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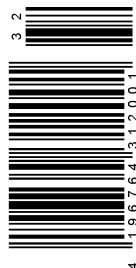
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Lighting Special

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Open Universe of Diversity

Koen Vanmechelen's chicken run

At the outset of the project, it's unlikely that visual artist Koen Vanmechelen could have quite fathomed the scope of what he started. The procreation of different breeds of common domestic fowl was doubtless a fine notion. Having got underway, the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project was entirely successful, sprouting bastard offspring like clockwork. By its very nature ongoing, this singular process has flourished, today boasting the 15th generation chicken. And it doesn't stop there - sculptures, paintings, photographs and installations go on to supply a metaphor for diversity that extends to addressing world issues, not to mention inspiring scientists.

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Previous spread:
Koen Vanmechelen in his studio
wearing 'Under my Skin - C.C.P.'

Vanmechelen's chicken run
(both images)
Photos: Minne Dalemans



Visual artist Koen Vanmechelen crossbreeds different species of chicken in order to create new 'bastardised' species. In his work, which tackles issues of multiculturalism, globalisation and genetic engineering, he approaches scientific subjects from an artist's point of view. Vanmechelen was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Hasselt for his role in inspiring and collaborating with scientists. The importance of this exchange with scientists is also reflected in his studio work, baptised the Open University of Diversity. For the upcoming Manifesta OFF programme, he will not only shelter chickens but artists as well.

Our minds sometimes play funny tricks on us. For a split second, on arriving at Koen Vanmechelen's office-cum-studio (housed in a former 3000 m2 gelatine factory in Hasselt, Belgium), I had the impression I could smell chicken. Though I doubt the odour was real, it's the kind of subconscious association you make when thinking of this artist. The Belgian is internationally known for his Cosmopolitan Chicken

Project (CCP), a worldwide breeding experiment he started 20 years ago. Vanmechelen – who was a professional chef before starting to breed chickens in the garden of the restaurant – began by crossing a Belgian Mechelse koekoek with a French poulet de Bresse. The new creature was christened the Mechelse Bresse and was, in turn, crossed with an English chicken. Twenty years on, the 15th generation of crossbred chickens have seen the light of day. And it is still going on. Vanmechelen: "All my projects are works in progress. When something is finished, there is a problem (laughs). Then you stop the evolution and development. Life is never complete. One of the strengths of CCP is that it always goes on."

The CCP project – and resulting artistic production, in the shape of sculptures, paintings, photographs and installations – is a metaphor for diversity, tackling issues like multiculturalism, globalism and genetic engineering, as well as fertility and immunity. The chicken makes an interesting subject for study, as it is something kept throughout the world. Being the most domesticated of animals, chickens have contributed to spreading diseases like the Spanish flu and – indirectly – the plague. During the last bird flu crisis, Vanmechelen had to take precautions in order not to lose his entire stock. Hence, his breeding places are dispersed throughout various countries (Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Germany, Tanzania and Russia), also illustrating the inherent global dimension of the project. For this artist, the sky is clearly the limit. His Frozen Culture Balance consists of DNA



Modified Spaces - C.C.P.,
Guangdong Museum of Art,
Guangzhou, 2011 (left)
Photo: Stoffel Hias

Nato a Venezia – C.C.P. ,
54th Venice Biennale, 2011
(bottom)
Courtesy: Venice Projects
Photo: Stoffel Hias





and sperm from CCP stocked in a freezer chamber at -196° Celsius. In order to save the DNA for eternity, he wants to store it on the moon, at the South Pole, in the ocean and in the desert. Negotiations with astronaut Frank De Winne have already started.

Birds of a feather

The exchange between science and art is crucial in Vanmechelen's practice. He strongly believes that art can lead to surprising new findings. He has already formulated several ideas that were later confirmed through scientific research: "Fifteen years ago, I gave a lecture at the National History Museum in London. I stated – based on a gut feeling and evolutionary thinking – that the chicken stems from the T-Rex. That created consternation. Four years ago, science proved that to be correct." Vanmechelen continues enthusiastically: "We tend to see ourselves as separate from the rest of nature. But that's just wrong. We are part of it. The main question in my work is: Did the chicken come to us or did we come to the chicken? That refers to domestication. If you say that we domesticated the chicken, then you simply assume we made the world. I always believed that the chicken came to us, which was scientifically proven by professor Leif Andersson. And also one of the reasons I was awarded an honorary doctorate."

Vanmechelen guides us round his working environment. Besides offices, meeting rooms and a studio, the



Micro software – C.C.P., 2011
(top)
Installation with glass eggs, neon
and surgery lamps

Scanning of chicken and egg,
2011 (left)
Selective Laser Sintering technique
(3D), polyamide

Facing page:
Medusa, 2007
Iguana, 'Mechelse fighter', and
snake

building also houses an exhibition hall: "For me, the exhibition hall is a kind of studio where I can test my installations. I look at them every day. If they keep on fascinating me, that means they are good. If not, it's a no-go. The works you see now correspond with the show that is actually on view at the 4th Guangzhou Triennial in China." Vanmechelen also refers to his studio as the Open University of Diversity. The artist works in close collaboration with scientists and organises various meetings with experts. Most of the time these happen behind closed doors. Twice a year, the public is invited to follow the debate, as was the case last January, when Mario Meraldi from the World Health Organization gave an exposé on fertility, a key subject in Vanmechelen's oeuvre. Meraldi is also one of the scientists interested in the Walking Egg project, in which gynaecologist Dr Ombelet played a key role. In this project – a subdivision of CCP – Vanmechelen examines how the social stigma behind infertility in



Vanmechelen in front of Modified Spaces – C.C.P. in his studio (above)

Studio: glass eggs under breeding lamp (top, right)

Shamanism, 2012 (right)



the Third World can be erased. That is illustrative of his social engagement and the breadth of his work. As he explains: “For me, it’s not just about chicken. It is about human beings.”

Vanmechelen’s projects are not restricted to chickens. For the opening of Manifesta, the roving European art biennale taking place in the Belgian province of Limburg in June, he has invited some 30 international artists to participate in a residency called ‘Hotel de Inmigrantes (sic) – Cosmopolitan Stranger’. The artists live and work in the studio and create work in response to Vanmechelen’s universe. The studio is open for four months, enabling visitors to see the results. Vanmechelen would also like to test the participating artists’ DNA, in collaboration with the University of Hasselt, to see “how foreign they are”. “Maybe some of the Polish and Russian artists turn out to have Belgian roots”, he smiles. #

Glasstress, MAD Museum, New York, until 10 June
Scoop New York, 07- 10 March
Glasstress, Lebanon, May- June
Poznan Biennale, 14 September – 14 October
De Nieuwe gouden Eeuw (group exhibition), 01 March – 13 May
Hotel De Inmigrantes – Cosmopolitan Stranger, Parallel event to Manifesta9, 02 June – 30 September
Combat – C.C.P., Landcommanderij Alden-Biesen, Autumn 2012

www.koenvanmechelen.com

Concept & Art direction: Leftoft - Foto: Paolo Spinazze

