

'Doctor Honoris Causa' KOEN VANMECHELEN

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On the 28th of May 2010 Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen received an honorary doctorate from the University of Hasselt. This year's theme was 'Art meets science'. The UHasselt also bestowed the title of 'Doctor Honoris Causa' to two other international artists: Panamarenko (Belgium) and Michael Rowe (United Kingdom).

Koen Vanmechelen is the 'Artistic Reviewer' of our Journal 'Facts, Views & Vision in ObGyn'.

He started his **Cosmopolitan Chicken Project (CCP)** in the late '90s. By crossbreeding chickens from all over the planet he tries to create a cosmopolitan chicken that combines different traits from the original breeds. This genetic diversity is a model for mixing the genome of human population groups. So far he has realized 13 generations of crossbreds. Vanmechelen uses this genetic diversity of chickens as a metaphor, to explain certain relevant social phenomena. He asks attention for 'crossing borders' to achieve mutual 'cosmopolitical' understanding. 'Nothing is as beautiful as joining with other cultures and taking energy from this.'

The artist has developed a unique mix of different media to work around this theme. Often in collaboration with scientists. His works range from highly expressive paintings and drawings, to photography, video's, installations, works in glass and a recurring wooden sculpture. What connects all these different modes of expression is the chicken and the egg. Over the years they have become an important symbol that has enabled the artist to make a connection to scientific, political, philosophical and ethical domains and issues. The intricate artistic-philosophical system he developed is the subject of debates, conversations and lectures the artist organizes or takes part in to shape his philosophical universe.

Out of Vanmechelen's central ideas, forming the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project (CCP), three major directions have developed. They have linked themselves to other domains: scientific, social and philosophical. The three are:

The Walking Egg arose out of the mutual curiosity of two domains that start from a sense of amazement and a compulsion to understand the human identity. It concerns art and medical sciences, in this case the field of fertility (Willem Ombelet). Beside the creation of an illustrated magazine (The Walking Egg Gazette), the cross-over between the CCP and the fertility project of Willem Ombelet led to an artistic-scientific project in Arusha, Tanzania. This meant the start of a focus on (in) fertility in developing countries. The artist will also contribute to this important project of "Universal access to reproductive care, including infertility", coordinated by Willem Ombelet. He will create a series of numbered reproductions of his work which can be sold



Left: Koen Vanmechelen, right: Professor Stinissen (Dean of the University of Hasselt).

against the price of one fertility treatment. According to the artist, each individual fertilization will combine the story of an infertile woman with the owner of a piece of art.

The CosmoGolem, is a large wooden giant of approximately 4 meters height; it is a symbol of the helper and the savior for children who are in need of help, hope and courage. Vanmechelen refers of course to the legend of the Homunculus that was made out of clay in the 16th century in Prague by rabbi Jehudau Löw to protect the Jews in the ghetto. Vanmechelen's golem also functions as a bridge between different cultures. It serves a higher purpose and insists on tolerance and engagement. At present 26 Golems have found a home in countries like the Netherlands, India, Pakistan, Tanzania, Poland, Chile and Belgium. More and more international and local organizations want to involve themselves in the CosmoGolem project.

The Cosmopolitan Chicken Research Project (CC@P) wants to bridge the gap between art and science. It is a continuation of the 'The Cosmopolitan Chicken'. The CC@P foundation creates the possibility for scientific research as well as support of social projects. The first scientific project is a genetic research project (two years), led by professor Jean-Jacques Cassiman (KULeuven). He made a model to investigate the genetic diversity between the Vanmechelen breeds and to assess the consequences of crossbreeding. DNA samples were collected from animals involved in the CCP, from 5 different chicken breeds found at different Belgian locations and from the 4 types of the Junglefowl.