Why Did the Artist Cross the Chicken?

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A few years ago now, I heard about an artist who had decided to breed chickens as part of his artistic practice. Koen van Mechelen, the artist in question, has a very simple core philosophy:

"Every organism needs another to survive. Also for art it is like this."

Koen's project has clear implications for the chickens we eat and, especially, for the chickens on which so many smallholder farmers depend. And that's why just before Easter, I found myself in Belgium on a mission to visit Koen Vanmechelen at his studio in Genk. Twenty-eight years ago, Kuhn embarked on what became the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project by crossing a local Belgian breed with an iconic French chicken. And every year since then, he's added another breed to the population from all over the world.

When I told the friends I was staying with about Kuhn, they said, Oh yeah, that's a famous chicken. The Mechelse Koekoek. Now, Koen's name is Vanmechelen. So is he, like the chicken, from Mechelen?

Koen: No, I'm not from Mechelen. I mean, it's a coincidence, but I'm an artist, and in my language, coincidence doesn't exist in my world. There is always a meaning behind it. And I started with a Mechelse Koekoek. And so my name is Koen Vanmechelen. So the link, the link was there, but it was not on purpose actually, because the Mechelse Koekoek indeed is very famous and it was brought in the World Expo in 1958 and it was actually there to show the world that we Belgians, we have an important chicken.

Jeremy: Koen says that countries, and smaller areas, often take a chicken as a symbol of their culture, and the Mechelse Koekoek reflects that.

Koen: If you look at at that animal, it's a quite heavy chicken, you know, with feathers on the legs. And if you see to the old paintings, for example, of [Constant] Permeke, you see that the Belgian people were working in the clay and they need very strong hands and big

hands. So in one way or another, it was a representation of the working class and the farmers that that we had.

And it becomes more clear when you go to different countries — for example, in France, and that's the most famous chicken, I think here in Europe — it's the Poulet de Bresse. And when you look at it, it's red in the head, it is white in the body and its blue legs: so it's the French flag. So they associate their nationality with the chicken. But also the Chinese, they make a silkie. So the silk, the idea of silk, you know, to translate it in a chicken. If you go to a Turkish long crower and you think about how they sing, also the minaret, you know, the long crows, it was an idea that we never put inside of a chicken. So symbolically, the chicken was standing for a culture.

Jeremy: But to Koen, that was a bit of a dead end. Each of those local breeds was different, like the cultures. But the individual birds in each breed were much too like one another.

Koen: And now I'm going more than 20 years back, I think around 30 years back in time. I said: but we need diversity. We have to break monoculture. And so my solution came by by looking at the Mechelse Koekoek and to think, why not crossbreed this with the Poulet de Bresse? So we break the frames around the living animals, we break the monoculture, and by mixing them, there is another solution. There is something which makes them more vulnerable for the environment. But there is more resilience. I think there is more diversity and that and more immunity. That was the first idea.

But of course it was also a comment on our society. If you do it as an artist, you really think about mankind and think: Wow, there is something with the chicken, which is also happening with mankind.

Jeremy: But what did you see from crossing the Mechelse Koekoek with the Poulet de Bresse? What came out in the next generation that was actually surprising to you?

Koen: Yeah, for me, it was a big surprise because, of course, genetically it was a total mix of grey and white chickens, but also black and white. And not one of them are black and not one of them are white. I'm talking a piece of art. I'm looking at it in a different way, in a philosophical way. But at the same time, you know, the outcome was beautiful for me because there was not one the same anymore.

And I started to think about about the reproduction in diversity instead of reproduction in monoculture.

Jeremy: But if you go back to the middle of the Victorian period when a lot of these breeds were established, they were established with kind of an artistic view then, it was the visual aesthetics that defined the breed. So how is what you're doing different from what they were doing when they tried to make them all the same?

Koen: Yeah, I think that there is a huge difference because I think we start to realise that bio and cultural diversity is an important thing that we have to respect. We come out of a time when mankind was ruling over the world, we started to think about how can we live better? And the problem of that one is that we were thinking about our own freedom, but that in one way or another that we made our own cage. Let me explain that. Because we were forgetting to look around the environment. We were not thinking that the environment was important for us to live. And luckily, now we start to realise that the question is, are we too late or are we just in time? I'm not a scientist to answer on that, but I'm an artist who can see that we have to take many steps and try to get a certain balance with our environment. And this is what all these years we didn't do.

Jeremy: Let's go back to the chickens. After each cross, you then add another breed. So after the Koekoek and the Poulet de Bresse, you add another breed, then another breed, then another breed. How did you choose the extra breeds?

Koen: And so also a little bit by coincidence, I will tell you a little story. I think it's an important story. When I had the first result, actually, which came from the Belgian with the French Poulet de Bresse, it was born in a museum. And between all the white and gray, there was also a black rooster. And when I looked at the date when the black rooster was born, it was actually born on an eclipse day. That was very surprising. For somebody else, it was just a regular day, but for me it was something special.

When you study, for example, the junglefowl, which is actually the primal chicken where all the chickens are coming from, living in that area of the Himalaya, they do an eclipse moult. So when they are fertile, the season that they are fertile, when that's over, they go from beautiful feathers into black feathers. And so for me, I said: Okay, the

eclipse, which they call eclipse moult, it was there. So that black rooster, I think it's an important one.

So I kept that one and I went to Lisson Gallery in London. I was invited — and the Lisson Gallery is the top of the top of contemporary art — to do the crossbreeding with England. I take this black rooster. And I was trying to find the typical English redcap, but I couldn't find this one.

Jeremy: What's a redcap?

Koen: A redcap is a typical English chicken. If you look at it, it is English, believe me. It has a flat crest. It looks a little bit like the guards, if you go to Buckingham Palace, you know. It's a little bit that English touch. You know, you can't explain it, but for sure when you see it, they are proud.

What was important in the whole story is that — they were in the 60s so successful because of the egg production — that they were almost extinct, extinct by monoculture. So I couldn't find the redcap anymore. And then I found a guy in Northampton who had a rooster and three hens, and I called him and [he] said: Please come to get him, because in ten years I didn't get any offspring there. They're not doing anything. So they are useless. And I put the three hens together with the black rooster in the gallery. So what happened? Actually, during the exhibition, they started to call me and they said: Koen, you have to come because something is happening here. There is a quarrel in this chicken coop. I said: What's going on? They said: Yeah, the hens are fighting, you know, and one hen is really with the black rooster. So the two others, we have to take them away. So they took them away and so we put the eggs of the couple of the black rooster with the one hen of the redcap into the incubator. And the offspring was 13 little chicks. So in one way or another she was waiting for, for somebody who's fertile enough to give an offspring. So there was something there in which I had enough philosophy to move on.

Jeremy: Moving on, Koen added one breed at a time: the Jersey Giant from America, the Dresdner from Germany, the Ulebaard from the Netherlands.

After about 10 years, Koen had created a foundation, and with the help of some scientists had started looking at the DNA of the cosmopolitan chickens. They were staggered by the amount of genetic diversity they had accumulated. And while he was exhibiting at the Havana Biennial in Cuba, bringing back the local Cubalaya breed, one of his scientific collaborators encouraged him to think about sharing this diversity with smallholder farmers in Africa, who could definitely use some help.

Koen: At that moment I invented the planetary community chicken. If you look, CCP standing for Cosmopolitan Chicken Project. If you turn this, you have PCC Planetary Community Chicken. And what is it? It is actually ... I was taking the cosmopolitan chicken, which is a rich on the DNA diversity, fertility. And I started to think: Why not crossbreeding this huge diversity that we need so badly?

Jeremy: The scientist who triggered the Planetary Community Chicken was Olivier Hanotte at the International Livestock Research Institute in Ethiopia. You might have heard him a few episodes ago on Eat This Podcast, telling me about the domestication of the chicken and the important of cross-breeding to improve village chickens.

Olivier: The village chickens are locally adapted. So in a certain sense they have been optimised by natural selection, by some human selection, to survive in a specific environment. But what we know also is that the environment is changing and also that basically, well, there is a trade off to that. So not only the environment is changing, but also these locally-adapted birds are relatively low in productivity. So we decided to actually cross this bird with one of the adapted chicken in Ethiopia, the Oromo, and to find out how this chicken will actually behave. We discovered that, in fact, the progeny of these birds were much bigger. They were growing faster. But I have to say there was a little issue here. They were also extremely hungry. So because, of course, if you get someone big growing fast, you need energy and the resource to feed it.

Jeremy: So for the woman with a few chickens in Ethiopia, she now has a chicken that will grow faster, will grow bigger if she can find enough food for it.

Olivier: Exactly. And this is where the cross becomes also interesting, because the local chickens are what we call scavenging or semi-scavenging birds. They are scavenging and semi-scavenging birds

so they can get food all around. These crosses, of course, have been mixed by different ... It's a mix of different breeds. They can also scavenge and so on, but they require supplements and so on. So obviously if you give a bird which has better growth, and they like the chicken, they like to grow animals which grow faster and so on, it has more value in the market. You have also to provide source of food and so on, and there are different ways you can handle that. So we will be able to address that issue. Now, of course, you solve one problem. There are other coming on the table. But this, we are here to do that, to solve the other one and so on.

Jeremy: Is it also important with these birds, do you also have to make sure that they have somewhere safe to sleep at night? Are they more likely to be taken by predators?

Olivier: Well, every bird, I will say, in general, may be taken by a predator if you let them moving around, of course. But it's more than predation. And this is where also the cross becomes interesting. This disease outbreak. As we ... Chicken is a survivor, there is no doubt about that. It has been around for centuries, if not millennia, and has been providing food and and income to the smallholder farmer. But it's also regularly, you do what ... We have disease outbreaks which are wiping out a substantial proportion of the population.

Jeremy: Well, we're in the middle of one.

Olivier: Yeah, we are in the middle of one. We had one actually. Avian flu. We have one, avian flu now for the moment in Europe, which is not only attacking chickens, but it's actually, this virus strain actually also devastating for wild birds and so on. So how do you respond to that? You respond to that with diversity. I'm optimistic. At the end, all this population will survive, [it] is not going to lead to a complete extinction because there will be always animals in the population which will have the right genetic makeup to actually survive and to move to the next generation. But when you are an isolated population, when you are small village chickens adapted to a specific environment, you may not have this diversity, but the diversity is there in the cosmopolitan chicken. So by bringing the cosmopolitan chicken and by crossing it with a local chicken, we [are] also bringing actually diversity, which actually which may be an insurance for the future. So and that's very, very, very important.

Jeremy: And I guess the sort of, the ultimate purpose of the chicken, at least in a smallholder society — and in advanced industrial societies — is to provide eggs and meat. So how good are the cosmopolitan chickens to eat?

Koen: That's it ... I mean, I didn't, of course, study that one because I think that's one of the reasons also why we were looking for the scientists, and I think also the scientists has to do their job on that side.

Olivier: The monoculture of the chicken ... That is, basically we have a strain of chicken line which are egg production, and then we have strain which are basically meat producers. This is not what we we want. This is not what the farmers want. What do they want? They want to have flexibility. They want to have the flexibility to produce eggs as well as to produce meat. They may use the meat to actually sell in some specific circumstance.

For example, in the country where I'm working now, these days, Ethiopia, Easter is next door, Orthodox Easter. So this weekend, the weekend after. And then when they will be typically eating a chicken, they will actually have a special dish called doro wat which is very symbolic, where you have seven different parts of the body of the chicken being cooked and with spice and so on. And they basically ... Chicken is essential to their culture and to the breaking of the fasting. But there will be other circumstances that the birds will actually be used to produce eggs, which then will be being fed to to the household, to the children. And chickens are so important for feeding small children and so on. So what you really want is flexibility, and flexibility is closely associated to diversity.

Jeremy: Yeah, but for that's fine for the smallholder in Ethiopia, keeping a few birds, some for the market, some for the children. Et cetera. Et cetera. But what do you say to the person in North America, in Europe, who seems to want the cheapest possible food? And that means, you know, chicken for almost no money, €2 a kilo or whatever it is. How do you get out of that mindset of thinking: Well, the only way to have cheap food is monoculture. How how do you get people to accept the fact that maybe they're paying for the cheap food in some other way?

Koen: Well, that's a big point. But I think, you know, like I said before, you know, we went into a trap and the trap is that we were thinking

that this part is the biggest solution. And I think also, because I'm talking with the farm industry, which is actually not so big, it's only actually one company who is deciding on the genetics of the chicken. What is the important lesson of this? That the monoculture is failing. Instead of believing in one farm, we have to believe in two farms. And this is also in the philosophy of thinking that, as I'm saying, we need the others so badly, that every organism is looking for another to survive. For example, that we can say: Okay, in one way we have to be busy with diversity and in another way we have to be busy with productivity. On a certain point, those has to cross with each other. We all know that our mentality in so called — so-called — developing countries has to change dramatically because otherwise we ruin our own nature and our environment where we live in. So I think the answer is clear.

Jeremy: So as a scientist, what have you got out of this collaboration with Koen, where he started making the cosmopolitan chicken? What have you gained as a scientist?

Olivier: I gain extremely ... I gain a lot. I gain a lot. Because first of all, you know, I think it's clear from the interaction we have here that we have a common ground. And the common ground is diversity. We know that diversity is at the root of his art. It's also at the root to agricultural productivity. Without diversity, there is no production. There is no improvement of production for any livestock species. So we are sharing something common here that we, both of us, we value diversity. One of the things about Koen, extraordinary, is that he knew that before, he managed to integrate that in his art and philosophy. So actually, I have to say he is feeding me actually, his art is feeding me as a scientist to continue to move ahead and to continue to actually explore this diversity, understand this diversity with the help of his cosmopolitan chickens, which are a unique type of beasts which doesn't exist anywhere else in the world.

Koen: Let me start with that statement, that was unbelievably important: That every organism is looking for another to survive. Also, for the artists, it's like this. And when Olivier, when I met him very early, actually, because he had the curiosity to be there from the beginning of the Cosmopolitan Chicken Project. When he found out that there was a guy doing this, actually, he was there already from this very, very, very beginning moment. So the curiosity to say: I come to you, I go into your barn, I see something happening here, and there

is hybridity and I believe in the hybridity. So for me that is the same trigger as he tells about about me to science. Science from him was the trigger to say, okay, here we are with something. The thing is that — and that's the beauty of it — art is a kind of freedom. And in the freedom of the art, the cosmopolitan chicken could exist. And what is good on Olivier, I have to say that he understands that freedom. Because if you as a scientist said, okay, let's take this and we're going to do science, you lose the art. But you also lose the science because you cannot learn anything if you do not let the art grow.

Jeremy: Koen van Mechelen and Olivier Hanotte, talking about the Cosmopolitan Chicken project and the Planetary Community Chicken it gave birth to.

Amazingly, and I promise I didn't plan to do this, this episode is going out on May the 22nd, which, according to the United Nations, is officially the International Day for Biological Diversity. It's supposed to be a celebration of the signing of the Convention on Biological Diversity in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. And I'm going to take the opportunity to deliver a little rant.

The big problem with the convention, and indeed of most talk about biological diversity, is that it ignores the fundamental diversity that we all depend on most directly. I'm talking, of course, about agricultural biodiversity. I'd even go so far as to say that ignoring agrobiodiversity is part and parcel of the whole idea that there's something separate between one unique species, our own, and the rest of biology in all its glorious diversity.

Okay, I admit that's a bit heavy, but I feel quite strongly that a lot of our problems stem from arrogantly setting ourselves apart from the rest of nature. Agricultural biodiversity, today encapsulated in Koen Vanmechelen's Cosmopolitan Chicken Project and the Planetary Community Chicken, is every bit as important as all the other biological diversity. And it saddens me to see that still, 41 years on, too many conservationists continue to see people and agriculture as part of the problem rather than as part of the solution.

Okay. I'll get off my soapbox now and let Koen Vanmechelen use it instead.

Koen: So we have to look to new ways and to listen more to our environment and the nature than to be than to be the middle of all

this. And I think it starts already with education. If you, if we go back in time, scientists and medical doctors, you know, when they start to study the first sentence that they get, and I'm talking about 40 years ago, was: when Nature goes wrong, we have to correct it. I think this sentence we should forget. We should really turn it and to say, you know, we have to we have to look where we go wrong and then to ask Nature how we can correct this.

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