

MANIFESTA

16

Ruhr

Press Release

8th of October 2026

Manifesta 16 Ruhr: This is not a church. Let the discussion begin!

Manifesta 16 Ruhr Closes After 15 Weeks and nearly 200,000 Attendances, while the Discussion on the Future of Vacant Churches Continues

Thursday, the 8th of October, 2026

After fifteen weeks across the Ruhr Area, Manifesta 16 Ruhr has closed, following years of pre-biennial research, preparation and collaboration centred on a question of growing relevance across Germany: what new role can vacant and deconsecrated churches play in their neighbourhoods, and what role can arts and culture play in this transformation?

Across Bochum, Duisburg, Essen and Gelsenkirchen, twelve former or underused post-war Modernist and Brutalist churches became temporary spaces for art, ecology, culture and community life. They were reimagined as tea gardens, music halls, migration museums, weaving workshops, basketball courts and neighbourhood meeting places, testing how buildings that have lost their original function might serve as new forms of civic infrastructure. Free and without tickets, Manifesta 16 was designed to remove financial barriers to experiencing a large-scale event and bringing culture into neighbourhood spaces rather than asking audiences to seek it out in conventional art institutions.

The scale of participation, alongside the political and public discussion generated by the biennial, demonstrated the wider resonance of the experiment. Manifesta 16 has recorded nearly **200,000 attendances** across its exhibitions, public programme and pre-biennial activities.

This includes more than **185,885 visits** to the main biennial venues during the biennial period, 2,054 participants during the pre-biennial phase, 2,000 attendees to the Opening Night in June 2026 and more than 8,500 attendees recorded through the available data for the Manifesta 16+ programme. In total, Manifesta 16 featured 187 programmed events, including some held before the biennial officially began, with over 9,400 attendees. The Manifesta 16 Ruhr programme brought together 107 participants from 30 different countries, while the Manifesta 16 team collaborated with more than 108 regional partners in the Ruhr Area. Over the course of the biennial, **364 Mediated Walks** took place.

An integral part of the biennial was Manifesta 16+, a grassroots programme commissioned by Manifesta 16 and developed and organised by local communities to transform their own churches. Across ten Ruhr cities, Manifesta 16+ supported 16 locally initiated projects with €15,000 each. Based on figures reported by 11 of the 16 participating projects to date, the Manifesta 16+ programme delivered a further **308 events** and recorded approximately **8,500 attendances**. These figures remain preliminary, with data from five projects still to be included.

Manifesta 16's legacy extends beyond attendance figures. From the outset, one of its ambitions was to bring the future and potential

reuse of vacant and deconsecrated churches into a wider public and political conversation. Over fifteen weeks and twelve venues, the biennial demonstrated public interest in seeing and using these buildings as cultural and civic spaces, while sustained media attention and engagement with church organisations and politicians helped turn the future of these buildings into a broader public and political issue.

Through years of research and sustained engagement in the region, Manifesta 16 brought together local communities, church organisations, artists, cultural institutions, researchers, young people and policymakers, creating relationships and knowledge that can continue beyond the biennial. The questions raised through this process — concerning the future of vacant churches, their potential as civic infrastructure and the role of culture in their transformation — have contributed to discussions extending beyond the Ruhr Area and across Germany.

The project has also helped bring the extraordinary architecture of these post-war churches to wider public and professional attention, generating significant international, national and regional media coverage. More than **700 articles**, broadcasts and reports across print and online publications, television and radio have addressed Manifesta 16 and the questions surrounding the future of these buildings and their role within communities.

Alongside this broader legacy, a number of specially commissioned artworks and community projects are expected to remain in place or continue beyond the biennial. Some of the newly commissioned works will be

acquired or donated to museums and local institutions. These include the tea garden at St. Bonifatius – Ferdane Satir Tea Garden in Gelsenkirchen, planned to continue as part of IGA 2027's Zukunftsgarten at Nordsternpark, as well as installations and project elements being considered for retention, donation or reuse by local cultural hubs, museums and partners. From community infrastructure and seating to site-specific works, these on-going projects demonstrate how elements of Manifesta 16 can remain embedded in the places and communities for which they were developed.

Manifesta 16 does not propose a single model for the transformation of vacant churches. Instead, it leaves a set of tested possibilities, new partnerships and a body of knowledge that municipalities, church organisations and communities across the Ruhr Area can take forward. Through the biennial, the closure of churches has been explored not only as a loss, but also as an opportunity to consider how these buildings could become places for democratic participation, cultural activity and community exchange. Manifesta's initiating partner, Regionalverband Ruhr, has appointed a dedicated team to continue this work together with church organisations and develop a policy framework for the church buildings in the years to come. What happens next will be determined locally, but after years of research and fifteen weeks of public experimentation, the question has changed: not only what happens when a church closes, but what these buildings could become next – and by whom.

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RUHR

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