowd.***** A reversal, like a black mirror. Poe's nineteenth-century London, which we obviously couldn't know, would simply be replaced by the twenty-first century Brussels.

We have walked the streets of Brussels a lot, and still do. You can't know a city if you have not walked all the way around it; and you cannot perceive any changes if you do not continue to do so. Only on foot you can experience how Brussels is a city of abrupt transitions. You turn a corner and all of a sudden the street has changed its character—as if your mind did some wandering on its own, but no, this happens within a fraction. The contrasts can also be quite large, and the transitions drastic. A large expensive building owned by a single family next to a ruin accommodating countless tiny rented rooms where the toilets have no flush, with a dismal corner shop on the ground floor, and then a cool wine bar across the street.

We walked down one of the platforms of *Bruxelles-Midi*, from the front to the back via the stairs at both ends, as an alternative to the Avenue Van Colxenn that runs parallel to the track, past the strange obelisk in the direction of Forest. The signs indicating departure times were empty, no train was expected. This was not that long ago, but the SNCB (the Belgian railway company) used a rather different, mechanical system for displaying the departure times then—it has since been replaced by those generic electronic screens that you see everywhere: small black cylinders each with a yellow dot on it, cylinders that could rotate, arranged in seven rows of five for each digit or letter to be made. We stood still under one of the signs and assumed a waiting attitude, so as not to stand out, to be like the other people on the platform who were just waiting. No trains were expected, but the times sign was not completely empty: there was one yellow dot in the middle: the point that distinguishes the hours from the minutes. A fixed point, a point that does not need to move and therefore doesn't move. One of us took a picture. It needed several attempts.

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Brussel-Zuid/Bruxelles-Midi

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No departure times, no destinations, and at the same time all this departure times, all destinations. With our focus on this fixed point, it was as if the hours and minutes passed so fast that we could no longer perceive them. As if we were living very slowly. As if time passed through us, accelerated.

Seventy years ago, Emil Cioran wrote: 'In Time's sentence men take their place like commas, while, in order to end it, you have immobilised yourself into a period.'*****, and now, while retyping this, it becomes clear that a sentence has begun that can't be finished

* ... a certain dapperness of carriage which may be called deskism for want of a better word, *The Man of the Crowd*, London 1978 (1840), p. 508.

** Marc Augé, *Non-places, Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, New York 1995 (1992).

*** In the meantime a monument has been erected, selected from a competition—for various reasons it is very unwise to write a competition for something like this, nothing good can ever come out of it, and nothing good has come out of it. While there was a monument present already: the metro map of Brussels with the cut-out circle of Maelbeek station, exactly as it still hangs on the platform today. It could have been made into an unlimited edition that would for ever remain in print, available at the station itself.

**** Edgar Allan Poe, *The Man of the Crowd*, London 1978 (1840), p. 515.

***** gerlach en koop, *Un mal portant*, written for 'Les mots bleus', part of 'le Printemps de septembre', Toulouse, 2016

***** Emil Cioran, *A Short History of Decay*, New York 1975 (1949), p.52 (translation Richard Howard)

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De Appel Reads is a series of publications offered to De Appel email subscribers. It consists of new texts, reprints and the occasional lost gem. These texts relate to both the ever-evolving thinking—as—institution of De Appel and the current projects it engages.

'Deskism' was written by gerlach en koop for the Brussels-issue of *Metropolis M* (nr 3, June/July 2019) at the invitation of Domeniek Ruyters (in Dutch).

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