

LABIO MISTA

**NEW 60-ACRE REDEVELOPMENT PROJECT, LABIOMISTA,
SLATED TO OPEN IN 2019 IN BELGIUM**

**ESTABLISHED BY ARTIST KOEN VANMECHELEN,
LABIOMISTA TO FEATURE LARGE-SCALE PUBLIC PARK, RESEARCH FACILITIES,
AND THE ARTIST'S STUDIO**



Genk, Belgium—September 25, 2018—

Internationally renowned conceptual artist Koen Vanmechelen is breathing new life into the city of Genk, Belgium—once a major mining center—with a 60-acre redevelopment project. Called LABIOMISTA—which means “the mix of life”—the project will feature an entrance and orientation building designed by acclaimed Swiss architect Mario Botta; a Research & Study Forum, located in a newly redesigned 1920s villa; the Cosmopolitan Culture Park, a sustainably redeveloped grassland that will serve as home to a wide range of animals and invite the public to engage with the environment and its inhabitants; and the artist’s 53,000-square-foot private studio, also designed by Botta. Each of the project’s components is inspired by Vanmechelen’s wide-ranging practice, which is guided by an artistic and scientific engagement with biocultural diversity and its impact on the creation of more resilient and sustainable communities. This fall

marks a midway point to the project’s completion, which is slated to open in May 2019.

LABIOMISTA brings together, at one site, the different threads that comprise Vanmechelen’s work, while also creating a new platform for dialogue and innovation. His practice is best encapsulated in such “living art” initiatives as the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project (CCP). Launched 20 years 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. The project has become a driving force for Vanmechelen, spurring similar projects around the world—most recently in Ethiopia—as well as collaborations with scientists and leaders from a spectrum of fields to examine the importance of diversity to building resilience, shifting outlooks on the environment, the relationships between nature and culture, and community development.

The selection of the site in Genk also further builds on these ideas, as LABIOMISTA sits atop a former coal mine that was later transformed into a now defunct zoo. Economically and ecologically scarred, the location offers an ideal opportunity for an intervention that will at once rehabilitate the natural landscape and stimulate economic growth in this region. With support from local government as well as private stakeholders, and in collaboration with Flanders and Limburg Tourism, LABIOMISTA is being developed as a public-private partnership between Vanmechelen and the city of Genk. Discussions are also already underway for a further development focused on cultivating locally-sourced dining options in and around LABIOMISTA, to support further economic and social growth in the area.

“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 leadership of the city of Genk, who share my vision for a new kind of community and have boldly signed on to have an artist redevelop this vital site and area.”

Further information regarding the components and design for the redevelopment follow below.

The Studio (aka “The Battery”)

The Studio, also known as The Battery, is situated at the southern end of the site, with proximity to the road and views of the Cosmopolitan Culture Park to the north and the Research & Study Forum to the west. Inspired by Vanmechelen’s artworks—which in addition to his “living art” projects include paintings, drawings, sculpture, installation, and video works—Botta designed 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 Studio has three levels and an open, spacious interior, with polished concrete floors throughout.

The western end of the building is elevated, creating a series of open-air spaces punctuated by structural columns. These spaces—which will be open to the public—will showcase some of Vanmechelen’s 2D and 3D installations and works, and also feature an enclosure for the Red Jungle Fowl—the primary progenitor of the domestic chicken. Entry to the private Studio 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 Studio also features a multi-story greenhouse on its western side, which houses a number of bird species, including hornbills, toucans, and several varieties of turacos. A large enclosure, positioned atop the building, also provides a habitat for a pair of Steller’s Sea Eagles. A glass void in the ceiling at the core of the building allows for views into the Eagles’ environment.

The design for the 53,000-square-foot Studio is a direct outgrowth of Botta's long-standing friendship with Vanmechelen, and his strong understanding of Vanmechelen's vision to unite experiences of nature and culture. Although primarily not a public facility, visitors to LABIOMISTA will be able to walk around and through the open-air spaces and greenhouse, and also get views to the Eagles housed above.

Entrance (“The Ark”) and Research & Study Forum (“The Villa”)

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

From this entrance, visitors will be directed toward the Research & Study Forum, where they can learn more about the activity that takes place at LABIOMISTA. Situated within a beautifully renovated 1920s villa that originally belonged to the owner of the coal mine, the Forum will serve 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 details 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 the redevelopment. Visitors can also view some of the archives on the site's coal mining history, the genome data for the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project, and additional works of art by Vanmechelen.

Cosmopolitan Culture Park

The Cosmopolitan Culture Park will be the largest component of LABIOMISTA, encompassing the majority of the 60 acres. Animals at the Park will include camels, dromedaries, ostriches, llamas, emus, nandus, and alpacas. Together these animals will enable Vanmechelen—and the scientists and researchers with whom he collaborates—to pose questions and formulate answers about human and animal relationships, including issues around how we broadly view animals, evolution, adaptation, domestication, and the impact of these ideas on diversity.

Formerly a zoo, the Park is being designed by BURO Landschap, a Belgian urban planning and technology firm, in collaboration with Vanmechelen. With the removal of the enclosures that were once a part of the zoo, the Park will feature a network of elevated and ground level pedestrian walkways to establish spaces where the animals, which will be able to roam freely, can engage safely with human visitors. By encouraging visitors to explore the Park on foot, LABIOMISTA will provide an enriching experience with the Park's animals, opening a window into their communities and reinforcing the linkages between all living things.

Located within the Park will be an amphitheater, called Lab Ovo, designed by the Belgian-Spanish architecture firm Van Belle & Medina. The amphitheater will provide visitors with the opportunity to watch

art performances and hear talks by artists or scientists, and also offers a centrally-located, publicly-accessible space to care for the Park’s many animals.

The Park will include public sculptures created by Vanmechelen, including his 9.5-meter-high sculpture *CosmoGolem*. Some of the sculptures will serve as animal shelters—such as bird houses—as well as landmarks for visitors. Vanmechelen’s “living art” initiatives will also be central to the Park, which will include breeding stations for the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project and Planetary Community Chicken and serve as a platform for the exploration of the de-domestication and reintroduction of certain animals into the wild.

Civic Partnerships

LABIOMISTA is supported by a partnership with the city of Genk, which made possible the adaptive reuse of land and opened the door for the creation of this major redevelopment project, fully envisioned by an artist. Building on this groundbreaking relationship, the leadership team for LABIOMISTA will encourage additional partnerships with other local and regional entities, supporting future growth and innovation in the region. Vanmechelen has already begun to create connections to adjacent community gardens—managed by local residents—and will eventually establish a space for food trucks and other vendors to provide other services to visitors to LABIOMISTA. These efforts provide a new blueprint and model for public-private partnerships that are built on collaboration and an openness of vision.

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.

###

For more information, please contact:

Aga Sablinska or Alina Sumajin
PAVE Communications & Consulting
aga@paveconsult.com / alina@paveconsult.com