

# KOEN VANMECHELEN BRINGER OF HOPE

They live amongst the most vulnerable communities on our planet. During the day, when the hatch to their heart is open, they stand frozen. But when it is half-light, their giant feet start to move. And in the darkness, they run. Their wooden bodies are filled with stories and songs.

Their heads are like houses without walls, broadcasting children's voices. They run through the streets. They run up the mountains. Through the woods, they run to protect and bring hope. My Cosmogolems never rest.

Why I have created this, or that, is one of the most recurrent questions I am being asked. As if the act of creating art is a deliberately planned process. One that can be connected to a place and a time in the continuum of my life. Often something is brewing and growing inside me, waiting for the right temperature to burst out. In 1986, such a creative outburst materialized into

a wooden sculpture. I named it golem, after the mythical creature made of clay and water who guarded the Prague ghetto. Golem tells a story about the 'makeability' of man and how, in the end, the maker loses control over his creation. In that sense, golem is a symbol for all the significant evolutions, from the invention of the computer and nuclear fission to social media and CRISPR/Cas.

It took many years for my golem sculpture to evolve into the current Cosmogolem, the wooden giant of hope. Realizing that the golem had been giving me the freedom to do what I do as an artist took quite some time too. I was convinced that what was possible for me should also be possible for others. That is why I carpentered a hatch at the level of the Cosmogolem's heart.

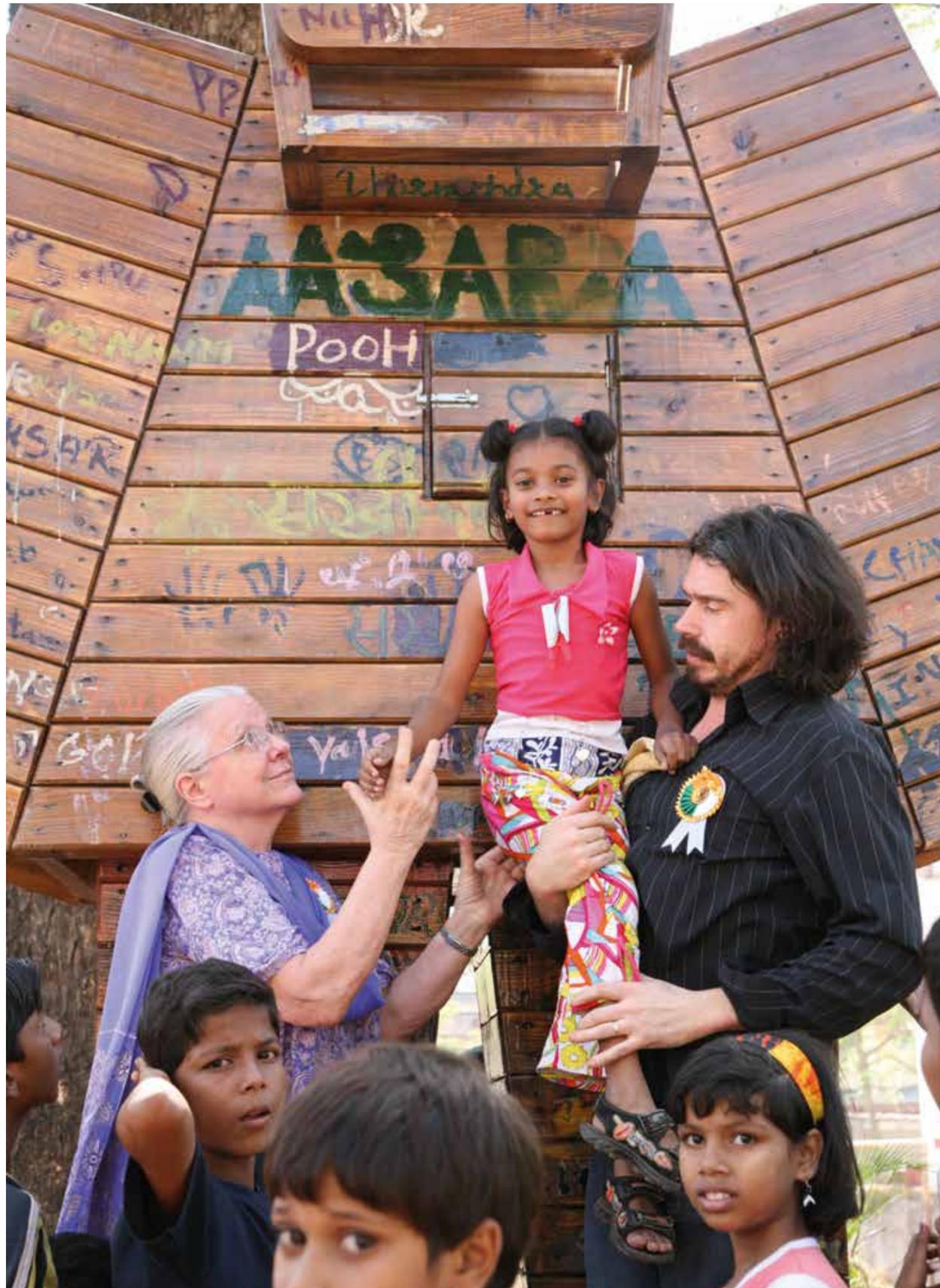
Shortly after that, the first wooden giant was built by students



Koen Vanmechelen with children around the Cosmogolem, Mumbai, India, 2006



Cosmogolem © Koen Vanmechelen, Arusha, Tanzania, 2007



Jeanne Devos and artist Koen Vanmechelen during a Cosmogolem workshop in Mumbai, India, 2014



Chido Govera and Koen Vanmechelen with the Cosmogolem at The Future of Hope, Harare, Zimbabwe, 2015

from a school in Belgium. As one group worked on the head, another on the torso, and yet another on the feet, the sculpture grew as a sum of genetics, a Venn diagram of efforts.

Yet, the idea of such a Cosmogolem rising from within vulnerable communities can be traced back to a specific moment in time and place. It happened in Nepal after a visit to a giant shelter for trafficked girls and a visit to the Chitwan National Park, the first national park of Nepal and a World Heritage Site since 1984.

After finding the red junglefowl, the proto chicken, we drove back to Kathmandu. Our guide brought us to a remote village where children were making tapestries. Once out of the jeep, we were immediately surrounded by a cloud of excited children. My wife came short of many hands as she carefully tried to hold all the extended little hands reaching out to her. It was a vulnerable village, with hardened grown-ups and hard-working yet enthusiastic children. It would be, so it deemed me, the perfect place for a golem, for a Cosmogolem.

After that, my golem evolved into the Cosmogolem, a gigantic wooden, anthropoid sculpture about four-meter high that serves as a prominent symbol of hope and evolution worldwide. The first international Cosmogolem landed not far from Nepal, in Mumbai, India.

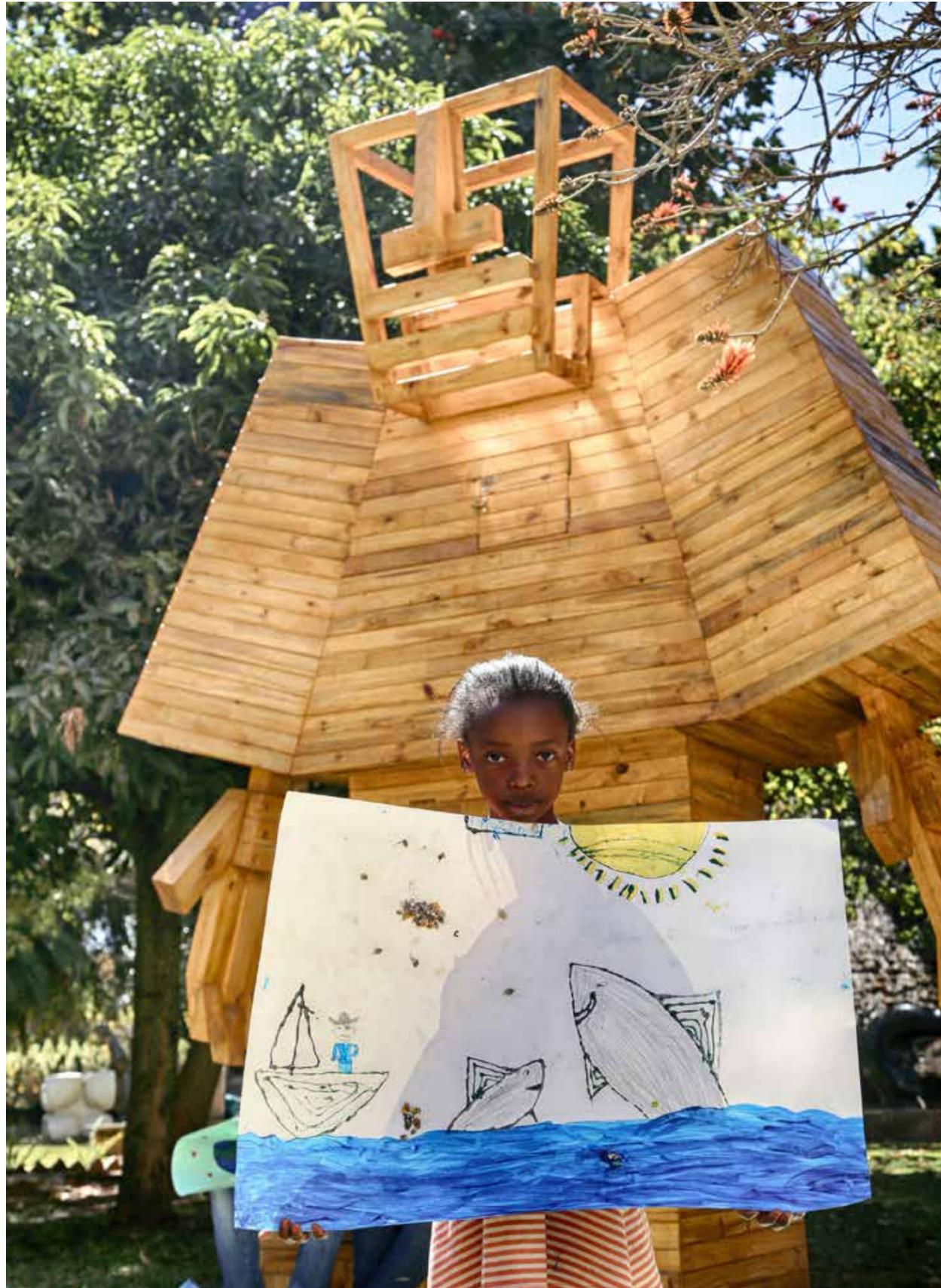
A Belgian Nobel Peace Prize nominee and theologian, Sister Jeanne Devos, incorporated it into her care for exploited minors.

Her organization, the National Domestic Workers Movement, fights against child labour, child trafficking, child prostitution, and child soldiers and takes care of abused and 'forgotten' children.

The Cosmogolem gives these children an identity and a voice. Also, Peter Adriaenssens, child psychiatrist and chairman of the Care Centre for Child Abuse in Leuven (BE), 'embraced' the sculpture and used it in his therapy. It was the beginning of an interlinked chain of Cosmogolems in more than 40 places, from Poland to Chile, Pakistan, Mumbai, Arusha, Zimbabwe, Belgium, the Netherlands, etc.

While the chain grew longer, the meaning of the sculpture expanded. It started to draw attention to the importance of universal human rights and, more specifically, children's rights. It became cosmopolitan. By moving around the planet, it moves people. The Cosmogolem is at the same time a saviour, a rescuer, and a supporter of those in need. He is a towering beacon that invites action.

Thinking back to Nepal, now almost 20 years ago, I realise that since launched; the Cosmogolem will never stop looking for places where it can bring hope to people in need. And so it happens, as more and more international and local organizations involve themselves in the project, and every year new statues are ready to nest themselves, next year (2023) in Guatemala and Sri Lanka.



Girl presenting her drawing during the Cosmogolem workshop, National Museum of Harare, Zimbabwe, 2016



Painting the Cosmogolem, Friends of Mangochi Orphans Education, Malawi, 2017

Why is the sculpture so appealing? All its parts reveal something unique and universal. First of all, the head is open. Thoughts can move freely and can disseminate. The statue provides a place where people can dream and develop their aspirations. Secondly, the mouth is flat, without expression.

The Cosmogolem speaks from mind to mind. The large hands symbolize the different partners who join the project and invariably take the project one step further. But they are also the hands of the helper. Someone with whom people can make contact. Someone who can console and protect. The hollow body brings together energy, communication, and life. It needs to be filled with dreams, hopes, and desires. With poetry, drawings, letters

but also medication and books. Has that happened, the Cosmogolem can travel, spreading his inherent diversity worldwide, providing links between different cultures, stimulating communication, creating life, and passing on energy. That's why the statue rests on two feet.

The Cosmogolem is a traveller. My golem consists of eight elements, not seven as in Jewish tradition. Eight is the symbol of infinity. The Cosmogolem never stops.

I witnessed it on the plains of Harare, on the slopes of San Juan de Miraflores, on the beach of Tulum, and in LABIOMISTA in Genk. Where the Cosmogolem stands, children gather to



Children from the local community during a Cosmogolem workshop, Tulum, Mexico, 2019



Cosmogolem © Koen Vanmechelen, Tulum, Mexico, 2019



Inauguration of the Cosmogolem in Lima, Peru, 2021

communicate, philosophize, create, and share in whatever form. Cosmogolem workshops help them discover different perspectives on reality.

Next, they translate their thoughts and emotions into work with the use of any ingredient. Finally, in the closing ceremony, they share their work with the others and deposit their hopes, wishes, dreams, and aspirations in a giant, wooden and walking mailbox.

Decades later, I realise that it is what I witnessed twenty years ago in that tiny Nepalese village far off the beaten track. As my beautiful wife silently stood in a sea of the children, offering both her hands to them, accepting their gifts of warmth and humanity.

Before they took her to show what they were making, her heart opened, and when she drank the tea she was offered,

the children gathered around her, talking to each other as they watched and communicated with her. And the rest of us witnessed this scene in awe, seeing the lines that connected her and the children.

While our jeep tried not to capsize on our long and bumpy way back to the main road, her solemn gaze rested on the side mirror. Something had happened. Behind us, a cluster of children waved us goodbye for a remarkably long time. No one uttered a word during the long hours back to the City of Light.



Cosmogolem in Anderlecht, Belgium, Cosmogolem Connekt, 2019



Cosmogolem in Anderlecht, Belgium, Cosmogolem Connekt, 2019

### WHY DOES KOEN VANMECHELEN HAVE A COLUMN IN DIPLOMATIC WORLD?

Unlike anyone else, this visionary artist bridges the divides between cultures, disciplines, communities and generations.  
 Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen (1965) is an internationally acclaimed conceptual artist.

His exploration of crucial issues as diversity, fertility and identity is translated into highly idiosyncratic works and projects.  
 Decoding and recoding nature's language, the artist tackles contemporary issues regarding human rights, sustainability and multiculturalism.

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The Caucus, an initiative of Dr. Ameenah Gurib-Fakim, Former President of Mauritius, was launched recently to provide a platform for authors to share their views and opinions.

## Invitation for collaboration

Forum where views and opinions are shared on critical issues on Science, Technology, Climate Change, Environment and Women Empowerment.

It is not an exhaustive list, other blogs/posts are most welcome.



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SMART IDEAS