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Interview with artist Koen Vanmechelen



What does the city of Venice mean for an artist like you? Could you reveal to us more about your future art projects in the city? How is the international Human Rights Pavilion evolving?

I consider Venice as a birthplace. This was the meaning of the title of my solo exhibition at the 2011

Biennale: “*Nato a Venezia*.” Venice is a city on the border of water and land, a city of duality, growing on elements of death and birth; it is fragile and strong. The city is a melting pot of differences, a cultural hybrid. Without finding the balance, there is always the risk it might be seen as inconsistent. I have a powerful connection with Murano, where I discovered the furnaces of the Berengo Studio. On Murano, the fire is kept alive, transformation happens. Contradictions are necessary. It is wise to balance them. An artist is always in a position of duality. Art is like the Oracle of Delphi; it incorporates both the good and the bad. It consumes you and enlightens you; it allows you to see the many sides of the mysterious hyperobject called existence.

We initiated the Human Rights Pavilion during the Biennale of 2019, together with the Global Campus of Human Rights, Fondazione Berengo, and the Mouth Foundation. At various locations around the globe, we organised debate platforms called Cosmocafes. From a table under a tree in Zimbabwe to the Botanical Gardens in Sydney. The pandemic slowed us down significantly. But when travel- and congregation bans were lifted last year, we still had the chance to host Cosmocafes in Zagreb and at LABIOMISTA (Belgium). It is imperative to keep moving. The foundations of the Pavillion exist out of the diversity of places, people, and topics.

During the pandemic, the Cosmocafes further evolved to be included in our *LaMouseion* project. *LaMouseion* invites young adults to “think the unthinkable.” In three knowledge boxes, every one of them is a piece of art; students from different universities and the local communities can work and think. We intend to exhibit one of these ‘boxes’ as an artwork at the Global Campus of Human Rights headquarters during the next Venice Biennale in 2022. Creativity encourages connection. The box will invite people and continue the Cosmocafes, discussing various topics, forming temporary thought clusters. The Human Rights Pavilion is a developing process as well as a place of connection. It has its rhythm involving many institutions. This will not happen overnight. The important thing is to keep on moving, finding the right moment to “cross-fertilise,” metaphorically speaking, when the right conditions are present. The right place and time, the right temperature, context, and love.

How could Venice be more efficient, attractive, and prepared to host artists like you and international cultural foundations and non-profits like your LABIOMISTA, the Mouth Foundation, Cosmogolem, and others?

A city is like a person. As Jung stated in his Red Book, a person is governed by two spirits: the spirit of the times and the spirit of the depths. The same applies to Venice. Venice is very accessible and welcoming for artists and international foundations. Because of the spirit of the depths. The issue there is linking the economic to the sustainable. In doing so, Venice could be more contemporary. A more vibrant city, less a commercial machine that temporarily offers an experience. When I was there during the pandemic, I could see a mentality switch happening. In the end, everything is about the mindset. It is never easy to transform a successful commercial product. But in Venice, the content is the key, and this should be much better appreciated. The Venice Biennial has the opportunity to bring content on an international level. The danger that looms is to pay too much attention to the design/form and not to the content — too much spirit of the times. The energy invariably comes from the content - the deep - and not from manipulating the forms.

With Venice’s 1600th anniversary, how do you view the relations between artists with the academic networks and authorities in Venice, between the EU and the world? Should they be strengthened with new ideas and contributions regarding possible sustainable future scenarios for the city? Do you have any specific proposals?

There is a lot of knowledge revealed through the arts. Art is thought from the future, says Timothy Morton correctly. People should learn to read the arts, to explore what they can teach us. Too often, we are only looking for confirmation of what we already know. It is an essential job for schools and universities to guide young generations to read the knowledge inside art. Art is fragile, yet its content can provide new

knowledge. Every artwork has a story. Remembering those narratives, their expertise, and lessons is of vital importance. Hence, we need more careful translators. Venice has everything to enable this. Everyone wants to visit this fantastic city. The biggest brains in the world could come to this tiny island to create and discover this new knowledge. However, if you show only the surface, there is a risk you become a candy land. Murano already fell into the trap of becoming a monoculture, losing its essence and viscosity. We could organise many conferences about this. We could work together to make society and the world better and richer and move away from overconsumption. Our world already changed on the inside; it will inevitably also vary on the outside.

How is human rights education relevant to the art world and to achieve the Global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Art is a human right, a critical contributor to evolution and to the achievement of the SDGs.

For me, freedom of art differs from freedom of speech. The absolute assertion of freedom of speech can lead to violence. For example, sometimes a freedom fighters' problem is that he will keep fighting even if he is free. Because fighting for freedom is what he knows. I realise that some people would disagree with me.

I see art differently. Real art reveals the point where everything is reconcilable, without direction or orientation. Art arises in an unorchestrated absolute freedom. It transcends the free will and ego of the artist. That means it requires the willingness to distance yourself from a single truth, knowing that change is the only constant. Good art moves away from power. It creates a middle ground, and it always shows different facets of issues, conflicts, themes, ideas, etc. In this way, real art maps the essence of man. It visualises the conflict that is in all of us, while it also reveals the absolute. This, to me, goes beyond freedom of speech. Art is a barometer of time. Art is knowledge.

Yet, because art is about opposites and conflict, the risk of abuse is always present. Art can thus be turned into a weapon. It can be used to limit our freedom of knowledge, restrict the diversity of perspectives, and simplify complexity into a monocultural message. We should constantly be aware of the power of art and work together to guard against this potential abuse. Because art impacts how and if we can progress. This is why freedom of art is a human right and why it is important to integrate this in all our educational systems. The freedom of art, the freedom to hold opposites. This feeling of freedom is essential for a peaceful society.

Could you share a message with the Global Campus of Human Rights community?

Build your community and build it further and more profound. Connect creatively and expand your network. Offer balance. Be a platform on which people, communities, and groups can tell their stories. The world communities are the essential aspects of the Global Campus of Human Rights. There is a need for new leadership, and the Global Campus is in the proper position to detect the new leaders in their small communities. You could find them early on and create projects where you could test micro and macro. This type of leader is better than the ones made randomly. Too often, today's leadership refers to somebody who seems a good leader but quickly transforms due to popularity and eventually ruins everything. There is a golden thread in the Global Campus of Human Rights. It leads from Venice to small communities. It can create memorable effects through experimental programs and creating safe and timely testing platforms.

For more information contact our [Press Office](#)

Elisa Aquino – Isotta Esposito – Giulia Ballarin

pressoffice@gchumanrights.org

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