



# Toespraak minister Rianne Letschert (Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap) bij de opening van het Nederlandse paviljoen op de Biënnale van Venetië

Toespraak | 06-05-2026

Op woensdag 6 mei 2026 sprak minister Rianne Letschert (Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap) bij de opening van het Nederlandse paviljoen op de Biënnale van Venetië. De opening werd verricht door het Koninklijk Paar. De Oekraïense minister van Cultuur, Tetjana Berezjna, was speciale gast bij deze opening.

Deze tekst is alleen in het Engels beschikbaar.

Good afternoon, Your Majesties, distinguished guests, dear friends.

It takes real courage. To so radically transform the work of one of the greatest Dutch architects of the 20th century. It's enough to make a purist shudder.

Dries Verhoeven, you have that courage. You have turned Rietveld's transparent pavilion, designed to drink in Venice's celebrated natural light, into a closed, unsettling space. It feels like a scene straight out of Ovid - the Roman poet who knew, two thousand years ago, that transformation can be both beautiful and deeply disturbing. The beautiful Callisto, transformed into a bear. Or Medusa, whose beautiful hair turned into snakes.

Soon, the spring exhibition on Ovid's 'Metamorphoses' in the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam will travel to the Galleria Borghese in Rome. Bernini, Titian, Caravaggio, Rubens, Rodin and Magritte, among others, display the full force of their artistic imagination. Each offering their own interpretation of Ovid's poems.

Because that is what artists do: they respond, protest, compete, and build on each other's work. And that is exactly what Dries Verhoeven does here in Venice.

Honestly, Dries, I'm still processing your metamorphosis. It was not an easy ride. And it won't be for the countless visitors who will experience this performance over the coming six months.

But that discomfort feels entirely right for this Biennale. More than ever, the geopolitical tension of our times finds expression here, even before the doors are open. The power of art and culture lies not only in their ability to offer beauty, but also in their capacity to reflect on what is dark and ugly. On injustice

and the abuse of power. They can bring us together, but they can also shine an unsparing light on division and inequality. They ask the questions we would rather avoid.

Much like science and journalism, art and culture provide a free space for ideas. That makes them indispensable for a healthy, pluralistic, and free democracy.

It is all captured in the Dutch Thorbecke principle: the government does not pass judgment on what is good or bad art. What the government *does* do is ensure that citizens have access to a rich variety of artistic expression, both to create and to experience. And that is why public funding goes to museums, theatres, companies, educational institutions and artists.

Since the first Biennale di Venezia in 1895, the Netherlands has been present almost without interruption. All those years have put Dutch art firmly on the global map. And throughout that long history, the Biennale has always been a place for international cultural encounters, exchanges and collaborations - grounded in appreciation and respect for each other's contributions, each other's heritage, each other's culture and identity.

We cannot ignore the fact that this appreciation is entirely absent when it comes to Russia. The ongoing Russian war of aggression is directed not only against the people of Ukraine, but also against Ukraine's cultural life and heritage. Cultural heritage sites and cultural infrastructure facilities have been deliberately targeted for destruction and devastation. Ultimately, Russia seeks to erase cultural memory, denying Ukrainian civilization and identity altogether. That is why, for us, Russia's participation in international cultural events is unacceptable. And that is why I, together with 21 other European culture ministers, sent a letter of protest to the organizers of the Biennale.

At the same time, I place my hope in individual artists who have the courage to stand up to power. As in the Dutch proverb: blood crawls where it cannot go. The human spirit finds a way, even when official roads are closed. Artists find each other. They collaborate across geographical and political borders, they respond to one another's work, they inspire and challenge one another, and they engage with different perspectives. Together, they can even undermine those in power.

In a shifting world order, we see regimes and powers that have set their sights on democracy and the rule of law. They often begin by gnawing away at the world of ideas, expression and connection. They understand, sometimes better than we do, that art, culture, science and education are not soft forces at all. Indeed, they are the very foundation our society rests on. Undermine them, and you undermine democracy.

We see the consequences playing out across the world. Teaching methods are under fire, scientists face censorship, books are being banned, disinformation is spreading. And yes - modern architecture and art are under attack too.

That is not a kind of world that welcomes Rietveld. Or Verhoeven. So it is clear what we must do. Protect, promote and propel these so-called soft forces: culture, education, science and media. Because a resilient democracy is made up of people who are connected through shared stories, information and knowledge. But who are also free to differ from one another. And who are allowed to challenge their own governments.

Dear friends,

In times like these, it is easy to sink into a sense of hopeless gloom. But the Venetian light that has captivated artists for centuries still illuminates a powerful source of optimism for us today. That source is art and culture, taking such powerful shape right here in this Dutch pavilion. Let us handle them with care, in the name of beauty, freedom for all, and a healthy, strong democracy. Thank you.

---

## **Verantwoordelijk**

- › Ministerie van Onderwijs, Cultuur en Wetenschap