

THE COSMOPOLITAN  
CHICKEN PROJECT  
DOMESTICATION

Koen Vanmechelen







## A CHICKEN IS A CHICKEN IS A CHICKEN... OR IS IT?

Next time you take a look at a chicken and think it's just a chicken, look again.

When BBC gardener Alys Fowler added a pair of chickens to her Edible Garden, she named them Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, after the American writer and her friend. In Alys' world Gertrude is a Bluebell and Alice B. is a Speckledy with Gertrude giving white eggs and Alice B. brown eggs. When Gertrude Stein, the female writer, not the chicken, wrote her famous line *A Rose is a Rose is a Rose* she meant to stress the identity of the rose by repeating its name. By naming chickens, or for that matter any animal, we give them a personality, an identity. So Alys' chickens now are no longer anonymous if only because they have been presented to a wide audience via TV. The information that one is a Bluebell and the other a Speckledy gives yet another depth to their personality as is no doubt the knowledge of what colour their eggs are.

Ever since I invited Koen Vanmechelen eight years ago to show his *Cosmopolitan Chicken Project*, presenting *The Mechelse Giant* during 'FEB.3.2002', I have learned to look at chickens in a different way. We installed the chickens in the open-air patio in the middle of the museum. On the walls alongside the patio we hung some of the larger than life portraits that Vanmechelen tends to make of his chickens. The combination allowed for learning to see the chicken in a completely different vein, as an individual, rather than a mass-produced animal. It was for instance quite interesting to observe how the chickens would communicate with each other whenever one of them was about to lay an egg.

Chickens have fascinated Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen ever since he was a boy when he already had a small chicken-breeding machine. Later he would first train as a chef before finally becoming an artist. Pretty soon he returned to his love for the chicken, realizing that it is a universal symbol for diversity. His *Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* started in 2000 when he crossbred a Belgian Mechelse Koekoek with a French Poulet de Bresse, resulting in a Mechelse Bresse. Today the project consists of 14 generations with the Mechelse Silkie as its latest addition, a crossbred between the Mechelse Orloff and the Chinese Silkie. In the 9 years since the project started, Vanmechelen has travelled all the continents more than once in trying to find yet another connection. The route that he follows is fairly contingent



as it answers more and more to invitations and other opportunities that are offered to help the project to evolve.

There are several aspects that feed into the project. First, there is Vanmechelen's interest in the mother of all chickens, the Red Jungle Fowl that still lives in the Himalayas. It is said to be the original chicken from which all domestic chickens are descended, based on comments and observations made by Darwin. Vanmechelen regularly visits the Himalaya to observe the Red Jungle Fowl and has thus discovered that the animal lives on the border of the jungle and human civilization. This for him has raised the question whether the chicken came to mankind or the other way around. Recent research has provided proof that it is quite possibly the first. Man in the meantime has used the chicken to make statements about his own situation. Since the introduction of world exhibitions chickens for instance have become national statements: the earlier mentioned Poulet de Bresse has a white body, red comb and blue feet, making it a living French flag. And not completely surprising the largest chicken in the world is American, the Jersey Giant. Thus, as Koen Vanmechelen states, his project is not so much about the chicken, as it is about humankind.

It is not Koen Vanmechelen's aim to recreate the primeval chicken. By crossbreeding he does however give the chicken back its potential. Quite interestingly, his chickens have a longer life and are healthier than their inbred origin. When being invited to participate in the group show *A Shot in the Head* at Lisson Gallery, London (2000), Vanmechelen went looking for a British chicken he could crossbreed with his Mechelse Bresse. He found the almost extinct and infertile Redcap that in the gallery nevertheless happily went on to produce the Mechelse Redcap. For Vanmechelen this was obvious proof of the importance of diversity and of mixing, whether it is of race, identity or discipline. This inherent message is the reason why his project finally gained wide philosophical, political, social and scientific importance. The project is also intriguing on an artistic level through its daring mix of disciplines in which the performance gets a completely new dimension, both through the presence of the chicken as through the exchange with the audience.

Since that first time in 2002, Koen and I have worked on multiple projects which have not only included live animals, but also a version of his *Cosmogolem* during *Landgraaf25* (2007), and more recently his contribution to the project *wijheij* for the Belgian NGO *Vredeseilanden*. For this latter project,



**MECHELSE KOEKOEK** ♂  
BELGIUM



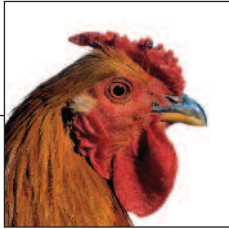
**MECHELSE BRESSE** ♀  
CCP



**ENGLISH REDCAP** ♂  
ENGLAND



**MECHELSE REDCAP** ♂  
CCP



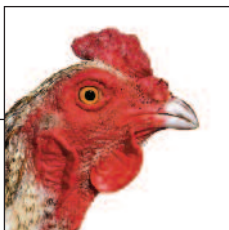
**MECHELSE DRESDENER** ♂  
CCP



**UILEBAARD** ♀  
THE NETHERLANDS



**MECHELSE UILEBAARD** ♂  
CCP



**MECHELSE FIGHTER** ♂  
CCP



**AURACANA** ♀  
BRASIL



**MECHELSE AURACANA** ♂  
CCP



**MECHELSE CUBALAYA** ♀  
CCP



**ANCONA** ♂  
ITALY



**MECHELSE ANCONA** ♂  
CCP

THE COSMOPOLITAN CHICKEN PROJECT (CCP) 1999-2010  
KOEN VANMECHELEN

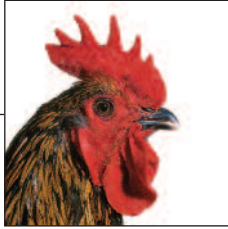




**POULETTE DE BRESSE** ♀  
FRANCE



**JERSEY GIANT** ♀  
USA



**MEHELSE GIANT** ♂  
CCP



**DRESDENER** ♀  
GERMANY



**LOUISIANA** ♀  
MEXICO



**MEHELSE LOUISIANA** ♀  
CCP



**THAI FIGHTER** ♂  
THAILAND



**DENIZLI HOROZU** ♀  
TURKEY



**MEHELSE DENIZLI** ♀  
CCP



**CUBALAYA** ♂  
CUBA



**ORLOFF RUSSIA** ♀  
RUSSIA



**MEHELSE ORLOFF** ♂  
CCP



**SILKIE** ♀  
CHINA



Koen worked together with the wheat farmer Dirk Draelants to not only produce food to ensure his project, but also to raise awareness for the work of both farmers and artists that lies at the basis of human existence. In his installation *Feed the world*, he makes reference to the Buddhist tradition to plant prayer flags outside homes and places of spiritual practice for the wind to carry the beneficent vibrations across the countryside. Prayer flags are said to bring happiness, long life and prosperity to the flag planter and those in the vicinity. Koen Vanmechelen has imprinted his with the portraits of his cosmopolitan chickens, spreading out the importance of the chicken for humankind.

Earlier this year, we also worked on the *Parallelepipeda* project that highlighted the collaboration between artists and scientists. From the start of Vanmechelen's *Cosmopolitan Chicken Project*, he could count on the cooperation and friendship of internationally renowned scientists. For *Parallelepipeda* he asked whether he could collaborate with the distinguished Belgian genetic researcher Jean-Jacques Cassiman who gladly agreed. They are currently investigating the importance of chicken genetics for human beings with the first results due later this year. In the meantime, we decided to show the result of another collaboration with a scientist 'Golden Spur' in the exhibition. The rooster that is the subject of this work was born blind and had no spur, making him the subject of ridicule and derision in the chicken coop. In collaboration with stomatologist Luc Vrielinck, Vanmechelen decided to give the rooster a golden spur that almost immediately handed the animal back his dignity. Without the spur it was seen as conspicuous, with the spur – golden or otherwise – it was accepted. Together with being a crossbreed, this rooster also had a considerably longer life span than the average rooster. So all in all it had only gained from being included in, or being made into an artwork.

What has been especially appealing to me from the start of my collaboration with Koen Vanmechelen is the endless energy and creativity that he emanates. I feel as if I have embarked on a wonderful journey with him back in 2002 that has led me to the most unexpected corners of the world, even if I am not there to actually travel along and witness the results first hand. While I am writing this article, Koen is travelling in Africa. He is visiting Namibia for yet another *Cosmogolem* project in Ondangwa, and meanwhile researching the possibilities of another crossing. Thanks to Facebook I can now follow his whereabouts and adventures, from missing aeroplanes and



finding eggs from Ovambo chicken. When he returns his solo exhibitions in Brussels and Den Haag will open, and no doubt there are already many other plans cooking.

The *Cosmopolitan Chicken Project* is highly complex and equally inspirational. Whether in a large-scale display as during the recent *Mediations Biennial* in Poznan where he built a huge *Tower of Babel*, or in smaller-scale presentations as now in *Galerie West*, Koen Vanmechelen always finds yet another way of showing new aspects of his ongoing research. The project has this wonderful capacity of tackling philosophical, political, social and scientific issues at the same time. If I had to describe it in one or two words, I would call it 'warm' or 'warm-hearted'. This is clearly an example of artwork where the artist cannot be left out. Koen Vanmechelen's warm personality is an integral part of it. As is surely also the record of his travels because it speaks about the process of developing the project.

For *The Cosmopolitan Chicken - Domesticus* at *Galerie West* Vanmechelen plays with the setting in a former domestic house. He sees it as a kind of nest and plans among other things an installation with 4000 eggs, live chickens of the last generation and some portraits. But also the urns with the remains of chickens, alluding to the circle of life and the eating-being eaten aspect of the chicken. A golden chicken that is built out of layers turns the fairytale chicken and the golden eggs around. Like all his other endeavours this overview will speak about the essential and endless need for crossing and connecting. By understanding the chicken, we might in the end learn to understand each other.

EDITH DOOVE, SEPTEMBER 2010



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THE COSMOPOLITAN CHICKEN PROJECT – DOMESTICATION

Koen Vanmechelen

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