



From left: the new Mario Botta-designed Labiomista building; Koen Vanmechelen in front of a Mechelse Redcap chicken in 2009

The Dialogues of Diversity

A Belgian artist's latest gargantuan project takes on the pros and cons of cosmopolitanism with a refreshingly scientific perspective. **BRIAN NOONE** reports

Koen Vanmechelen is an unlikely artist. Avuncular and greying now in middle age, his work is both deeply conceptual and disarmingly practical, a combination that stands out like a clucking chicken in an art world full of preening peacocks.

The Belgian artist's long list of foundations and projects over the past two decades – which includes everything from livestock development in Ethiopia to a forthcoming 24ha campus-cum-studio in a post-industrial Flanders city – makes clear that Vanmechelen exists far from the provocateurs and the art-for-art's-sake creators who dominate the contemporary circuit. He is best understood, in fact, through one of Karl Marx's epigrams, lightly altered: "Artists have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."

It was with a changed chicken that Vanmechelen began his international art career in 1999. The Cosmopolitan Chicken

Project aimed at breeding the most genetically diverse chicken in the world. The birds, he noticed, had been domesticated to extraordinary degrees – and often symbolically, as with the gastronome's favourite poulet de Bresse, which mimics the French tricolour with its red comb, white feathers and blue legs – and Vanmechelen wanted to mix the various national poultry, explaining that "cross-breeding opens borders".

The resulting birds, it turned out, were not only metaphorically rich: the increasing specialisation of the genes of individual breeds meant that domestic chickens were becoming better for the specific requirements of farms, but weaker outside them. His new birds were "more resilient, longer-lived and less aggressive", representing, for Vanmechelen, a minor triumph of cosmopolitanism.

In recent years he has put the new, genetically diverse birds to use, breeding them with local stocks in Uganda, and starting



From left: *Modified Spaces*, an installation at Labiomista; inside the new facility



PHOTOS FROM LEFT: COURTESY KOEN VAN MECHELEN, PHILIPPE VAN GELOOVEN

last April, Ethiopia, to produce chickens that promise to be more profitable for farmers. And this is not idle optimism: Dominic Wright, associate professor at Linköping University, Sweden, is one of a number of researchers using these chickens for academic research to, he says, “understand the genes behind particular traits”. Vanmechelen, he explains, has “created a really interesting resource population from a scientific perspective”, and Wright just this autumn received a shipment of eggs from the birds to study at his lab.

For Vanmechelen, the chickens are just one of a multitude of interests. His focus at the moment is Labiomista, a radical reclamation of 24 hectares in Genk, Belgium, that is part art studio and gallery, part research campus and part zoo, scheduled to open to the public in May 2019.

“The mines here made Genk a cosmopolitan city,” says Vanmechelen of the city’s rise in the early 20th century. “When they closed, the city became a wounded place, and I want to transform these grounds with new creative energy.”

Working with Swiss architect Mario Botta, whom he met in 2013 and instantly formed a friendship, he has built a new 5,000sq m structure of concrete, brick and glass to join the former mine manager’s home, among other structures on site. The grounds

are “a magic place”, says Vanmechelen, which will eventually be home to more than 150 animals, including sea eagles, a variety of chickens, toucans, dromedary and junglefowl, the ur-chicken native to the Himalayan foothills.

“I have come to see the duality of diversity,” says the artist about Labiomista. “I consider this an Open University of Diversity, looking at the positives and the negatives.”

“The biggest problem of our time now is not the need for cosmopolitanism, but the reaction to it – the revenge of the local,” he says. “We need to understand how the local and the global fit together.”

Vanmechelen’s philosophising and practical projects are not the exclusive outlets of his art: he displays physical pieces regularly in exhibitions and art fairs, including at several recent Venice Biennales and notably at a group exhibition curated by the Lisson Gallery in 2014 alongside Ai Weiwei, Anish Kapoor, Julian Opie and others.

But his sort of thinking – the kind that doesn’t just interpret the world, but changes it – puts Labiomista radically outside the artistic mainstream. It represents a hopeful, constructive form of the avant-garde that has been largely absent in contemporary art and may well be a precursor of its future. koenvanmechelen.be ●