

# BELGIAN ARTIST LAUNCHES WORLDWIDE HUMAN RIGHTS PROJECT KOEN VANMECHELEN'S MOVING PAVILION

During the opening of the 58th Venice Biennial, Belgian artist Koen Vanmechelen chose the sixth edition of GLASSTRESS to initiate the birth of the evolving artwork Human Rights Pavilion. A work of art that will take shape during its two-year world tour, visiting almost every continent. In 2021, Vanmechelen will present his completed OPUS to the Venice Biennale as an appeal, and possibly as the foundation for a recurring pavilion dedicated to international human rights.

## CONTEMPORARY ART AND GLASS

Artist Koen Vanmechelen heralded the birth of the Human Rights Pavilion at the sixth edition of GLASSTRESS, a show curated by Vanmechelen and fellow artist Vik Muniz honoring ten years of GLASSTRESS and 30 years of Berengo Studio. The 2019 exhibition on the famous 'glass' island of Murano, shows an impressive line-up of glass art by leading contemporary artists from all over the globe, including installations by artists as Ai Weiwei, Tony Cragg, Thomas Schütte, Javier Perez, Erwin Wurm, Jaime Plensa, and Mat Collishaw, amongst others.

For Vanmechelen, who has been involved in GLASSTRESS since its inception, initiating the Human Rights Pavilion at GLASSTRESS was a straightforward decision. Thirty years ago, Adriano Berengo started to redefine the relationship between modern art and glass, a much-neglected material with vast potential. Berengo's furnaces on the island of Murano became a temporary refuge for artists, the forever migrants of our time, and the cultures they represent. Since then, more than 160 contemporary artists and designers from Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Asia, visited his famous furnaces on the island of Murano, shaping their creativity

in flexible transparency together with Berengo's artisans. Human rights and glass share not only fragility, but also transparency and the flexibility to adapt in a given context.

## HUMAN RIGHTS

At the initiation of the Human Rights Pavilion, Vanmechelen also presented a new body of work, dedicated to the concept of Human Rights. COLLECTIVE MEMORY consists of Encyclopedias of Human Rights, combined with



*Collective Memory, Global Campus of Human Rights, Venice (IT), 2017*  
© Koen Vanmechelen, Photo Global Campus of Human Rights



*Collective Memory, Human Rights Pavilion, GLASSTRESS, Venice (IT), 2019*

© Koen Vanmechelen, photo Francesco Allegretto

a book of the DNA sequence of his renowned Cosmopolitan Chicken Project. They carry different glass objects, recurring symbols in the artist's work, revealing the delicate balance between nature and culture.

The works refer to Vanmechelen's firm belief that art has a role to play in the current debate about human rights, a controversial issue highlighted by globalization. Are human rights culturally relative? Does the human rights project have limits? Is the existing Universal Declaration on Human Rights outdated and Western-centered, as some claim?

## GLOBAL CAMPUS

To answer those questions, the internationally acclaimed Belgian artist works together with international partners Global Campus of Human Rights, Fondazione Berengo and the MOUTH Foundation to develop the Human Rights Pavilion. Vanmechelen: "This project needs people who can bridge to the Other. Every organism needs another organism to survive. The other is crucial for defining myself and for my own existence. I am the Other who is me. Shared fundamental and unalienable human rights are a matter of life and death to us as individuals, as a group, a species and the superorganism called Earth."

## HUMAN RIGHTS PAVILION

Over the next two years, the work of art will gather momentum through the dialogues, travels, correspondences, explorations and creations that Vanmechelen will be realising with various local partners across the globe. As it roams the planet, the pavilion-to-be will take shape by its contact with the 'others', people and organisations involved with or interested in human rights; from the Mapuche in Chile all the way to the United Nations in New York. The focal point is Vanmechelen's adage 'the global only exists through the generosity of the local.'

Vanmechelen: "Recently, globalization has shown that the human rights narrative is under continuous pressure by the banality of evil, by the destruction of nature, nationalism, climate change, inequality, and growing authoritarianism. The time has come to rewrite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, based on what we have so far experienced and learned and to also include the rights of the non-human Other, our co-species on the planet. Our interconnectedness with them make the rights of nature as valuable as human rights."



Collective Memory

© Koen Vanmechelen, 2019



Collective Memory, marble sculpture underneath the Battery - Studio Koen Vanmechelen, LABIOMISTA, Genk (BE), © Koen Vanmechelen, 2018, Photo by Kris Vervaeke

“In that context, we should situate my initiative to create the evolving artwork The Human Rights Pavilion. With the Human Rights Pavilion, I want to explore with others the complexities of human nature, the possibility of a universal concept of human rights and the role of art in its development. I firmly believe that in the Anthropocene, the era in which the human impact on the Earth’s geology and ecosystems reaches critical proportions, art can help in the development of this much needed new universal concept of human rights, taking into account local sensibilities. Connecting the universal with the local and making human rights not or less controversial.”

### COSMOCAFE

Vanmechelen’s tools include both living and non-living materials: wood, marble, glass, ceramics, photography, living bio-installations, as well as video messages, letters, private conversations, round table settings, café’s, and accidental encounters. Debate will be stimulated in all locations, through so-called SoTO dialogues in Cosmocafes. Those are local hubs to debate the conditions for sustainable coexistence of individuals and human cultures with each other, and with other species on the planet. The focus is on the existence of a body of human rights to which humans, and by extension nature on our planet

are inherently entitled. A concept that is in fierce decline worldwide, much like biocultural diversity is in decline.

### SOTO

Vanmechelen: “Through my longstanding work around children’s and nature rights, I learned that connecting to others is vital. Underlying the philosophy that unifies my work is ‘every organism needs another organism to survive.’ Survival depends on the survival of the other or SoTO. The Human Rights Pavilion comes together in three chapters: SoTO Dialogues, SoTO Environment and SoTO Legacy. Different partners are invited to contribute to both the artistic research and the development of the artwork, aiming to include as many disciplines, perspectives, and cultures in the creation.

At the end of 2020, all inputs will be reworked into a unifying OPUS. This collective memory of our moment in time and space, will be presented to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Commission and the President and Curator of the 59th Venice Biennale of Art. It will be accompanied by a call to establish a recurrent supra-national Human Rights Pavilion as part of the structure of the Venice Biennial.

THE HUMAN RIGHTS PAVILION DEVELOPS OVER A PERIOD OF 18 MONTHS AT DIFFERENT GLOBAL LOCATIONS AND THROUGH A WIDE VARIETY OF PARTNERS.

**MANFRED NOWAK, SECRETARY GENERAL GLOBAL CAMPUS OF HUMAN RIGHTS**

"It's a beautiful project, and the concept behind it is inventive and innovative. Initially, we linked it to our monastery of San Nicolo in Venice. It would thus become a 'stateless' pavilion at the Venice Biennale, centered on the topic of human rights.

We developed all kinds of ideas on how we would implement it. But then it went far beyond the original idea.

The Human Rights Pavilion has become a global project. It's a metaphor for all kinds of events in various countries in Latin America, Europe, and Africa, innovatively linking arts to human rights. Art to Koen Vanmechelen is not only an object, it is also a process, something that spreads a message while it's developing. In other words: art as a virus."

Visit the website to view the global tour destinations  
[www.humanrightspavilion.com](http://www.humanrightspavilion.com)

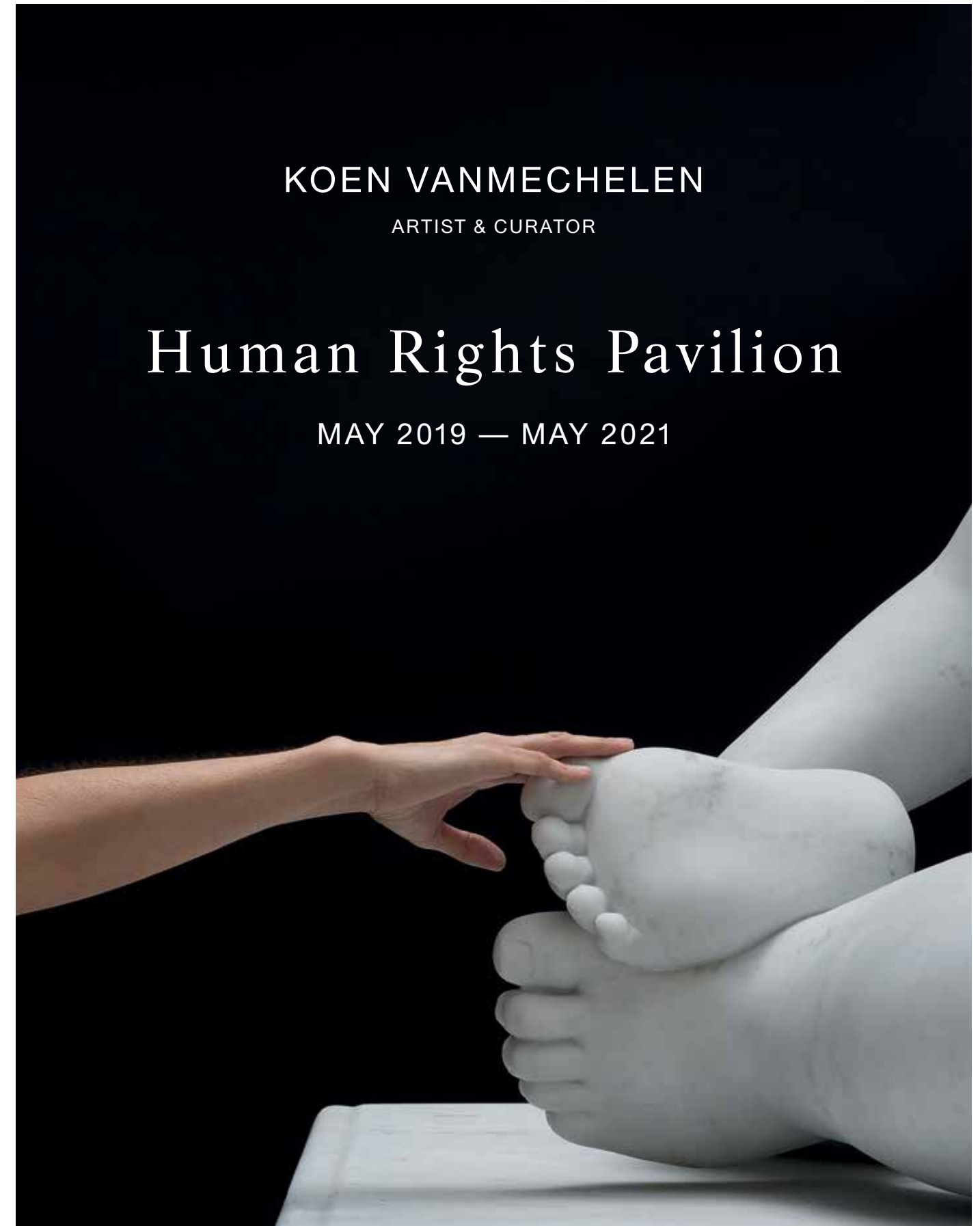


Manfred Nowak and Koen Vanmechelen at the inauguration of *Collective Memory* at the Global Campus of Human Rights, Lido, Venice (IT).  
Photo by Global Campus of Human Rights

**BIOGRAPHY KOEN VANMECHELEN**

Internationally renowned contemporary artist, Koen Vanmechelen (BE, 1965), works at the confluence of art, science, philosophy and social engagement. Key concepts in Vanmechelen's art are fertility, diversity, identity, domestication, de-domestication and human rights. A deeply ethical artist, his work is concerned about the

state of the Earth and a sustainable future for all species. He seeks both symbolically and concretely to open perspectives into a future where people do not exploit nature or each other but live in a state of balance. As an artist he is motivated by the desire to change the world, not by the power to possess it.



## CURATORIAL STATEMENT Human Rights Pavilion

Referring to the American author Ursula K. Le Guin's notorious 2014 speech: hard times are indeed coming. We need the voices of Artists, Writers, Thinkers, Dreamers "who can see alternatives to how we live now, who can see through our fear-stricken society and its obsessive technologies to other ways of being, and even imagine real grounds for hope. We'll need people who can remember freedom – poets, visionaries, artists – realists of a larger reality."

We need people who can bridge to the Other. Every organism needs another organism to survive. The other is crucial for defining myself and for my own existence. I am the Other who is me. Shared fundamental and unalienable human rights are a matter of life and death to us as individuals, as a group, a species and the superorganism called Earth. Recently, globalization has shown that the human rights narrative is under continuous pressure by the banality of evil, by the destruction of nature, nationalism, climate change, inequality, and growing authoritarianism. The time has come to rewrite the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, based on what we have so far experienced and learned and to also include the rights of the non-human Other, our co-species on the planet. Our interconnectedness with them make the rights of nature as valuable as human rights.

In that context, we should situate my initiative to create the evolving artwork The Human Rights Pavilion. Its realization is facilitated by the Global Campus of Human Rights, Fondazione Berengo and the MOUTH Foundation. With the Human Rights Pavilion, I want to explore the complexities of human nature, the possibility of a universal concept of human rights and the role of art in its development. I firmly believe that in the Anthropocene, the era in which the human impact on the Earth's geology and ecosystems reaches critical proportions, art can help in the development of this much needed new universal concept of human rights, taking into account local sensibilities. Connecting the universal with the local and making human rights not or less controversial.

The work is initiated at the same time as the 58th Biennale of Arts in Venice with an exhibition in an old glass furnace on the island of Murano and will come together over the following 18 months in and through different global locations, partners and individual contributors. I will collect and curate inputs from all over the world, through dialogues, travel, correspondence, explorations, and creations. My tools include both living and non-living materials: wood, marble, glass, ceramics, photography, living bio-installations, as well as video messages, letters, private conversations, round table settings, café's, and accidental encounters.

Different partners are invited to contribute to both the artistic research and the development of the artwork, aiming to include as many disciplines, perspective, and cultures in the creation. At the end of 2020, all inputs are consolidated and reworked into a unifying OPUS, a collective memory of our moment in time and space. The OPUS will be presented to the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, the European Commission and to the President and Curator of the 59th Venice Biennale of Art with a call to establish a recurrent supra-national Human Rights Pavilion as part of the structure of the Venice Biennale of Art.

The Human Rights Pavilion comes together in three chapters: SoTO Dialogues, SoTO Environment and SoTO Legacy. SoTO which is short for Survival of The Other gives a name to the different sections and weaves my fundamental philosophy through the various elements of the work: every organism needs another organism to survive. We are them.

Koen Vanmechelen



## PROMOTERS

### Global Campus of Human Rights

The Global Campus of Human Rights represents more than 100 universities in all world regions and is the biggest institution for human rights education in the world, initiated and supported by the European Union. Its vision is a world in which human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, as shared values of the European Union and the United Nations and as internationally binding legal standards, are fully realized. Based in Venice, the Global Campus of Human Rights seeks to connect arts, culture and human rights. — [www.eiuc.org](http://www.eiuc.org)

### Fondazione Berengo

Founded in 2014 by Adriano Berengo, Fondazione Berengo is a Venetian cultural institution that supports artistic endeavors and disciplines with a focus on contemporary art and glass. With other art institutions, most recently the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Fondazione Berengo sponsors exhibitions of contemporary art, architecture and design in a historic palazzo in Venice and other venues. Since 2009, in the context of the Venice Biennale, it has presented Glasstress, an exhibition of artworks created in glass in its furnace on Murano with internationally renowned contemporary artists whose work engages human rights issues, including Ai Weiwei, Erwin Wurm, Koen Vanmechelen, Lucy & Jorge Orta and Vik Muniz. — [www.fondazioneberengo.org](http://www.fondazioneberengo.org)

### MOUTH Foundation

MOUTH, Museum of Understanding, Trust and Humanity, is a private non-profit foundation, set up in 2013, by the immunologist and philanthropist Dr. Philip Remans and internationally acclaimed artist Koen Vanmechelen. The foundation links art with science and communities worldwide. It brings together a wide variety of global experts at unique locations and uses the transformational power of art to inspire cross-disciplinary public debate, research, and social evolution. MOUTH's ultimate mission is to bring art, science and communities together to convey the beauty and need of biocultural diversity. To this purpose, the foundation develops and supports exhibitions, cultural exchanges, international art projects, conferences with experts in various disciplines, research and community projects. — [www.mouth.be](http://www.mouth.be)

[humanrightspavilion.com](http://humanrightspavilion.com)

## H.E. ELENA BASILE AMBASSADOR OF ITALIA



Venice is, along with other Italian landmarks, one of the symbol of the so-called “Vivere All’Italiana”: its canals, the “aperitivo” and the “gondole” and of course the majesty of its “Palazzi” and museums.

The Venice Biennale is part of Venice’s charm, attracting thousands of tourists to visit the Arsenale and the Giardini, where the National Pavilions are set up. Belgium, for instance, was the first Country to install a National Pavilion at the Venice Biennale in 1907, thus testifying the already very strong cultural ties between the two Countries. Belgian painters Delvaux and Magritte came to Venice in 1949 to participate to the first Venice Biennale after II World World, confirming their role as leading figures in contemporary art. Venice Biennale is in fact, since its inception, a mirror to reflect art’s tendencies developing all around the world

Since the beginning of my mandate as Ambassador of Italy to Belgium, I focused on strengthening even further the cultural ties between Italy and Belgium. Also, thanks to the cooperation with the Italian Institute of Culture, we manage every year to promote Italian cinema, music and visual arts, as well as literature and theatre. A more structured cooperation with the Venice Biennale would certainly be one of my ambitions in the next years



*H.E. Elena Basile*



*Beautiful view of Grand Canal and Basilica Santa Maria della Salute in Venice*