

Chapter 16
“Newtopia”: Artists Address Human Rights
From Guernica to Guggenheim, Relations in Art and Politics from a Comparative Perspective,
Center for Basque Studies, 2015

“We can at least dream of a new way for human societies to live together, caring for and respecting each other as brothers and sisters.” Stéphane Hessel (2012)

In the fall of 2012 the city of Mechelen in Belgium hosted the exhibition “Newtopia, the State of Human Rights,” curated by Katerina Gregos. Closely based on the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948, this groundbreaking exhibition presents both historical and contemporary artists who are deeply committed to analyzing political process and social issues. Art works that address such topics as torture and immigration increase their impact when framed by human rights discourses. The exhibition places them in relationship to the four categories of human rights cited in the Universal Declaration, civil, political, social, and economic. In the process, “Newtopia” demonstrates the creative subtlety with which artists address these concerns. The affiliation with human rights provides a new direction for the analysis of engaged art, as well as new possibilities for more nuanced visual campaigns linked to activist issues.

While many treaties and covenants followed the original Declaration as a means of enforcing it legally, the principles laid out in the Declaration have continuously had enormous moral authority. They are constantly cited in movements across the globe as a means of shaming individuals and governments into action. Its articles were developed from June 1947 to December 1948 under the auspices of the newly formed United Nations and in the midst of the emergence of the Cold War, the partition of India and Pakistan, and the creation of the State of Israel.

The committee, chaired by Eleanor Roosevelt, received input from thinkers around the world, including Mahatma Gandhi, Chung-Shu Lo, a Confucian scholar, and Humayun Kabir, a renowned Bengali leader. They all stated that the principles of human rights, if not the term, existed in their cultures and ideologies.¹ At the same time, these rights, as thought through by the original writers from diverse backgrounds, are fundamental to human existence everywhere. Some recent writers have contested that rights are culturally contingent, and it is true that rights-based language has Western origins. However, the rights articulated by the Universal Declaration began by carefully incorporating non-Western conceptions of ethical responsibility, and they have evolved since their adoption through myriad social, legal, and political movements from around the world. Thus, rights such as that articulated by Article 3, “Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person,” are expressed in rights-based terms, but have come to mean much more than narrow or Westernized articulations of “rights.” Life is not a culturally contingent idea.²

¹ Glendon, *A World Made New*, 73–74.

Both the Declaration and “Newtopia” take the Holocaust during World War II as their foundation and point of departure. In the Preamble of the Declaration, the first statement of principle is the “inherent dignity . . . of all members of the human family . . . , whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts . . . it is essential . . . that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.” Likewise “Newtopia” is a direct response to those same “barbarous acts” in both its location and purpose. Mechelen, Belgium is located half way between Antwerp and Brussels, and was a major center for the deportation of Jews, Roma, and others to Auschwitz during World War II. In November 2012, concurrently with the “Newtopia” exhibition, the City of Mechelen opened Kazerne Dossin, a Memorial, Museum, and Documentation Center of the Holocaust and Human Rights. The museum is directly opposite the army barracks in which people were gathered for deportation. Commissioned as part of “Newtopia” is the artwork, *MenschenDinge* by the artist Esther Shalev-Gerz.³ According to the catalog, the word is invented by the artist. It can mean “‘the human aspect of objects’. The original German, however, is much wider, allowing for a variety of possible interpretations. The human and the object blend in the German word, the object becomes humanized, animated and the human objectified to some extent. These objects-by- humans, or human-objects can be perceived as a community of a kind, because they have shared the same dehumanized life.” The artist presents interviews with professionals organizing Auschwitz as a memorial site. They are responding to the objects that survived at the camp after it was liberated. On other floors, the museum documents as thoroughly as possible, the names and faces of 26,000 of those who were deported.

The Declaration and the exhibition are organized around the same groupings of human rights. In the Declaration the articles are conceptually ordered into individual rights, civil rights, political rights, economic, social, and cultural rights, and finally by the rights and responsibilities of the individual in society. In the exhibition, these ideas are ordered into four chapters: civil and political rights in Chapter 1, and social, economic, and cultural rights in Chapter 2. Chapter 3 addresses the same human rights from the perspective of changes in the world since 1948, including decolonization, globalization, global capital, and multiculturalism. Chapter 4 calls for a new way to realize human rights in “Thinking beyond the Here and Now” It is described as “poetic, transformative leaps of the imagination,” and “a diagnostic, programmatic of radical intervention in real life.”⁴

² Gregos, “Righting of Human Rights,” 22–24 as well as Hessel, “Interview” with Stéphane Hessel, *Newtopia*, 103–4 discuss this question. Stéphane Hessel participated in the original process of drafting the Declaration in 1948. He had his roots in the French Resistance movement. His pamphlets *Indignez -Vous!* (Time for Outrage!) 2010 and *Engagez-Vous!* 2011 became worldwide bestsellers and handouts during the Occupy movement and beyond. He died in February, 2013, an outspoken activist to the end: Weber and de la Baume, “Stéphane Hessel, Author and Activist, Dies at 95,” *The New York Times*, February 27, 2013.

³ According to the catalog, the word is invented by the artist. It can mean “ ‘the human aspect of objects’. The original German, however, is much wider, allowing for a variety of possible interpretations. The human and the object blend in the German word, the object becomes humanized, animated and the human objectified to some extent. These objects-by humans, or human-objects can be perceived as a community of a kind, because they have shared the same dehumanized life.” Unsigned, *Newtopia*, 237

⁴ Gregos, *Newtopia*, 49.

As a curator, Katerina Gregos has already demonstrated her ability to take on art that addresses complex and controversial political issues in “Speech Matters,” the Danish Pavilion at the 54th Venice Biennale in 2011. Although the controversy over the cartoon that depicted Mohammed published in Denmark in 2005 was one starting point for the pavilion, Gregos framed “freedom of speech” as a discursive issue with both historical and international significance. She assembled eighteen artists from diverse cultural backgrounds and explored the topic further with a thoughtful catalog.⁵

In the present exhibition she has followed the same model, but greatly enlarged the theme and the scope. The art in “Newtopia” demonstrates the ways in which artists offer dramatic alternatives to the usual photographs and videos sponsored by human rights campaigns. As Ariella Azoulay concisely states in her catalog essay: “Human rights discourse as embodied in photography has cultivated two major figures to date: the victim, whose rights have been violated, and the spectator who is supposed to recognize this violation.”⁶ The straightforward, and actually effective, purpose of these photographs is to generate guilt and pity in order to encourage us to give money to the non-profit to help the situation.

The fact that Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch are co-sponsors of “Newtopia” demonstrates that they are happy to embrace new ideas in their visual campaigns. Human Rights Watch, in particular, has already offered alternatives to traditional photographic approaches to visual imagery of human rights. The Human Rights Watch Film Festival shown annually in several cities states its commitment to bringing together creative thinking and human rights.⁷

Although photography is a dominant medium in “Newtopia,” these artists re-negotiate the space between themselves, the subject, and the viewer in order to create new perceptions. As Katerina Gregos states “[art’s] great power is that it is able to change the way people *think* about the world. Art may expand perceptual horizons.”⁸

The benchmark artist of the exhibition, Alfredo Jaar, dramatically demonstrates that idea. In his early work, shown in Chapter 1, Jaar presents us with the perpetrators of human rights violations, rather than the victims. As a Chilean, Jaar’s subject is the CIA-engineered coup that killed Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. In *Untitled (Handshake)*, he displays the

⁵ Gregos, ed., *Speech Matters*, Danish Pavilion, 54th Venice Biennale.

⁶ Azoulay, “The (In)visible Victim-Deconstructing the Spectator’s Frame,” 67.

⁷ Human Rights Watch Film Festival statement of purpose: “Through our Human Rights Watch Film Festival we bear witness to human rights violations and create a forum for courageous individuals on both sides of the lens to empower audiences with the knowledge that personal commitment can make a difference. The film festival brings to life human rights abuses through storytelling in a way that challenges each individual to empathize and demand justice for all people.” <http://ff.hrw.org/about>, accessed April 20, 2013. Another, less well-known example is the systematic photographic portrayal of human rights, as both absence and presence, is Kálin, Muller, and Wyttenback, eds., *The Face of Human Rights*. This book is based on a spiral of human rights, with “The Right to Life” at the center, moving outward to nine groupings of human rights that provide a concise summary of the longer Declaration. It includes five hundred photographs from all over the world that record abuses of human rights, those who work to keep those rights and those who enjoy those same rights.

⁸ Gregos, “Righting of Human Rights,” *Newtopia*, 31.

covers of *Time* magazine with Henry Kissinger and Salvador Allende, as well as a newspaper photograph of Kissinger shaking hands with the dictator Augusto Pinochet, who came into power following the coup and perpetrated massive violations of human rights in every area of life.

In Chapter 4, the utopian chapter, Jaar honors women who have stood up for human rights. *Three women (Aung San Suu Kyi, Ela Bhatt and Graça Machel)* includes three tiny photographs of the three heroes of human rights, in Burma, India, and Mozambique respectively. A forest of floodlights illuminates but almost renders impossible to see, the tiny photographs, suggesting the idea of their massive fame as well as the illumination and magnification of their enlightened ideas. Jaar frequently works with the primary source for a photograph, light and the absence of light, as a metaphor of the dialectic of enlightenment and ignorance. In highlighting heroes, Jarr parallels the exhibition catalog which features statements from six heroes as a major feature. The six heroes are two Pulitzer Peace Prize winner Aung San Suu Kyi (Burma) and Shirin Ebadi (Iran), as well as Anna Politkovskaya (the murdered Russian journalist who was exposing human rights abuses in her country), Liu Xiaobo (an imprisoned public intellectual in China), Aman Mahfouz (the young woman who called people to Tahrir Square in January 2011), and Carina Govaert (representing a Peace Community of San José de Apartadó in Colombia).

“Newtopia” also sponsored a one person exhibition of Jaar’s work in Brussels, “Let There Be Light,” focusing on his work in Africa including the *Rwanda Project*. In the immediate aftermath of the genocide that killed one million Tutsis by Hutus from April to July 1994, Alfredo Jaar went to Rwanda, perhaps because he had “seen” mass civilian death in Chile only through absences. He took thousands of photographs, made an obsessive report, but when he returned home he could not look at his work for two years.⁹

When Jarr finally did display his photographs, he put them into photographic black boxes stacked up in piles, so that the images were invisible. Instead of viewing a photograph, we read narratives written on the top of the box, based on the stories of specific individuals that Jaar had photographed. He wanted to avoid the superficial experience of the “other.” He offers instead a graveyard that looks like a minimalist installation of black cubes.

Another Rwanda related installation, *The Eyes of Gutete Emerita*, gives us only the eyes of a woman whose entire family had been slaughtered in a church before her very eyes. Below is her narrative. The photograph of the eyes, enlarged, with each eye framed separately, draws us in. Her eyes saw the killings; they contain the killings; they live with the killings. One survivor’s eyes connects to us more directly than statistics about death.

Krzysztof Wodiczko, another featured artist of “Newtopia,” dramatically departs from traditional photographic representation in a different, though affiliated, way, as he addresses the human rights of refugees, and displaced persons, the right to work, and the many other rights that undocumented immigrants cannot access easily. His public installation, *The New*

⁹ He consciously “disappeared” (did not exhibit) the photographs that he took of ordinary people caught up in the mass murder. As he explained, “I have always been concerned with the disjunction between experience and what can be recorded photographically. In the case of Rwanda, the disjunction was enormous and the tragedy unrepresentable.” Quoted in *Let there be Light, The Rwanda Project 1994–1998*, unpaginated. This book includes a detailed discussion of all the formats of the project.

Mechilinians, was based on interviews with undocumented immigrants to Mechelen both recently and in the past. It was both intimate and public. Wodiczko worked with the immigrant rights group “Werkgroep Integratie Vluchtelingen” (Refugee Integration Working Group) to conduct the interviews. The refugees speak in several languages reflecting their point of origin and a few speak Flemish. They become the “face of the city”: their eyes look down on us in a live projection (the eyes blink and move) as we listen to them speak about their nightmares, and their fears, one woman speaks about her absent husband, and questions us “how can a human being be illegal?” The artist points out that, in the Bible, the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because they mistreated newcomers.

In the installation, people hiding in the shadows hear their voices and see their eyes projected at the center of the main city square. The façade of the City Hall becomes their mask. The artist spoke of his hope that this transmission directly to the public might make a new consciousness possible that will change people’s perspectives and make the work itself obsolete. Democracy is measured in part, according to Wodiczko, by its openness to strangers. These immigrants are now giving us the opportunity to properly welcome them

Other artists in “Newtopia” altered expectations with media such as posters, sculpture, painting, installation and found objects, For example, they create installations with objects that are signifiers of a social issue, not in themselves, but in the context in which they were found as in the example of Esther Shalev-Gerz mentioned above. Ziyah Gafić followed the same process in *Quest for Identity*, with his photographs of artifacts from the war in Bosnia. The International Institute of Social History assembled large constellations of posters from many protests, affirming the idea that collaboration, not individuality, is the way to a better world. Still others create multimedia actions like Satch Hoyt’s *Say It Loud*, a podium of one thousand books on the African diaspora and a free speech platform. Other artists participate in large public actions or document public theatrical gestures. There is nothing obvious in these works: even when artists adopt traditional media or aesthetics, they do so with odd scale, disorienting relationships, peculiar colors. In other words, the deformation, exaggeration, or deconstruction of traditional media and aesthetics are part of the social challenge.

At the entrance of the extensive Chapter 1 in the Mechelen Cultural Center, Mona Hatoum’s neon globe, *Hot Spot*, spills its neon red light into surrounding spaces. In a nearby gallery is her sculpture/found object, *Exodus II*. Two other works included in Chapter 3, *Infinity* and *Conversation Piece II*, give the well-known Palestinian artist, who is doubly exiled from her homeland and from Lebanon, a strong presence. Hatoum adeptly manipulates our expectations with ambiguity and challenging imagery that at first appears straightforward, but with further viewing becomes layered references to urgent social issues. The stainless steel globe, glowing with red/orange neon, can refer both to the idea of the global and permanent wars of the planet, or to global warming and climate change, as our planet heats up. Of course those two ideas are interconnected, although that connection is rarely made; war is one of the biggest sources of CO² in the air, not to mention other types of pollution. Hatoum succinctly offers us the connection. Her *Exodus II*, with its two found suitcases connected by human hair also offers several possibilities for interpretation: exile, refugees, human trafficking, forced migration, and deportation. In *Conversation Piece II*, 2011, a circle of chairs connected by a wire spider web, multiple human rights concerns, the right to the privacy of your home, protection of property, and freedom of expression are just a few possibilities referred to.

Chapter 1 ranged from personal liberties to participation in political life. It included references to the US Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa, Tiananmen Square, the Bosnian War, and resistance to oppression in Latin America, Turkey, and in the post-Communist state of Belarus. Well known quotes such as “A Right Delayed is a Right Denied” (Martin Luther King), and “If you don’t stand for something you will fall for anything” (Malcolm X), appeared on the wall near Hatoum’s globe.

Historically, the earliest works were by two printmakers, Belgian Frans Masereel and German Franz Meyer, both of whom fled the Nazis. Masereel worked in woodcut; as a conscientious objector, his art indicted the horrors of war. Almost all of his work was destroyed by the Nazis. Meyer published his linocut illustrations in Communist and other left-wing publications, survived only by chance and are shown for the first time in “Newtopia.” Printmaking has always had a strong role in protest art most famously in Francisco de Goya’s etchings of the *Disasters of War*. Because it is easy to produce in multiples, printmaking, from woodblocks, engravings, and etchings to silkscreen, lithography, and digital prints, always plays a prominent part in protest art in all venues from the street to the gallery.

Leon Golub works in the traditional medium of painting on canvas, but he creates large, simplified imagery that depicts paramilitary interrogation in Nicaragua in the 1980s, showing us that the right to a fair trial and the prohibition of torture have been violated for decades. The almost life size scale intentionally immerses us and implicates us in the action. These actions are now chillingly familiar to everyone as a CIA trained torture technique that was continued in the Iraq War.¹⁰

Some of the actions in Argentina protesting the thousands of disappeared during the military dictatorship were documented by Eduardo Gil. He presents a public project by the mothers of the disappeared (Madres Plaza de Mayo) from 1982 to 1983, in which they created life-size silhouettes to represent some of the “desaparecidos.” *El Silhouetazo* made visible some of the thousands of people who were taken by the police never to be seen again.

David Goldblatt worked in apartheid South Africa, the state absolutely based on racial discrimination. In this series he created intimate and dignified portraits of individuals and families in their stores in an Indian community in South Africa about to be removed from an area declared to be White Only. The right to housing, and the right to work are about to be destroyed, but rather than show the actual destruction, Goldblatt gives us the people in their homes before that happens, still in the midst of what they have made of their lives.

Turkish artist Cengiz Çekil modified twelve Coca-Cola bottles to look like handmade Molotov cocktails in *Towards Childhood Since Childhood*. Low lights cast a threatening glow. This work was a response to his childhood under martial law in Turkey from 1971 to 1973. His work combines a toy like feeling paired with a sense of threat and violence. The sense of constant danger within a seemingly harmless bottle also resonates with the sense of threat from homemade explosive devices that people in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and elsewhere deal with daily in the present.

¹⁰ In *A Question of Torture*, McCoy explains these connections in detail. See also Mahmood, O’Kane, Madlena, and Smith, “General David Petraeus and ‘dirty wars’ veteran behind commando units implicated in detainee abuse,” *The Guardian*, March 6, 2013.

Two African artists address the history of colonization and the current state of democracy. Sammy Baloji from the Congo photographs sites that were marked in a turn-of-the-century Belgian scientific expedition by Charles Lemaire. Comparing the “objective” early photographs and the contemporary site tells a story not of science, but of changing belief systems. Boniface Mwangi, based in Kenya, documented the 2007–2008 election between Mwai Kibaki (Kikuyu) and Raila Amollo Odinga (Luo) and the violent reaction to what was perceived as a rigged elections in Kibera, Nairobi, a huge slum outside the city center. All of these artists are addressing violations of political rights by the state.

Thomas Locher working only with words creates a transition between historical and contemporary human rights references. On large wall panels, he wrote in bold letters the text of Article 5 addressing torture in the Universal Declaration, Article 7 “All are Equal Before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law,” and Article 14 “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.” Amidst the quotations, he inserted his tiny questions typed or written in red and underscoring the theme of the contradiction of the state’s actions with the ideals of human rights. The relationship of individual rights to community responsibilities, of the idea of freedom of the individual in relation to the benefits provided most effectively by the state is a central issue of human rights enforcement and has been debated since the very first discussions of human rights in the 1940s.¹¹ It is still at the center of political disagreements today.

Since 2008, Belarusian political activist and artist, Marina Naprushkina, has pursued multimedia resistance techniques addressing lack of freedom of thought and belief for individuals and the absence of freedom of expression, assembly, and movement for the collective public. She refers to her activities collectively as the “Office for Anti-Propaganda.” It includes, in this installation, two videos, several drawings, and a wall chart that dramatically diagrams the lack of human rights in Belarus. Within the country, she also distributed, with the help of local activists, a self-published politically-charged newspaper *Self#governing*. According to the artist: “The second edition of the paper analyzes the patriarchal, masculinist system of government in Belarus. It shows how women themselves unwittingly perpetuate this model, and possibilities for changing the situation. Considering the recent wave of protest and resistance across the globe, *Self # governing* can be read – and used – as a guide for daring to think about political alternatives worldwide.” In Naprushkina’s video *Patriot II*, the artist carries a portrait of the president through the streets. The video is deadpan, humorous, ironic, and provocative. Naprushkina’s formal approach sometimes echoes the colors and geometric abstraction of early Russian avant-garde art from the immediate post-Revolutionary era, an important reference point for political art. Her strategy is called radical “civil obedience”: quoting or acting on the words of the documents that are intended to safeguard human rights, when in reality, these rights are constantly violated.¹²

U.S. artist Taryn Simon’s large photographs of *The Innocents* points to the miscarriage of justice with photographs of people who served jail time, based on mistaken identity (through

¹¹ Glendon, *World Made New*, 39–40.

¹² Sorokina “Between poetic justice and legal imagination,” *Newtopia*, 82–84.

photographs), for crimes that they did not commit. Her unusual concept is to place the freed prisoner at a scene related to the original crime or misidentification, a place the innocent men have never been to before. These poignant images are extraordinary testaments to individual survival in the face of state wrongdoing. They underscore the commitment of the exhibition to avoid simply documenting misfortune, but to present us with the strength of survival and resistance. The constant negotiations of individuals to assert human rights in opposition to state oppression is one of the central themes of Chapter 1.

Chapter 2 in the Old Mechelen Meat Market considered social and cultural rights such as work, housing education, and women's rights. At the center of the space a small separate gallery held the work of self-taught Belgian artist Wilchar. Wilchar was detained in a concentration camp in Belgium during the war, and his art work is an ongoing and blunt criticism of the abuses and hypocrisies of the Catholic Church as well as other topics.

On the outside of this enclosure, the brilliantly colorful photographs of Ravi Agarwal, from India, seduce us into looking closely at globalization and its impact on ordinary workers. As is the case with David Goldblatt, Agarwal's photographs are intimate; they create a rapport between the viewer and the workers he photographs. In the series *Down and Out: Labouring under Globalisation*, he conveys human dignity in the face of unimaginable oppression of working conditions in the unregulated informal economic sectors. Agarwal follows these people as individuals, engaging with their work in various industries from diamond processing to construction. Because of his close connection to his subjects, he can photograph a young girl looking directly at him as she carries eight bricks on her head. The photograph conveys not helplessness but stamina.

Olga Chernysheva's simple black and white drawings of homeless people are not pitiful; they represent a human condition that violates a basic human right to housing. A tiny typed inscription reads "Person protected by a smoke." "Person protected by a Coat," the "bare life," means of survival in the absence of all else. The artist pairs these drawings with a video, "Festive Dreams," suggesting the dreams of plenty of the homeless. Sleeping in the street becomes normalized when the state fails to provide the human right of housing.

The right to housing, protection of private life, and the sanctity of the home are addressed in the installation of Palestinian artist Taysir Batniji. *GH 0809(Gaza Houses)* looks like a series of real estate advertisements, with a house and a text, until we realize that all the houses are ruined, and the texts describe the apartment or house before it was destroyed. The neutrality of the descriptions that ignore the current uninhabitable condition of the house underscores the violation of right to housing. In each case the (large) number of people who lived in the bulldozed house is listed. The Palestinian situation also violates the human right to a nationality. Batniji's conceptual photographs intentionally echo known references, as in his *Watchtower* series that recall the benchmark conceptual photography of Hilla and Bernar Becher of abandoned industrial towers in Germany. In this case, the towers are not abstract forms, but real towers occupied by unseen soldiers, who are enforcing military checkpoints. Creating the photographs of the towers was difficult. According to the catalog, the artist actually asked "a Palestinian photographer living in the West Bank to shoot the images for him . . . Under the conditions of occupied Palestine, the photographer did not have the time needed to find the perfect vantage point or ideal light conditions. Nevertheless, the images speak

volumes of the oppression and surveillance suffered by the Palestinians under the Israeli military occupation.”¹³

Women’s rights are singled out in Chapter 2 in the photomontages of Lynn Hershman Leeson in which women’s limbs are merged with cameras. The result is the image of a woman who is both disempowered and resistant: sometimes the woman’s face stares at us defiantly. Yet, they also suggest the way in which women’s bodies are caught up in the technology of capitalism. Even more defiant is the video by Barbara Hammer, *Superdyke*, a fantasy of “Amazons marching through San Francisco, symbolically claiming public spaces.” Hammer asserts the rights of women to freedom of movement, assembly, and equality.

Chapter 3, located in the Museum hof van Busleyden, focused on environmental and economic issues, sexual abuse, collective protest, and power. Tom Molloy’s *Shake and Protest* approaches two aspects of public space: government leaders whose interchangeable photographs shaking hands flatten into a single elite image and the dozens of ordinary people protesting oppression all over the world. Their tiny photographs, taken from public media, and painstakingly cut out and assembled in long linear arrangements document the right of public assembly and freedom of speech, both rights frequently denied as in the violent suppression of the #Occupy movement in the U.S. photographs of which are included.

Another reference to collective public protest by Kadir Attia, *J’accuse* (named, of course, after Emile Zola’s famous condemnation of the Dreyfus case in France), emphasizes immigration controversies in France, particularly focusing on veterans from colonized French Africa who fought for France in World War I and II. Attia takes an archival approach, filling a long wall with three rows of images. The top and bottom are historical posters, prints, and book covers with images of African soldiers who fought with the French, the center strip is a continuous enlarged contact print of black and white photographs taken by the artist as documents of demonstrations in the late 1990s by immigrant rights groups with whom he was working. After failing to get inside, the demonstration took place on the steps of the former Musée des Colonies in Paris (now the Musée des Arts d’Afrique et d’Océanie.) The protestors held large banners that read “They died for France, did they have their ID papers?” The French did not provide adequate veteran’s benefits for these soldiers until 2006. The richness and extent of the colonial material underscores his point, that these soldiers played a major part in French history.

Sexual abuse in the Catholic Church is addressed by Lieve van Stappen in her poignant installation of partially transparent glass christening robes that seem to move soundlessly toward an altar, like the innocent children abused by clergy in the Catholic Church. Van Stappen has paired the robes with a timeline that begins with the earliest proclamations of the church that condemns sex with young boys and continues to exposure of the extent of the sexual abuse that has taken place and the resignation of bishops in the last few years. The piece resonates with the contradiction of the delicacy of the sculptures and the appalling exploitation of innocence outlined in the impersonal black and white timeline.

Environmental degradation in Chapter 3, a topic of grave concern in the present, is represented by Edward Burtynsky’s large photographs of the construction of the Three Gorges

¹³ Gregos, “Taysir Batniji,” *Newtopia*, 160.

Dam in China. Burtynsky's aerial view of the vast amount of human construction on the land, with hardly a trace of nature left, makes visible the scale of destruction of the natural environment currently being pursued in the cause of traditional energy production. Burtynsky has also photographed the tar sands in Canada and other environmental catastrophes. The writers of the Declaration of Human Rights did not address the planet, nature, or our responsibility to nurture the earth and not destroy it, but the articles that address treatment of humans might well also be applied to nature. The fact that only human rights are listed is indicative of the Enlightenment attitude to the earth in which humans are more important than the land or the animals. Edward Burtynsky's photographs present the absolute destruction wrought by humans on the land by adopting a large scale and the representation of deep space: there is barely a trace of the natural world left.

Paired with environmental concerns are two videos that address current economic abuses, Jon Peter Hammer's *Anarchist Banker* with its talk show format features a slick looking "banker" who declares that from his perspective, his freedom must be completely uncontrolled by interference from the government. Wooloo (a pair of Danish artists, Sixten Kai Nielsen and Martin Rosengaard) has produced a music video, *We need you now (more than ever)*, formatted to mimic fund raising videos by Human Rights groups; a dozen individuals (they were intended to be celebrities according to the nonprofit model, but the artists were frequently refused) ask the Catholic Church to turn over some of its enormous wealth to save Europe.

Finally Chapter 4 suggests a way to move forward. Easily the most inspired work in this section was by Fernando Sanchez Castillo. In his video, *Pegasus Dance*, water cannon trucks normally used for riot control were choreographed to perform a type of balletic dance. The trucks created for oppression are freed to create poetry. This work captures the spirit of the purpose of the exhibition: the power of art to transform oppression.

Another work that offers solutions, but in a pragmatic way, is Thomas Kilpper's *Lighthouse for Lampedusa*. Kilpper proposes to specifically assist the thousands of immigrants who are crossing from North Africa by building a lighthouse with a powerful beam to guide them to the small Italian island of Lampedusa. He also proposes building an arts center as a place to "learn and listen" on the island, a resource for both the immigrants and local people.

Palestinian artist Khaled Jarrar's *State of Palestine* stamp project poignantly addresses the right to a nationality. He has created a passport stamp for the "State of Palestine" that he actually stamps in people passports. The risk that is incurred with Israeli border guards is real, although the stamp is an art work, and of course not part of a legal border process. Yet, the beauty of the stamp, and the artist's action in actually illegally stamping it into passports, makes clear the current Palestinian condition.

Seamus Nolan's objects align with the legal system as well. His multimedia installation, *Every action will be judged on the particular circumstances*, refers to a trial held in Ireland of Pitstop Ploughshares, a group who damaged a US plane on its way to the war in Iraq with pickaxes and hammers, as a protest against the Iraq war. Ireland was supposed to be neutral, but it supplied its airport for the US Army. At the trial they were charged with damaging property, but the defendants claimed they were actually protecting property, that of the people about to lose their homes in the war in Iraq. Nolan shows the actual pickax and hammers used in the protest, part of the evidence in the trial that were variously identified as weapons and antiwar protest tools. The installation includes many elements including a video of the action,

and talk show responses to it. It addresses the human right of protest and the right to life and dignity for those caught up in the war. The oppressive role of the state as exempted from human rights in the “war on terror” is foregrounded here as peace activists try to stop killing.¹⁴

Finally, two artists are part of current conflicts. Ali Ferzat, the Syrian cartoonist, who has become famous worldwide for his caustic representations of Bashar al-Assad and the multiple violations of human rights in the Syrian civil war, had several biting cartoons.¹⁵ Egyptian artist Ganzeer (Mohammed Fahmy) created the sardonic *Mask of Freedom*, a gagged and blindfolded man with the caption “Salute from the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces to the Loving Sons of the Nation.” He posted it as stickers all over Cairo. Murals by Ganzeer, together with other artists, were an integral part of the Tahrir Square uprising. He was invited to create a mural in Mechelen, but was delayed by difficulties in getting a visa. He declared when he finally arrived:

Hey! It’s great to finally make it out to Mechelen. I had initially intended on creating a mural that would honor the efforts of revolutionary people across Europe’s history such as Bakunin, Victor Dave, Ravachol, Jean Baptiste-Sipido, and Frank Van Dun for example via the creation of a fictional “revolutionary prophet” (Anarelic)—so to speak that—that would sort of represent all of these peoples’ teachings. But after the sheer difficulty I’ve faced in being able to travel from Cairo to Mechelen upon the invitation from a “human rights festival,” I’ve decided to do a little piece on freedom of mobility. Or rather. . . the lack of freedom of mobility!¹⁶

Like the people who created the original Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the artists selected for “Newtopia” are profoundly committed to social justice. They create art works that make visible the violations of human rights, the many forms of resistance to those violations, and transformative ideas for moving forward. These artists themselves are to be honored, in my opinion, as human rights heroes, for the dedication of their art to social justice. In doing so, they defy the traditional norms of the art world, which honor aesthetics more than content, and abstraction more than realism.

In the “Newtopia” exhibition, the City of Mechelen, with the collaboration of Curator Katerina Gregos, has indeed moved forward¹⁷ from its dark heritage to a new identity of enlightened sponsorship of artists who seek to make the world a better place. The exhibition

¹⁴ Sorokina, ‘Between poetic justice,’ refers to the “state of exception,” in Nolan’s work in her detailed discussion [80–82].

¹⁵ There is a long tradition of dissident art in Syria as described in cooke (sic.), *Dissident Syria*. Another current example is “Top Goon, Diary of a Little Dictator,” a humorous puppet show with relentless attacks on the government. See Rives “Art and revolution: The Syrian case,” *NearEastQuarterly* Saturday, March 24, 2012, available as a downloadable pdf at <http://www.near-east-quarterly.com/index.php/2012/03/24/art-and-revolution-the-syrian-case/>. Accessed April 22, 2013.

¹⁶ Statement on Newtopia blog <http://www.newtopiablog.com/ganzeer-and-his-mural-for-newtopia/>. Accessed April 20, 2013.

clearly demonstrates the extent and sophistication of socially engaged art, its effectiveness, and the possibility that its cumulative presence in the world can deeply affect perceptions of human rights as moral imperatives. The age old model of conflict and conquer is clearly no longer viable. In these artworks, a new model emerges, that of art paired with human rights, a partnership that can change perceptions about the relationship of human beings to the planet.