

LABIO MISTA

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AN EVOLVING WORK
OF ART ON THE
MIX OF LIFE

**TO OPEN ON JULY 6, 2019:
ARTIST KOEN VANMECHELEN'S *LABIOMISTA* PROJECT,
FEATURING A PUBLIC PARK, EXHIBITION SPACES, RESEARCH FACILITIES,
AND THE ARTIST'S STUDIO**

***LABIOMISTA* BRINGS TOGETHER THE VITAL THREADS OF VANMECHELEN'S
PRACTICE INTO A CENTRALIZED HUB**

AND MARKS THE ARTIST'S LARGEST, EVOLVING ARTWORK TO-DATE

Genk, Belgium—March 7, 2019— On July 6, 2019, internationally-renowned artist Koen Vanmechelen will open *LABIOMISTA*, a monumental, multi-faceted project that brings together the vital threads of his work and establishes new opportunities for collaboration and dialogue on some of the most pressing and challenging social issues of contemporary society. For more than 20 years, Vanmechelen has been creating work that explores the connections between art, community, and science. From his paintings, sculptures, videos, and mixed-media installations to his conceptually-driven “living art” initiatives, Vanmechelen’s wide-ranging practice has been motivated by the belief that art has an important role to play in enhancing understanding of and developing solutions for such critical topics as diversity and resilience, shifting outlooks on the environment, the relationships between nature and culture, and sustainable community building. With the opening of *LABIOMISTA*, Vanmechelen creates his largest, evolving artwork yet, capturing the trajectory of his practice and forming a dynamic platform for future endeavors.



LABIOMISTA, which means “the mix of life,” is located on 60 acres of land in the city of Genk, Belgium, and features several distinct but inter-related components, including the following.

- The **Cosmopolitan Culture Park** is a redeveloped grassland that occupies the majority of the site. The land, which was previously used for mining and later housed a zoo, has been cleared of prior man-made elements and vegetation has been allowed to regrow naturally, with little human intervention. The Park will serve as a habitat for a wide range of animals, including dromedaries, ostriches, llamas, and chickens, among others, and also feature art installations by Vanmechelen. Visitors will be able to walk the Park using a network of pedestrian paths, allowing them to engage with the nature, art, and animals.
- An open-air pavilion, called **LabOvo**, will also be housed inside the Park. The multi-functional space will host talks and events, provide a centralized location to care for the Park’s animals, and include a facility focused on the study of DNA.
- Situated in a re-designed 1920s villa that previously existed on the site, the **Villa OpUnDi** is the new home for—and takes its name from—Vanmechelen’s think tank, the Open University of Diversity. It will serve as a hub for ongoing discussions and research into a spectrum of issues relating to biocultural diversity.
- **The Battery** is the artist’s newly built 53,000-square-foot studio, designed by acclaimed Swiss architect Mario Botta. In addition to functional workspaces, the predominantly private studio building includes interior and exterior exhibition spaces as well as a greenhouse and open-air bird enclosure.
- **The Ark** is *LABIOMISTA*’s entrance building. Designed by Botta, it will provide visitors with an introduction to Vanmechelen’s practice, the overarching site, and work that takes place there.



Each of *LABIOMISTA*’s components is inspired by Vanmechelen’s vision to position art at the core of society. This vision is well encapsulated in one of Vanmechelen’s earliest projects—and one that remains at the heart of his work today—the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project (CCP). Launched more than two decades ago, the CCP is a crossbreeding program through which the artist naturally breeds chickens from different countries, diversifying the flock’s gene pool and in doing so

increasing its fertility, immunology, and aesthetic variety. As CCP developed, Vanmechelen realized its profound capacity to serve as a metaphor for the world’s diversity and to highlight the weaknesses and vulnerabilities of establishing monocultures. The project’s long-lasting success, and the conceptual spark that it bore, has spurred similar and related projects around the world as well as collaborations with scientists and leaders from a variety of disciplines to examine diversity and sustainability from a broad range of perspectives and needs.

LABIOMISTA furthers these projects and offers new opportunities to engage innovators, entrepreneurs, creatives, scientists, and the public in a collaborative effort to shift common perceptions of the environment, animals, and the human connection to both. It is being realized in partnership with the city of Genk, which

made possible the adaptive reuse of the land on which the complex sits. The site's history—as a former coal mine and later a zoo—left it ecologically and economically scarred, making it an ideal candidate for revival and inspiring the collaboration between the city and Vanmechelen. The project is additionally being supported by Flanders and Limburg Tourism and private stakeholders, who share in the city's and artist's vision. As part of the collaboration and as an effort to engage with a wide audience, LABIOMISTA will maintain an affordable entrance fee, with a standard ticket costing eight euros and children under the age of 18 admitted for free. Entrance fees will be invested directly into the public operations of the Cosmopolitan Culture Park and toward new community-oriented initiatives.

Discussions are also already underway for further development in the area that would support locally-sourced dining options, stimulating economic and social growth. As part of this effort, Vanmechelen is re-envisioning land adjacent to *LABIOMISTA*, which is currently home to community gardens, as **Nomad Land**. With the introduction of art installations, specially-designed picnic tables, and other elements like a children's playground and food trucks to the gardens, Nomad Land will transform into a vibrant gathering space, sparking further connection and conversation. Vanmechelen, with the support from the city, has purposefully eschewed the integration of pre-existing commercial dining, lodging, and recreation options on *LABIOMISTA*'s 60-acre site, so as to provide opportunity for local businesses and initiatives to thrive. This focus on the local dovetails directly with his vision for creating self-sustaining, healthy, and vibrant communities, and the understanding that local and global motivations are equally important and valid, and must be developed in parallel to ensure the success of both.

“The examination of the ongoing development of our societies and cultures feels particularly pressing today. My vision is that *LABIOMISTA* will foster discussions across a wide range of people—from the public to artists to scholars—about how we can create more diverse, sustainable, resilient, and engaged communities, and also about our relationships to the other living creatures with which we share the earth. It is exciting to bring



together the various aspects of my work into a centralized hub, and to see what new ideas and projects can be born from it, in this region and far beyond,” said Vanmechelen. “I’m also inspired and enthusiastic about the collaboration with the city of Genk, which shares my vision for a new kind of approach to community development and has boldly signed on to have an artist redevelop this vital site and area.”

Further information regarding the inter-related components of *LABIOMISTA* as well as additional background on Vanmechelen follow below.

The Ark

Visitors will enter *LABIOMISTA* through an entrance structure, titled The Ark, located at the southwestern end of the site, and which has been designed by architect Mario Botta. A dramatic, modernist archway of black bricks, steel, and polished concrete, the structure includes 2,500 square feet of interior space and serves as a welcome area for visitors, providing them with information about Vanmechelen’s practice and the overall site. The Ark also includes installations and works of art by Vanmechelen, a shop, and the offices for *LABIOMISTA*’s site manager.

Cosmopolitan Culture Park

The Cosmopolitan Culture Park is the largest component of *LABIOMISTA*, encompassing the majority of the 60 acres. To help realize his vision for the Park, Vanmechelen is collaborating with *BURO Landschap*, a Belgian urban planning and technology firm. The Park is connected by a network of elevated and ground-level pedestrian walkways. The enclosures that were once part of the zoo have been removed, and the barriers between animal habitats have been established predominantly through the build-up and strategic use of the naturally-growing vegetation. Where safety precautions made it necessary, minimal fencing and wooden slates have further divided certain areas. The overall effect, however, is of a continuous environment.

The animals of the Park, which include camels, dromedaries, ostriches, llamas, emus, nandus, and alpacas, are able to roam freely in many areas, allowing them to establish their own hierarchies and natural systems. This approach also allows visitors to experience the animals in a way that speaks to their biological needs, diversity, and lives, establishing a stronger understanding of animal life. Vanmechelen’s “living art” initiatives are also central to the Park, which includes breeding stations for the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project and Planetary Community Chicken.



The Park also includes public sculptures created by Vanmechelen, including his 9.5-meter-high sculpture *CosmoGolem*—a large-scale stone monument depicting a head, conveying the importance of an open mind. Located within the Park is a pavilion, called **LabOvo**, designed by the Belgian-Spanish architecture firm Van Belle & Medina Architects. A centrally-located, publicly-accessible space to care for the Park’s animals, LabOvo will also house a research lab focused on the study of DNA. The space will also serve as a location for talks and public events.

A locale for the public to connect with the natural world and each other, the Park plays an important role in examining and fostering discussions about human and animal relationships, including issues around how we broadly view animals, evolution, adaptation, domestication, and the impact of these ideas on diversity. It serves as a platform for the exploration of in-situ and ex-situ preservation of species and biodiversity in domesticated and semi-domesticated species. Collaborations to conduct further study of these topics have been set up with the International Livestock Research Institute in Ethiopia and with Linköping University in Sweden, among others.

Villa OpUnDi

Situated within a beautifully renovated 1920s villa that originally belonged to the owner of the coal mine, Villa OpUnDi presents the history of the site and serves as the home base for the Open University of Diversity, a think tank founded by Vanmechelen in 2011 to explore the intersections of science and art, particularly as it relates to questions of diversity, fertility, immunology, resilience, and sustainability. It will, over time, provide overnight accommodations for scientists, scholars, and curators, who wish to conduct research at *LABIOMISTA* or use its library and archives.

Here, the public can experience installations that provide further content and context about the animals and ecosystem developed in the Cosmopolitan Culture Park, as well as some of the ongoing scientific inquiries and dialogues that relate to different aspects of activity at *LABIOMISTA*. Visitors can also view some of the archives on the site's history, the genome data for the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project, discover Vanmechelen's work and projects from across the world, and view additional works of art by the artist.

The Battery

Vanmechelen's 53,000-square-foot studio, which is referred to as The Battery, has been designed by architect Mario Botta, a longtime friend of the artist. Inspired by Vanmechelen's artworks, Botta created a steel frame building, clad in black brick, and punctuated by 20-foot-high windows that draw light deep into the structure's core.



The western end of the building is elevated, creating a series of open-air spaces divided by structural columns. These spaces are open to the public and showcase some of Vanmechelen's 2D and 3D installations and works, and also features an enclosure for the Red Jungle Fowl—the primary progenitor of the domestic chicken. The remainder of the building is private.

Entry to the private building is primarily through an elevator built into one of the columns. The main level, which runs the length of the building, includes spaces for art-making and gathering as well as for rotating displays of Vanmechelen's work. The second floor serves primarily as office and storage spaces, and features a balcony that wraps the interior perimeter, offering sightlines down onto the art—and art-making—on the main floor. The eastern end of the building has a third, ground-floor level storage area.

The Battery also features a multi-story greenhouse on its western side, which houses a number of bird species, including hornbills, toucans, roul-roul, victoria crowned pigeons, and several varieties of turacos. A large enclosure, positioned atop the building, also provides a habitat for a pair of Steller's Sea Eagles. While entrance to these enclosures is closed to the public, visitors can look into these spaces from the exterior of the building.

Information regarding public hours and access to the Park, as well as ticketing information will become available in spring 2019.

About Koen Vanmechelen

Koen Vanmechelen (b. 1965) is an internationally renowned conceptual artist based in Belgium. He employs a diversity of approaches to his cross-disciplinary practice, from painting and sculpture, to video and installations, to drawing and glasswork, in addition to his living art initiatives.

Across the last decade, Vanmechelen has collaborated with scientists from different disciplines. His research and work earned him an honorary doctorate from the University of Hasselt in 2010, and the Golden Nica Hybrid Art award in 2013. His ongoing investigations, with the support of project partners, led to the creation of the Open University of Diversity, which invites people from different fields of study and practice to engage in a dialogue and new projects that examine ideas of diversity.

Vanmechelen has shown in major institutions across the world, including The National Gallery London, Victoria and Albert Museum (London), Museum Kunst Palast (Düsseldorf), Venice Projects (Venice), Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ (Amsterdam), Museum of Art and Design (New York), Pushkin Museum (Moscow), and across Belgium, including at the Verbeke Foundation, Watou, Museum M and Z33. In 2015, he participated in the Havana Biennale, where his Cosmopolitan Chicken Project was responsible for reintroducing an extinct species of chicken back to Cuba.

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Image Captions (in order that images appear):

1. Drone image of *LABIOMISTA*, aerial view of the 60-acre site under construction. Image credit: dmotion. © Koen Vanmechelen.
2. Works by artist Koen Vanmechelen, including the marble sculpture, *Collective Memory*, and large-scale photograph, *Turbulence*, installed below the Battery, the artist's studio. Photo credit: Philippe van Gelooven. © Koen Vanmechelen
3. Koen Vanmechelen and his monumental sculpture, *Cosmogolem*, installed in the Cosmopolitan Culture Park. Photo credit: Studio Tropics. © Koen Vanmechelen.
4. Rendering of Cosmopolitan Culture Park at *LABIOMISTA*. Image Credit: Buro Landschap. © Koen Vanmechelen.
5. Exterior view of Koen Vanmechelen's studio, called the Battery. Photo credit: Philippe van Gelooven. © Koen Vanmechelen.

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