

Cultural Policy

Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2018

An Exceptional European Capital of Culture

On 6 September 2013, the Frisian flag with its characteristic *pompeblêden* (water-lily leaves) fluttered proudly from the Westertoren in Amsterdam. This was quite exceptional, as even the Dutch national flag was seldom raised there. Why was this? The administrator of the Westerkerk had been 'bribed' with a simple Frisian sugar loaf. It heralded the outcome of the meeting of the European Capital of Culture committee, which that afternoon was to award the title for 2018 to one of the three candidate cities that remained in the running: Eindhoven, Leeuwarden and Maastricht. To the huge amazement of the whole of the Netherlands, it turned out to be Leeuwarden. It had nothing to do with the sugar loaf, only with the quality and extraordinarily ambitious nature of its bid book, which took as its title *Iepen Mienskip* and as a slogan *Criss-Crossing Communities*.

What on earth is *mienskip*, a word which the European panel was actually perfectly able to pronounce? The bid book expresses it clearly: 'The term *mienskip* is derived from times when the struggle against water led people to join forces, sharing talents with the goal of building terps and dykes for the common good. With our bid we aim to re-invent this old Frisian spirit of shared community feeling'. 'Leeuwarden 2018' is intended to bring about this renewal, establishing an *iepen mienskip* in 2018 through the medium of three major European themes: a link between Nature and Culture for a sustainable future; closing the gap between City and Countryside so as to give rise to a creative ecology; and involving Community and Diversity to enable people of differing cultural backgrounds to develop a new sense of community. With these themes at the back of their minds, 41 projects were set up, in which national, international and Frisian producers and artists cooperated closely. To be able to achieve an *iepen mienskip* in 2018.

How is Leeuwarden 2018 doing in 2017? First of all, the name has been changed to Leeuwarden-



Leeuwarden's Tower of Pisa: Lân fan Taal

Fryslân 2018, by analogy with Marseille-Provence in 2013. It is after all not only the city, but the whole of Friesland, with its own language, literature and culture, that is taking part in 2018. After the ups and downs that all European Capitals of Culture are subject to, the organisation has for the time being entered a period of stability. A small team of steady members of staff is now carrying out the immense project very meticulously. In 2015, the Flemish Lieven Bertels took up the post of CEO and artistic director, his domestic and international experience with the Sydney Festival and Holland Festival being a real asset. A Club 2018 has been set up, which at least 300 SMEs have joined at a fee of 2018 euros. Some major sponsors have been found, such as the ING Bank and the Leeuwarden Entrepreneur Fund, though the intended budget of 65 million has not yet been amassed. The provincial authorities set up an *Iepen Mienskip* Fund that honours the best local initiatives with a grant of 2018 euros. The producers wrote business plans to get a realistic view of the feasibility of their projects. Some of the projects in the bid book were dropped because they were too expensive (e.g. *Floating Future*, a spa island in Frisian waterways) or too excessive (*Romantic Painters from the North* at the Fries Museum, which was already organising major exhibitions of such Frisian icons as Alma-Tadema, Mata Hari and Maurits Escher). Some new ones were added, such as *Escape*, a virtual tunnel with physical entrances in Leeuwarden and Valetta, the other European Capital of Culture in 2018. In March 2016, Lieven Bertels gave the green light to the majority of the 41 projects in the bid book. So the party could get started.

Film

What will the domestic and international visitor encounter in Leeuwarden and Friesland in 2018? A lot! I'll give just a few examples. On the square in front of the Oldehove, Leeuwarden's Tower of Pisa, a remarkable *Lân fan Taal* is being built, an 'experience centre' for language diversity. The time-honoured *Oerol* Festival on the island of Terschelling is being expanded under the title *Sense of Place*, a large-scale landscape project with a Mondrian salt marsh in the Wadden area. In the *Grote Kerk*, the producer Jos Thie is setting up a performance with stories of 750 Frisian and foreign churches, called *Under de Toer*. The internationally renowned felt artist Claudy Jongstra, whose tapestries can be seen in the MoMA and who has dressed Lady Gaga and Madonna, among others, is turning her farm in Friesland into a *Farm of the World*. For the towns on the *Eleven Cities Skating Tour*, eleven artists have designed an artwork-with-water, called *Eleven Fountains*, among them the Frenchman Jean-Michel Otoniel (Franeker), the Spaniard Jaume Plensa (Leeuwarden) and the Fleming Johan Creten (Bolsward). For *Potatoes Go Wild*, seed-potatoes from Friesland will be sent to Malta with Frisian poems, and in March will return as mature Malta potatoes with Maltese poems. There is the literary project *The Sea! The Sea!*, co-produced by the Flemish foundation *Behoud de Begeerte*. International dance and theatre productions will be shown under the heading *Strangers on Stage*, a Polish-Dutch theatre company will perform *Lost in the Greenhouse*, a play with music, in the vegetable glasshouses of St.-Annaparochie, Opera Spanga is producing *Aida* in the open air in both Spanga and Valletta, thousands of sportspeople will be coming to the European Sports for All Games (traditional sports) in Friesland, and so on.

Let this much be clear: Leeuwarden-Fryslân 2018 will be a great European cultural feast. You have to be there!

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Translated by Gregory Ball

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Longing for Perfection

The Red Turtle by Michael Dudok de Wit

The life of Michael Dudok de Wit (b. 1953) was changed by a digital message from Japan. In 2007, the Dutch animator received a surprising e-mail from Studio Ghibli, the renowned Japanese animation studio responsible for such hand-drawn masterpieces as *Grave of the Fireflies* (1988) and *Spirited Away* (2001). It contained two questions: 'Your short film *Father and Daughter* is marvellous; do you have a distributor in Japan?' and 'Would you make a full-length film for us?'

Dudok de Wit, who had grown up in Laren in North Holland, studied animation in Switzerland and England and has for a long time lived in London, had never previously made a long animated film. And what's more, in interviews he had always said he never wanted to make one. But the offer from Japan could simply not be refused. At the animated film festival in Annecy he once said: 'It took me two months to get over it. I just couldn't believe it'.

However, it took another nine years after that first mail in 2007, two and a half spent in production, before the end product of this collaboration finally saw the light of day in May 2016. One of the reasons for this was Dudok de Wit's extreme perfectionism. In the documentary *The Longing of Michael Dudok de Wit* (2016),¹ which keeps track of him during the production of the film, he talks about this: 'I cannot



Michael Dudok de Wit, still from *The Red Turtle*, 2016