

MANIFESTA

Press Release

Amsterdam, Monday the 19th of October 2026

Manifesta Director Hedwig Fijen steps down after 33 years

Hedwig Fijen (1961), Director of Manifesta, is stepping down from the European nomadic biennial she helped establish and has led for more than three decades through profound political, social and cultural transformation. Her departure marks an exceptional moment in the history of one of Europe's most experimental cultural platforms.

Where does one find the courage to establish an international biennial from nothing? And not just any biennial, but an international event that moves to a different European city every two years, often to places where geopolitical controversies are never far away.

When Dutch art historian Hedwig Fijen was invited to develop this ambitious initiative, launched by eight European countries in 1991, she was working as a curator at the Netherlands Office for Fine Arts in The Hague. She initially declined the offer before eventually accepting a challenge whose scale and impact she could hardly have foreseen.

What began as an experiment grew into the now legendary nomadic biennial Manifesta, which celebrated its 30th anniversary with its 16th edition in Germany's Ruhr Area in 2026, taking place in 12 post-War churches across 4 cities under the title *This is not a church*.

Hedwig Fijen continuously had to fight to secure public and private funds for the existence and survival of the organisation in order to realize its 16 consecutive exhibitions in dealing with the complex structures of local boards, which she chaired as usual with gusto when confronted with a great variety of political and bureaucratic procedures [...] At the end of the day, Fijen has been the virtuoso creator and acting conductor of the Grand Manifesta Orchestra 16 times over, disregarding lots of noises and sounds around her, each time convincingly playing profound music for the future. Bravo, Maestro!

– Gijs van Tuyl, former Head of National and International Exhibitions at the Netherlands Office for Fine Arts (Rijksdienst Beeldende Kunst) and former Director of the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

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Fijen has shaped and repeatedly reinvented Manifesta, steering this complex cultural undertaking through some of Europe's most turbulent political periods. From the fall of communism and the end of the Cold War to today's changing global order and renewed war on the European continent, she has ensured that each edition critically responds to the particular histories, tensions and aspirations of its Host City.

Under her leadership, Manifesta has continuously challenged and expanded its ambition, including the continuous introduction of new curatorial models, such as collective curating, urban visions, citizens' assemblies and alternative forms of cultural mediation have all become part of the biennial's vocabulary.

For this work, Fijen received the European Cultural Management Prize in 2018 and was listed number 35 in *Monopol's* Top 100 influential figures in the art world. Her bold leadership and introduction of collaborative models helped create a far-reaching European network of thousands of emerging artists, young professionals and cultural producers across more than a dozen countries.

This willingness to take risks, confront complex histories and explore new forms of cultural collaboration has made Manifesta different than other biennials. For many artists and cultural professionals who are now internationally established, Manifesta provided their first significant international platform.

"Over 33 years, Manifesta has become something like a glass that never emptied – constantly refilled with fresh ideas, challenges and surprises. And this is largely an expression of Hedwig's courage, determination and single-mindedness."

– Henry Meyric Hughes, former Director of the Hayward Gallery, London, and first President of the International Foundation Manifesta Supervisory Board

"Hedwig Fijen has shown that art can help people bear the truth, even when it is painful. Nietzsche wrote that we have art so that we do not perish from the truth, and she has put this idea into practice in 16 cities. She achieved this through her vision and determination, her ability to keep building where others would have given up, her understanding of what brings people together and her gift for inspiring others. Emilia van Lynden, Catherine Nichols and we as the Supervisory Board are proud to build on this legacy."

– Bercan Günel, Chair of the International Foundation Manifesta and Managing Partner of NGL

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Following her departure, Hedwig Fijen will spend the coming months reflecting on the emergence and evolution of Manifesta, drawing on her experiences of building a cultural platform across a changing Europe in the decades following the fall of the Berlin Wall. She plans to put these experiences into writing.

Fijen will be succeeded by a dual directorship, with Emilia van Lynden as General Director and Catherine Nichols as Artistic Director. Both have been closely involved with Manifesta for several years. The next edition of Manifesta will take place in Coimbra, Portugal, in 2028.

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