

press release
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Foto: Jannes Linders, Zeynep Özkanca

The Van Abbemuseum Appoints Defne Ayas as New Director Starting September 2025

The Van Abbemuseum is pleased to announce the appointment of Defne Ayas as its new director, effective September 2025. Ayas will succeed Charles Esche, who is stepping down after two decades in the role.

Ayas's work as a director, curator, and editor spans the intersections of culture, technology, spirituality, and politics. Currently serving as Curator-at-Large at Performa, New York's biennial dedicated to visual art performance, she has held key positions at leading international institutions, including Kunstinstituut Melly (formerly known as Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art) in Rotterdam (2012–2017).

She has co-curated major biennials such as *Minds Rising, Spirits Tuning* at the 13th Gwangju Biennale; *How To Gather? Acting in a Center in the Heart of the Island of Eurasia* at the 6th Moscow Biennale; and the *Mindaugas Triennale* for the 11th Baltic Triennale. In 2015, Ayas curated *Respiro* by Sarkis for the Pavilion of Turkey at the 56th Venice Biennale.

Ayas's relationship with the Van Abbemuseum began early in her career, contributing curatorial texts as far back as 2005. She later co-curated *Double Infinity* in 2011 – a landmark exhibition which marked the first time that a European museum opened its collection to the interpretations of artists living and working in China. The project drew partial inspiration from Eindhoven-based artist John Körmeling.

Reflecting on her appointment, Ayas said: "Taking on this legacy of iconoclastic approaches to museology, especially in a city at the heart of the global chip wars, is no small feat. I am committed to continuing a practice of prototyping, one that embodies both the innovative spirit of the city and the museum itself, ensuring the institution remains relevant and forward-thinking. I am deeply aware of the profound impact this institution has had over the past two decades, particularly in shaping conversations around civic-mindedness and accessibility, and I offer my heartfelt thanks not only to my predecessors but also to the many women who have carried its mission forward over the years. I especially want to recognize those who continue to champion its values today, as well as those who have recently embarked on new journeys or transitioned into retirement. It is a true honor to step into this role."

Appointed ahead of the museum's 90th anniversary in 2026, Ayas will provide programmatic and strategic direction for the museum's programmes and the development of its collection, continuing to cement its international standing while ensuring that the Van Abbemuseum remains at the centre of cultural life of the city of Eindhoven.

About Defne Ayas

Defne Ayas is a director, curator, and editor whose practice embraces the confluence of cultural, technological, spiritual, and political currents. Over the past two decades, she has led, co-founded, and advised several distinguished global art institutions, including her tenure at Kunstinstituut Melly (fka Witte de With) in Rotterdam, which she undertook with energy and commitment. Ayas has co-curated landmark biennials including the 13th Gwangju Biennale, the 6th Moscow Biennale, and the 11th Baltic Triennale – each in collaboration with a constellation of visionary artists, curators, and thinkers. As a founding co-curator of *Blind Dates: New Encounters from the Edges of a Former Empire* (2006), she explored the rich and diverse legacies of the Ottoman Empire. She curated *Respiro* by Sarkis for the Pavilion of Turkey at the 56th Venice Biennale and has initiated and co-edited a range of influential editorial platforms and publications, such as *Stronger Than Bone* (2021); *WDW Review: Journalism in the Age of Revolt*, and *How to Gather: Acting Relations, Mapping Positions* (2017). Through these endeavors, Ayas has shaped evolving dialogues at the intersection of art, writing, and societal discourse. She will continue in her role as Curator-at-Large at Performa, where she has contributed since its inception in 2005. In 2023, she co-curated *Protest and Performance: A Way of Life*, featuring artists such as Gregg Bordowitz, Pamela Sneed, Rana Hamadeh, Pages, and Göksu Kunak. Upcoming projects for 2025 include new commissions with Ayoung Kim, Lina Lapelytė, Sojung Jun, Moriah Evans, and Isabel Lewis.

About the Van Abbemuseum

The Van Abbemuseum is a museum of modern and contemporary art located in the heart of Eindhoven, Netherlands, on the east bank of the Dommel River. Established in 1936, it was one of the first public museums for contemporary art in Europe. The museum's collection spans a wide array of 20th and 21st-century art, with a focus on international and experimental works. It holds significant pieces from movements such as De Stijl, Constructivism, and Surrealism, and has an extensive collection of

modern and contemporary works, including by artists like El Lissitzky, Laure Prouvost, Piet Mondrian, patricia kaersenhout and Joseph Beuys. The Van Abbemuseum continues to be a dynamic space for contemporary artistic exploration, fostering a dialogue between its diverse collection and the evolving global art scene. Its programming is centered on ideas of social engagement, accessibility, and the intersection of art with political and cultural contexts. For more information visit vanabbemuseum.nl

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Visiting address

Stratumsedijk 2, Eindhoven

Opening Hours

Tuesday to Sunday 11.00 – 17.00

The Museum is closed on King's Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day.

Admission

Adults - **€16**

Students - €8

Children under 13, Museum card,
VriendenLoterij VIP card & every Tuesday
afternoon after 3pm – **Free**

More info: vanabbemuseum.nl/

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