

SUMMARY

The fourth Edition of Otlet Salons takes place in the Open University of Diversity, nerve centre to the diverse activities of internationally renowned artist Koen Vanmechelen (<https://koenvanmechelen.allyou.net/>). Vanmechelen, best known for his Cosmopolitan Chicken Project, entertains and lectures his audience on the necessity of both a mental and physical space where people can share ideas. Prof. Dr. Caroline Pauwels (VUB) and Prof. Dr. Luc De Schepper (UHasselt), the rectors of two Flemish universities reflect on diversity, crossbreeding and the future of their institutions. Fusing arts and science is the way to go according to artist and panel members. They agree that within universities there needs to be a balance between real freedom and being productive at the same time and making sure there's a return to society. The lively interaction between keynote, panel and audience that Otlet Salons so cherishes, touches on many subjects, concluding that interdisciplinarity and exchange pose some challenges, but mainly holds great (societal) advantages.

REPORT

“Every organism is looking for another organism to survive”

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The Open University of Diversity (OpUnDi) is situated at the edge of Hasselt's city centre in an old gelatine factory. The entrance leads directly into a permanent exhibition space where the multi-disciplinarity of Koen Vanmechelen's work comes to full expression: painting, photography, sculpture, a coat made of several fluffy white Zijdehoenders and other taxidermy experiments. High placed window ledges support the various chickens Vanmechelen conducted his crossbreeding experiments with, including the original 1998 couple made up of a Mechelse Koekoek and the French Poulet de Bresse. The space's centrepiece is a ceiling-high birdhouse inhabited by spectacularly coloured pigeons. Besides all the stuffed animals, the building houses an abundance of live birds and, oh yeah, offices.

The kitchen area, which is ironically equipped with a large skewer, is transformed into a theatre for the occasion. Koen Vanmechelen, sporting his usual rugged beard, clad in a crinkly white shirt, is seated on the edge of a dark green chesterfield sofa with a tear in the upholstery that conveniently accommodates his iPhone. Vanmechelen purposefully named his studio (he calls it his 'church' at one point) 'university' after the original meaning: a place where people can come together and exchange ideas. 'Elements of society must enter the studio in order to make works of art with a universal quality', he explains. His practice forms an opportunity to reflect on existential questions and contemporary issues that relate to diversity, globalization, racism, genetic modification and cloning. Vanmechelen's ideas are not limited to the art scene; four different foundations form the organisational structure to implement his ideas in society (Cosmogolem, The Walking Egg, Cosmopolitan Chicken Research Project, Combat).

Panel

Is it ironic that apparently we need an artist to raise our awareness on the importance of a free arena, the importance of exchange, or, in the artist's words, cross-breeding? Or is that exactly what an artist's role should be? Either way, it's how Vanmechelen operates; everything he undertakes is part of his effort to improve society. Concerning this evening's topic he says: "Fertility always comes from outside. The human species (in fact all species – LLtV) should be open to new impulses and input from outside. Exchange brings about evolution."

After a short initial speech, the two panel members enter the conversation. Two newly appointed rectors with a clear vision of the future, Prof. Dr. Caroline Pauwels (VUB) and Prof. Dr. Luc De Schepper (UHasselt), reflect on what a university should be, especially in relation to society (strengthening social tissue. In her plans for the VUB Pauwels writes that "there is a need for a scientific and intellectual project that takes the time, and receives the time, to tackle the grand societal challenges and actively participates in the social debate. Universitas is a project that dares to take intellectual risks, strives for frontier-breaking research driven by curiosity, and enables serendipity."

Pauwels considers Vanmechelen's life work as the model universities should follow. De Schepper agrees and adds that arts should be integrated into the university: "Innovation is most strong at the intersection of several disciplines."

Is there a place for artists within universities? De Schepper responds by turning the question around: is it useful to conduct fundamental research within in the arts? If the answer to that is yes, then art also belongs within the university. A second reason to bring art within the institution's walls is trans-disciplinary approach: it's impossible to connect two disciplines if they can't encounter in a natural way.

Pauwels: "Within universities we need to find a balance between art and science, we need balance between real freedom and being productive at the same time and making sure there's a return to society. It's an and-and situation. We need to be pushing barriers. Artists are the forerunners, scientist should be too, not only in productivity."

Vanmechelen reacts: "I created OpUnDi to be a place full of science and art. Society in fact is moving from mono or uniformity to diversity, but we have to be careful, because 'diversity' is becoming a *hashtag*, an empty shell."

In reaction to De Schepper and a discussion about the seemingly local scope of the UHasselt Vanmechelen says: "Every city experiences a little heart attack because we developed a system that leaves no space to think anymore. Universities need to be open. They need to provide a mental space with actual, physical parameters. We need space and freedom to make evolution happen."

Discussion

Then there is that lively interaction between keynote, panel and audience that Otlet Salons cherishes.

On Erasmus scholarships and Flemish students

Flemish students don't go out enough to explore. Yet the advantages are huge: when you come back you're different, much more open. Erasmus is a form of crossbreeding. "It's true, many marriages came about", laughs Pauwels.

Audience @ De Schepper: You have parameters, you attract students that understand each other. They have Internet, they don't need to go abroad.

De Schepper and Vanmechelen don't necessarily agree. They consider the university as a hub for international input / a means to exceed the regional. Ideally the university functions as an incubator for the region.

'I lived in Antwerp', someone says, "and there are many cultures but it's not a successful crossbreeding project. You need more than just putting people (chickens) together and have them look at each other."

On duality

Another person remarks: "Looking around in your studio I noticed you are building boxes to keep the control." "We need conflict and duality to survive", Vanmechelen replies. "Here's what I consider art to be: you're an individual and you developed your vision. If you keep it to yourself then your vision is a trash bin for your frustration and nobody can learn from it. The meeting of the outside world and individual thinking should become a universal norm. But without the box there is no discussion, then you only talk about freedom."

On economics

"I make work, I sell it, I get money, I put it into a foundation, I use the knowledge, I make new work, I bring it to the world", Vanmechelen states his formula, which he then illustrates with an example. "I just came from Nairobi where I met with the Masai. I told them how I see a possible exchange between them and me. After I did my story they said they wanted to work with me. This is what I proposed: I travel there, I give them a cow, I learn from them, I learn about the cow, about it's ideal properties. After the cow dies I take the skin and the horns of the cow. I make something out of it that I can sell. With the money I can return to Nairobi. The Masai, they started to celebrate. Usually people buy a necklace or a dance, maybe they take our picture, they said. I can offer them strong social communication; they don't need me for reasons of science. They already know that cross breeding is the only way to evolution."

Financing of both science and art depends on numbers, quantities, not on who is conducting it. Instead it needs to be about quality and individuals finding their qualities.

On arts and research

A Ph.D. for artists seems to be a form of validating what they are doing for the world. A way to economize it, to prove it's useful. Does it make sense for an artist to submit to rules and restrictions? Isn't art always a form of research? And yes, it could also be an opportunity and a form of crossbreeding to bring artistic practice into the scientific realm.

Art and science have to respect each other within their field. Then real crossing can happen. You need respect as a building stone for trust. We need trust.

Looking at things in a different way is art, then you're creating something. As an artist you have more freedom because you have less boundaries / rules.