

Sous le haut patronage de  
Monsieur Emmanuel MACRON  
Président de la République



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## Manifesta BC AC: Manifesta Before Corona and After Corona

Whilst writing this text, in the midst of a pandemic, I can almost hear the windows of the world closing. Everywhere, governments have decided to close borders, entire populations have been isolated in their homes and, for many groups and individuals, traveling as well as any form of social contact beyond the sphere of the internet is made impossible.

The (feared) emergencies that threaten the world as we know it, - from the waning utopianism of 20th-century modernity to the end of climatic stability - have since urged us to rethink and remodel our lives, our economies, our dreams and realities, including the very concept and methodologies of something such as an art biennial.

For Manifesta, Europe's itinerant biennial, mobility of professionals, artworks and exchange of knowledge have been leading since the first edition in Rotterdam (1996), taking place in the last decade of the 20th century and the prime time of the somewhat naive belief in a new European form of solidarity and a global utopia, in which the Iron Curtain's deconstruction would be followed by many other walls falling down. That was then considered the core of our democratic civilisation.

Besides Manifesta, hundreds of other biennials and art fairs became part of an ever-expanding structure in the art world. But the expansion of global art during the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century started also to play a role in the exponential ecological destruction of our planet called earth. For a long time, critics have argued that biennials and fairs are mere forms of cultural branding, city marketing or stimulants for increasing tourism, rather than producing alternative aesthetic models or critical forms of art or discourses around it.

More than only criticising these events for being instrumentalised by the city marketers, global art events also consume unsustainable amounts of energy, as international artists, audiences and professionals are in need of aeroplanes, which allow the new creative classes to fulfil their position in the global art industry. The unsustainable consumption model of global art not only refers to our addiction to fossil fuel but also to an increasing quantity of works in exhibitions as well as the speed in between the production and consumption of artworks. Artists, organisers and art critics have been voicing their fear for some time of losing aesthetic and conceptual autonomy as well as their freedom of expression under the pressure of the growing market. This transnationalism of the growing neoliberal structures and the impact of this model also weakened the functioning of public art institutions, which

Manifesta 13 Marseille  
42 La Canebière  
13001 Marseille, France  
M: +33 (0)4 86 11 81 18  
[www.manifesta13.org](http://www.manifesta13.org)

Manifesta Head Office  
Herengracht 474, 1017 CA  
Amsterdam, the Netherlands  
Tel. +31 (0)20 672 14 35  
[www.manifesta.org](http://www.manifesta.org)

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seem to lose its power together with the recently plundered modern welfare state. The emerging presence of private art organisations shifts power to new players in the art world and with them different ideologies and financial agendas.

Yes, I am assured that a slow-down of the global model and the need for more sustainable organisation of art production might be found in the very places that often have been framed in terms of being on 'the periphery'. Moving to these places will also reshape the expectations that biennials produce, resulting in improving cultural infrastructures, instead of raising tourists and visiting numbers. Deeper bonds of regional collaborations and co-production with both partners specialised in both social mediation and architecture could become a more rewarding model, both for the cultural community in the host city as well as for the participants. Already, in 2010, in the run up to M9 in Genk, Limburg, we started preparations for a less spectacular, slower curated, more rooted in the community production process and less consumptive model which emphasized on including more profound and longer mediation and socially adapted structures which benefitted the schools and those local organisations, but were mostly invisible for the external art world and the international professionals.

I am aware of course of Manifesta's share in the globalisation of the art world. However, thanks to the nomadic nature, I believe that being a migrant organisation looking for asylum every two years and having to adapt to the needs of each host city, is bringing us so many alternative voices and urges us to constantly maintain in transformation, especially in these radically escalating times. Having to travel every two years to a new host city is, of course, exemplary of Manifesta's need for international mobility, open exchange of idea(l)s, visions, knowledge and histories between local and international individuals, as well as means to enable capacity building and artistic co-productions. Manifesta has already been working towards a distinctive model since the twelfth edition in Palermo (2018). Rather than organising exhibitions for international visitors, the focus is now on supporting already existing urban and social transformation processes, by helping to improving the host city's cultural infrastructures, on co-creation of already existing local initiatives as well as on the development of a legacy, which can be turned into concrete positive and constructive sustainable solutions in, for example, the material or non-material infrastructure for the host city.

By moving away from just producing a series of exhibitions, Manifesta is looking for collaborations with citizens and emphasise the potentials that might already exist in the local context rather than directly imposing abstracted discourses of a global world upon a community. Manifesta might rather reveal untold histories than only creating new ones from afar. The first urban study that Manifesta commissioned to the Rotterdam based Office of Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), titled *Palermo Atlas*, turned out to be a successful starting point for the development of both a social mediation as well as an urban transformation and the biennial artistic programme, as the collective project Cooking Sections invited in M12 produced shows. At Manifesta 12 Palermo, the collective presented *What is above is what is below* (2018), a series of installations and packed lunches. Triggered by the research presented in the Palermo Atlas, the duo started this project by analysing different techniques that have been used to control the conditions of water in Sicily in order to organise its distribution. Cooking Sections studied dry watering techniques that make cultivation without irrigation systems possible, giving the chance for plants to survive even in dry conditions. A series of installations set a stage around trees in Palermo to envision how to water with stones. Throughout Manifesta 12, a network of local food establishments offered a CLIMAVORE take-away meal, using drought-resistant ingredients. This type of artistic practice anticipates maybe the future of artistic production, away from the focus on visuality,

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symbolism or conceptualism, and maybe because of the current timeframe more into a sphere of sincere engagement that can be turned into a tool for people, in this example for Palermitani citizens.

Besides commissioning another urban study for Manifesta13 in Marseille in 2018, a series of so-called citizen assemblies have been developed during the preparations of Manifesta 13 in Marseille. The past years of civic protests in France by the Gilles Jaunes and other cities in the world inspired Manifesta 13 to try to intensify the dialogue with local Marseille citizens rather than only consulting or collaborating with professionals in the biennial. In the assemblies or workshops, citizens deliberately discussed the outcomes of the urban study of Manifesta 13, researched by MVRDV and were able to propose solutions that could help discuss the issues that MVRDV analysed in Le Grand Puzzle. Not long ago, a Marseille participant in one of those citizens assemblies proposed to transform the disused underwater tunnel of Marseille's Vieux Port into a glass passageway, like an aquarium, in order to stimulate people's imagination when walking through the structure. But, most importantly, the participant was convinced that the plan would raise more awareness about the high levels of pollution in the Mediterranean Sea.

With the upcoming, thirteenth edition of Manifesta 13 this summer in Marseille, the upcoming 25th anniversary of Manifesta in 2021 and the first activities of Manifesta 14 in Pristina starting soon, we are very much aware that this current health crisis followed by a possible economic crisis, creates the right momentum and maybe even the ideal circumstances for Manifesta, to reinvent itself, its nomadic model, its ambition to create a legacy, its exhausting strategies, its rigid structure every two years appearing in a new city and governance in close alliances with cities authorities and public bodies. As a migratory biennial looking for host cities every two years Manifesta might begin to miss the possibility of a stable home base, once.

However, we are dedicated to turn Manifesta into an organisation that fully embodies a new form of solidarity in every aspect, professionally, geographically, economically and socially. Needed today is a real understanding how to still function but avoid competitive systems in contemporary artworlds and more profound collaboration on a local base. I hope Manifesta's possible efforts support the institutional foundations of the emerging new worlds that rise from the current manifold crises, bringing an end to the exhaustion of lives in the twenty-first century.

You will hear from me in due time, from the European cities that I call home.

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