

Flemish Minister for Welfare and  
Poverty Reduction, Culture and  
Equal Opportunities

Geneva, December 8, 2025

Minister Gennez,

Artistic Freedom Initiative (AFI) writes to express its concern regarding the recent communications issued by your Ministry concerning the future of the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA). The announcements of October 3 and 6, which first abandoned the long-planned new museum building and then proposed dissolving M HKA's museum status and transferring its collection and responsibilities to SMAK in Ghent, constitute an unprecedented disruption to Belgium's contemporary arts infrastructure.<sup>1</sup>

M HKA is a significant contemporary art institution in Europe, serving as a steward of an internationally recognized collection and a hub of artistic exchange. That such a museum, widely recognized as an internationally respected institution with a long-standing global profile in contemporary art, could have its mandate upended so suddenly and without an authentic democratic process is troubling. Particularly surprising is that this reversal comes at the very moment when M HKA was preparing for long-overdue infrastructural expansion. Rather than reinforcing the institution's capacity to meet international standards, the proposal destabilizes its future and threatens the continuity that museums, by definition, are meant to safeguard.

AFI is concerned by the cultural consequences of the proposal and by the absence of a transparent, consultative process in shaping such a significant decision, which risks setting a dangerous precedent for democratic cultural governance. A unilateral ministerial decision to dismantle a museum, reassign its collections, and redefine its purpose signals a profound erosion of institutional independence. Moreover, the government's invocation of the ICOM museum definition to justify this restructuring is fundamentally inconsistent with that very definition. ICOM describes a museum as a permanent institution in the service of society that operates ethically, professionally, and with meaningful community participation.<sup>2</sup> These standards are intended to protect museums from abrupt political intervention. By undermining M HKA's permanence and reassigning its collection without any participatory process, the proposal runs counter to ICOM's principles and to the basic norms of cultural governance.

AFI's concern is grounded in our research on artistic freedom and cultural institutional autonomy across Europe.<sup>3</sup> In contexts where democracy is backsliding, cultural institutions are often among

the first to face political interference. We have documented this pattern in Hungary, Poland, and Slovakia, where governments have used structural reorganization, together with other mechanisms to reshape cultural bodies according to political priorities. These actions rarely appear at first as direct attacks; instead, they manifest through administrative decisions, restructuring plans, or “reforms” that gradually undermine independence. When cultural institutions lose their autonomy, democratic societies lose their capacity for reflection, critique, and collective memory.

That such a situation is poised to occur in Belgium, a democratic country with a long-standing commitment to cultural rights and public support for the arts, makes the development all the more alarming. Arbitrary state intervention into a museum’s mandate, location, and collection management, if left unchallenged, risks normalizing political overreach into the cultural field.

AFI therefore joins the many artists, cultural workers, institutions, and community members in Belgium and abroad who have spoken in defense of M HKA. We urge the Flemish Government not to proceed with the plan scheduled for presentation on December 15. We respectfully call on the Ministry of Culture to halt the proposed restructuring, to engage in meaningful dialogue with the museum and its community, and to reaffirm its commitment to international standards of cultural governance, including the autonomy, permanence, and participatory character that define museums under the ICOM framework.

The future of M HKA is not solely a cultural matter; it is a democratic one. How Belgium responds at this moment will set a precedent for the protection of artistic freedom, institutional independence, and cultural rights within Europe.

Sincerely,



**Sanjay Sethi**  
Co-Executive Director, AFI

## Endnotes

1. “Museum Professionals Protest Plans to Asset-Strip Antwerp’s M HKA,” *ArtReview*, October 10, 2025, <https://artreview.com/museum-professionals-protest-plans-to-asset-strip-antwerps-m-hka/>.
2. Bruno Brulon Soares and Laurant Bonilla-Merchav, *The Museum Definition Handbook: Words Inspiring Action*, ICOM, 2025, [https://icom.jlbinfo.info/bibliotheque/jlbWeb?html=Bur&base=documentation&ref=51601&file=7742.pdf&path=ICOM\\_Definition\\_handbook\\_2025\\_EN.pdf](https://icom.jlbinfo.info/bibliotheque/jlbWeb?html=Bur&base=documentation&ref=51601&file=7742.pdf&path=ICOM_Definition_handbook_2025_EN.pdf).
3. See Artistic Freedom Initiative reports on Hungary, Poland and Slovakia <https://artisticfreedominitiative.org/our-programs/advocacy-for-artistic-freedom/research-2/>.