

MANIFESTA

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Ruhr

Press Release

25th of March 2026

Manifesta 16 Ruhr Announces Participant List and Concept for Transforming 12 Former Church Buildings into Communal Spaces Across 4 Ruhr Area Cities

25th of March, 2026
St. Josef Kirche, Gelsenkirchen, Germany

Free programme with over 100 participants across 12 venues in 4 cities

Marking the 30th anniversary of the European Nomadic Biennial founded in 1996 in Rotterdam, The Netherlands, Manifesta 16 Ruhr will take place over 15 weeks in Germany's Ruhr Area across four cities — Bochum, Essen, Duisburg and Gelsenkirchen. The European biennial will unfold in 12 former or abandoned church buildings and will bring together more than 100 participants, artists and collectives alongside a series of mediation projects rooted in local communities across the region.

At the centre of this edition of Manifesta lies a pressing concern: how can we, in a time marked by multiple crises, disinformation and polarisation, contribute to developing alternative social models? How can culture utilise (urban) open spaces and vacant properties to counter-act division and isolation within a post-Covid society? During the pre-biennial research phase, the Manifesta 16 Ruhr team was struck by the vacancy of modernist church buildings and the loss of community spaces.

The question, therefore, is: how could the transformation of post-war church buildings result in places for civic life, physical wellbeing

and community encounter? Manifesta 16 Ruhr has invited citizens and local communities to imagine new futures for these spaces, asking how they could enhance social cohesion and interaction. Manifesta 16 Ruhr will be entirely free and without tickets, ensuring that these spaces of culture and encounter remain genuinely open and accessible to all.

With an influx of new churches built after the Second World War, these church buildings symbolised the emergence of a new democracy. Now abandoned, Manifesta explores how they could be reconsidered as spaces that re-inforce civil society and community spirit. The importance of proximity — and the need to create non-commercial public spaces where communities can meet, spend time and enjoy everyday life — is one of the key issues identified within the Urban Vision and the conceptual framework of the biennial. Manifesta 16 Ruhr hopes to open up the discussion among policymakers and local politicians on how to address the reality that more than 20,000 churches across Germany will become empty and deconsecrated over the next decade.

Alongside the industrial heritage of the region, Manifesta 16 Ruhr explores the human histories of post-war Germany and the migration

narratives that have shaped the Ruhr Area. While the industrial story has often celebrated miners' solidarity and the strength of labour, individual voices — particularly those of migrants from diverse backgrounds — have frequently remained under-represented.

Biennial Model

Manifesta operates differently from other biennials. Nomadic in nature, it moves from one place to another, focusing on broader social and geopolitical issues from a European perspective. Each edition is mapped through the development of a site-specific Urban Vision that forms the conceptual framework of the biennial. Rather than presenting a traditional curatorial structure to compose a series of conventional exhibition spaces, Manifesta 16 Ruhr has brought together intergenerational tandems of Creative Mediators — including German, Polish and British collaborations — alongside interdisciplinary specialists working across architecture and migration histories. Each has developed site-specific approaches within the twelve church buildings.

Programme

Working from this transgenerational perspective, the Manifesta 16 Ruhr Creative Mediators engage with the historical and social context of their sites while addressing themes such as migration, disinformation, polarisation, collective memory and the creation of more liveable urban spaces. This constellation does not present a single monolithic vision of transformation. Instead, participatory, bottom-up newly commissioned projects form a more

holistic and kaleidoscopic view of how houses of worship can be reimaged through a combination of artistic and spatial regeneration, urban transformation and social incubation.

Through this interdisciplinary and multifaceted approach, Manifesta 16 Ruhr will present over 50 newly commissioned works (see Annexe 2 for the list). The participant list includes collectives and individual participants, from both diverse backgrounds and diverse practices. In total, Manifesta 16 Ruhr presents works from participants from 30 countries around the world. There is a particular focus on Germany (which represents 25% of the participant list), Turkey (21%) and Poland (9%) — reflecting both Manifesta's European outlook and the specific histories and genealogies of diversity within the Ruhr Area. Over 50% of individual participants identify as female.

Radically local

Manifesta 16 Ruhr is deeply embedded in the social fabric of the region. Through a Citizens' Assembly, Manifesta 16+ projects selected from an Open Call projects and the work of local mediators, Manifesta engages directly with communities while inviting international visitors to experience the Ruhr Area through new perspectives. Youth Shift, a new initiative, introduces critical perspectives from young Ruhr Area residents into the project, emphasising that the future of communal spaces in the Ruhr Area depends on activating a new generation.

Manifesta 16 Ruhr aims to engage audiences who do not typically visit cultural institutions by offering an open, accessible format free of ticketing and other barriers to entry. More

than a dozen education and mediation projects will accompany the programme, reflecting Manifesta's long-standing commitment to engaging audiences from all walks of life through neighbourhood-embedded initiatives such as a Summer School, an all-female football team and a weekly Family Programme. Following the model established since Manifesta 1 in Rotterdam in 1996, the biennial also presents Manifesta 16+, a programme of collaborations with sixteen local grassroots initiatives who will present community projects in former church buildings across various cities within the Ruhr Area.

To underline its call to transform former houses of worship into spaces for communal life, this edition of Manifesta will be free to access.

Notes to the editors

Manifesta 16 Ruhr will take place in Essen, Bochum, Gelsenkirchen and Duisburg from the 21st of June to the 4th of October 2026.

The Press and Preview Days will take place on the 18th, 19th and 20th of June 2025.

The Official Opening of Manifesta 16 Ruhr will take place at UNESCO World Heritage Site Zeche Zollverein on Saturday the 20th June. Entrance will be free, details to follow in April 2026.

Accreditation for press and professionals for Manifesta 16 Ruhr is open until the 15th of May 2026. To apply for accreditation, please use our [online application form](#).

[Annexe 1](#) Manifesta 16 Ruhr Creative Mediators' Conceptual Essay

[Annexe 2](#) Manifesta 16 Ruhr Participant List

[Annexe 3](#) Manifesta 16 Ruhr Mediation and Education Programme

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