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## An artist drawn to fowl play

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Koen Vanmechelen puts 'Chicken Project' on D.C.'s table

By Monica Hesse  
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Sometimes when the Belgian conceptual artist Koen Vanmechelen is being philosophical, he ponders a profound question of our time:

"Did the chicken come to me, or did I come to the chicken?"

What led him to dedicate his life to the chicken, to breeding it and studying it, traveling the world for it? Was it the egg-as-prison metaphor that Vanmechelen found compelling -- the image of the domesticated chick struggling to free itself only to be born into a cage? Is it the chicken's humanlike traits, such as walking on two feet and waking with the sun, that create a soulful bond between man and poultry?

What is the meaning of life?

Those questions and more will be examined in Vanmechelen's "Cosmopolitan Chicken Project," a multimedia exhibit opening Saturday evening at the Conner Contemporary Art gallery, featuring photographs, video, taxidermy and livestock and smelling faintly of chicken poop.

In the center of the Northeast Washington gallery, the pièce de résistance -- a massive chicken coop with three feathered inhabitants who huddle together and occasionally squawk. "It's okay," Vanmechelen says to one chicken in the soothing voice of a man who is used to working with taloned animals.

He is inside the cage; he is holding the chicken. "The chicken likes it," Vanmechelen assures a visitor who stopped by earlier this week to witness the installation. "Go ahead, you can pet."

Its eyes are beady but its feathers are surprisingly soft and slick.

We humans apparently project a lot onto our chickens. We have been breeding them for thousands of years. Over centuries, each country has developed what it perceives to be the perfect chicken, based on everything from geographical conditions to national pride. In France, the poulet de Bresse has a red crown, white feathers and blue legs -- the patriotic colors of the French flag. In Belgium the Mechelse koekoek has sturdy legs like a Belgian horse, good for the country's clay terrain. Americans breed their chickens big, like they breed everything else big -- sneering Jersey Giants with rugged feathers.

### Chickens on the move

The pridefulness surrounding chickens concerned Vanmechelen, 44, who raised chickens as a small child. "By transferring these thoughts to living objects, we put a frame around them," he says over dinner at his hotel the night before installation. We decide what a perfect chicken looks like, and we disregard the ones who do not fit the mold. We judge the chicken. This rigid view of chicken-ness "is against the

movement of evolution. All we know is that things must change. That is life."

He got an idea. The idea was to take the Belgian chicken and mate it with the French chicken, creating a breed he christened the Mechelse Bresse. Then to take that offspring and breed it with an English chicken. Then to take that offspring and mate it with an American chicken. Nine years after his first experiment, Vanmechelen has 13 generations of crossbred chickens, each generation getting closer to the primal, unblemished wild chicken, which still roams the foothills of the Himalayas.

The chicken is the art.

(And why not, when Damien Hirst has his formaldehyde sharks and cows?)

The actual experimental chickens are only a small piece of Vanmechelen's work. He also photographs the chickens. He makes chicken drawings, incorporating corn and feathers. He runs videos of trembling eggs, and he still eats chicken because he was raised eating chicken and he doesn't want anyone to think that he is making a political statement when he is really making art. "Cosmopolitan Chicken" has recently been showcased at the Third Moscow Biennale of Contemporary Art. The Conner show is Vanmechelen's first solo exhibit in a U.S. gallery. The artist is also known for his "Cosmogolem" project, a series of towering wooden sculptures symbolizing children's rights.

The "Cosmopolitan Chicken Project" has brought Vanmechelen to every country in Europe, and all chicken-inhabited continents except for Australia. He has chicken farms in six countries. Chicken transport for a single crossbreeding can cost up to \$22,000, and Vanmechelen finds symbolism in the red tape that he must work around to bring the chickens together.

"How difficult it is for a chicken to come to Belgium is linked to Belgium" -- to its fears and phobias and official policies, he says. Bringing a chicken from Russia was nearly impossible, and there was so much fear over disease in African livestock that he eventually opened a farm in Tanzania and took himself to the chicken. That's also symbolic, Vanmechelen says. Think how difficult it must be for humans to cross those borders.

### **Hardly chicken feed**

Although he's received some foundational support for "Cosmopolitan Chicken," Vanmechelen says that most of the funding comes from sales of his work. His smaller works at Conner will go for around \$3,500; buying the whole installation could run up to \$100,000, says Leigh Conner of the gallery. The chickens are for sale, too, but not while they're alive. If art patrons become attached to a particular chicken, they may purchase the taxidermied version after its demise.

"The project is about multiculturalism, globalism, genetic engineering, diversity, so many things," Vanmechelen says. "It represents what we are doing with society." An empty incubator stands at the front of the gallery, which represents "the desire to have the upcoming generation."

A CD soundtrack of clucking plays on loop.

Jamie Smith, the curator of Conner Contemporary, first learned of Vanmechelen's work while studying in Belgium on a fellowship several years ago. She went to a contemporary art museum in Hasselt, saw his chickens, and thought, "Well, this is the cutting edge of realism."

She's followed him ever since. "Like all good art, it shows us something about ourselves," Smith says. "His use of material is very profound," and so, too, is the idea that the gallery itself becomes yet another cage. "I think the point is that as long as we're engaged with the material world, we can never be free."

In some of Vanmechelen's larger exhibits, he's able to showcase all the living generations of the project at once, in long rows of wood-and-wire coops.

At Connor he'll be showing only three chickens -- all Jersey Giants purchased specially for the exhibit from a farm outside of Charlottesville. After the show ends in December, a friend of Smith's will take them in, where they will live out the rest of their days in comfort and seclusion.

A reporter at the gallery was unable to discern how they felt about their brief foray into fame.

### *Cosmopolitan Chicken Project*

Nov. 7 to Dec. 31 at Conner Contemporary Art, 1358 Florida Ave. NE. Call 202-588-8750 or visit <http://www.connercontemporary.com>.

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