

MANIFESTA 10

The European Biennial of Contemporary Art

28 June — 31 October, 2014

St. Petersburg, Russia

The State Hermitage Museum

Press Statement

March 25, 2014

Hedwig Fijen

Director, International Foundation Manifesta and Manifesta 10

I want to first thank Prof. M. Piotrovsky, director of the State Hermitage museum, for all his personal courageous support in this undertaking from November 2012 up to this date.

As Director of International Foundation Manifesta and Manifesta 10 in St. Petersburg, Russian Federation, I wish to share my reflections and our position on the current escalating crisis. Despite the reactions in the media, Manifesta thinks that there are other ways forward than for calling for a boycott. We are open to all critical statements at large. We would like to offer opportunities for debating the different positions in an open discussion, now and during the Biennial in St. Petersburg. This we offer to artists, art critics, and opinion makers, of both Russian origin or international background, who, like we, struggle with the dilemma of how a contemporary art biennial with an artistic message should engage openly in contested areas where human rights are scattered and so-called criticism is not allowed.

Twenty years ago, I began researching and speaking with others about a model of a biennial that would move to different parts of Europe. Twenty years is a long time. It is of course twenty-five years since the fall of the iron curtain that separated Europe. Manifesta was born out of a historical moment that shifted the geo-political plates that reunited Europe. The 'cold war' era created a gap within Europe which held wider political implications globally. It created skepticism, suspicion, and for others, curiosity.

As someone who has witnessed and directed nine different Biennials in nine different European geo-political and socio-economic contexts, I can say that the organization often finds itself in a place of political non-alignment. The 'dilemma of being engaged or disengaged' is not only present in the current context of the Russian Federation but our critical engagement should also be proved in West European locations such as Zurich where Manifesta is hosted in 2016, and possibly in future host cities of Manifesta. We fight for artistic freedom, and we support curators and artists to investigate the sites of the Biennial and discuss the importance, sensitivities, and relevance of the proposed projects. We challenge the dialogue with the public and we discuss the relevance of the Biennial not only for the artistic community but also in relation to how it affects the daily lives of the general public. We offer training opportunities for those who are enthusiastic to be involved in a project like Manifesta so that the legacy of our work continues after the Biennial has gone. We are engaged with those communities that are stigmatized and need solidarity.

In regard to the complex situation in Ukraine and Crimea, Manifesta supports all those groups that fight for peaceful and non-violent solutions, whether in Europe or in the Russian Federation. Manifesta cannot and will not accept censor and self-censorship or unlawful intervention from any government in our activities. Our work is one of debate, negotiation, mediation, and diplomacy, that does not shy away from

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the conflicts of our time. We are not a political party nor an NGO, and do not operate under the aegis of any governmental authority. We operate autonomously and critically every two years in the complexities of each host city and our intentions should not be manipulated to legitimize the ruling powers. Manifesta supports ethical, curatorial, and artistic independence and tries to strengthen those forces and communities in society who are fighting for freedom of expression against any government that bases its power on censorship.

I appeal to those in power to find peaceful resolutions to any contested and conflicting situation; the current situation in Ukraine in particular, as well as in any country suffering conflict.

Manifesta has chosen to operate within contested areas. We choose to do this because we believe art provides an ultimate perspective and reflection on society. The biennial format offers a chorus of many voices. We choose to engage with a critical, pluralistic view, within a specific context. Manifesta has a responsibility to art and artists and to those who wish to engage with the context in which we situate ourselves. We hope that Manifesta 10 will offer the opportunity for local and international people to come to St. Petersburg, to engage with the program, to have discussions and for these discussions to reverberate within their daily lives.

Biennials like Manifesta should play a vital role in helping us better understand our place in this complex world. Biennials need to prove their relevance to today's issues in society, and to involve an audience in a critical dialogue that is not just about what they do, but why they do it.