



Speech by Hedwig Fijen

Director of Manifesta 16 Ruhr

Main Press Conference

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Duisburg

Thank you, Dr Dudda.

Good afternoon everyone.

And welcome to Manifesta 16 Ruhr.

A warm welcome to the international and local press, to our artists and Creative Mediators, to our partners, funders and collaborators, to representatives of the churches and municipalities, to the Regionalverband Ruhr, and to all those who have travelled from near and far to join us here today.

It is wonderful to see so many familiar faces.

This is a very special moment for me.

Not only because we are about to open the 16th edition of Manifesta after years of preparation.

Not only because this edition marks the 30th anniversary of the European Nomadic Biennial.



But also because it will be my final edition as Founding Director before handing Manifesta to a new generation.

For thirty years, Manifesta has travelled across Europe.

From Rotterdam to Ljubljana.

From Palermo to Marseille.

From Prishtina to Barcelona.

Always moving.

Always listening.

Always asking what role culture can play in moments of transition.

And perhaps there has never been a moment when that question felt more urgent than today.

Because everywhere we look, we see societies under pressure.

We see growing inequality.

We see political polarisation.

We see the erosion of trust in institutions.

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We see the consequences of war on the European continent.

We see disinformation shaping public debate.

And we see a generation growing up in a world that is more connected digitally than ever before, yet often more disconnected socially.

At the same time, something else is happening.

Across Europe, people are searching for new forms of belonging.

They are searching for places to meet.

For places to listen.

For places to disagree without division.

For places where collective life can still be imagined.

People are searching for rituals again.

Not necessarily religious rituals.

But rituals of gathering.

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Of care.

Of participation.

Of community.

And perhaps this is where the story of Manifesta 16 Ruhr begins.

Because six years ago, when the Ruhr Area invited us to develop this edition, we did not begin with an exhibition theme.

We began with a question.

A simple question.

What happens when the places that once brought communities together begin to disappear?

Across Germany, more than 20,000 churches are expected to become vacant or deconsecrated over the coming years.

Many of them stand in neighbourhoods that were built during the great industrial expansion of the twentieth century.

Neighbourhoods that once revolved around work, faith, solidarity and shared public life.

Today many of those structures have changed.

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The industries have changed.

The demographics have changed.

The rhythms of everyday life have changed.

And yet the buildings remain.

Standing at the centre of neighbourhoods.

Waiting for a new purpose.

Waiting for a new story.

For Manifesta, these churches became more than buildings.

They became a lens through which to examine a larger question.

How can existing infrastructure be transformed to support new forms of collective life?

How can culture contribute to rebuilding social cohesion?

And how can public space once again become a place of encounter rather than separation?

To explore these questions, we began with research.

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Not artistic research alone.

But urban research.

Social research.

Political research.

Together with our Urban Creative Mediator Josep Bohigas and many local partners, we developed the Urban Vision *This is not a church*.

We visited more than 200 churches across the Ruhr Area.

We listened to citizens.

We organised consultations.

We held conversations with local communities, church representatives, young people, neighbourhood organisations and municipal leaders.

And everywhere we heard variations of the same message.

People did not simply want these buildings preserved.

They wanted them activated.

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They wanted them reopened.

They wanted them to become places of encounter.

Places for culture.

Places for learning.

Places for civic life.

Places that belong to everyone.

That insight became the foundation of Manifesta 16 Ruhr.

Because this edition is not simply about churches.

And it is certainly not about nostalgia.

It is about the future.

It is about transformation.

It is about how architecture, culture and community can work together to create new possibilities.

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Over the next months, visitors will encounter twelve different responses to this challenge.

Twelve different experiments.

Twelve different futures.

Former churches transformed into exhibition spaces, gardens, music halls, workshops, schools, community platforms and places of gathering.

Some will feel familiar.

Others will surprise you.

But all of them ask the same fundamental question:

What kinds of spaces do we need in order to live together?

This question also shaped the structure of our artistic team.

For this anniversary edition, I wanted to create a dialogue between generations.

Between those who experienced the optimism of post-war Europe and those who have inherited a very different reality.

Between those who helped shape Manifesta's history and those who will shape its future.



That is why we invited three intergenerational tandems from Poland, Germany and the United Kingdom, alongside Josep Bohigas and Gürsoy Doğtaş.

Together they represent different experiences, different perspectives and different generations.

But they share a common commitment: to think about Europe not as an abstract idea, but as a lived reality.

A reality shaped by memory, migration, conflict, solidarity and exchange.

Their projects remind us that culture is not only about representation.

It is about participation.

Not only about reflection.

But about creating the conditions for new relationships to emerge.

And perhaps that is what makes this edition especially meaningful.

Because in 2026, Manifesta celebrates thirty years.

Thirty years since Rotterdam.

Thirty years since Europe emerged from the Cold War with an extraordinary sense of possibility.

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Manifesta was born in that moment.

Born from a belief that culture could create connections where politics had built divisions.

Born from a belief that artists could help imagine new forms of European exchange.

Born from a belief that Europe could be a project of openness rather than exclusion.

Today, thirty years later, we find ourselves in a different Europe.

A more uncertain Europe.

A more fragmented Europe.

But perhaps also a Europe that needs culture more than ever.

Not because culture offers solutions.

But because culture creates spaces where new futures can be imagined.

Spaces where complexity can be held.

Spaces where different voices can meet.

Spaces where trust can begin to be rebuilt.

That, ultimately, is what Manifesta 16 Ruhr hopes to contribute.

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Not simply an exhibition.

Not simply a cultural event.

But an invitation.

An invitation to think differently about the spaces we inherit.

An invitation to reconsider how we live together.

An invitation to imagine new forms of proximity, solidarity and collective life.

Over the coming months you will encounter artworks, performances, archives, workshops, conversations, gardens, playgrounds and gatherings.

But above all, I hope you will encounter one another.

Because if there is one ambition at the heart of this edition, it is this:
to transform spaces into places, to transform neighbours into communities,
and to transform culture into a catalyst for social cohesion.

At a moment when Europe is searching for new ways forward, that feels to me like a worthwhile ambition.

My deepest thanks go to everyone who has made this edition possible.



To our partners and funders.

To the Regionalverband Ruhr and the Ministry of Culture and Science of the State of North Rhine-Westphalia.

To the participating cities.

To the church communities.

To our artists, Creative Mediators, participants and collaborators.

And above all, to the remarkable Manifesta team, whose dedication, imagination and generosity have made this project a reality.

Thank you for believing in this vision.

Thank you for being part of it.

And thank you for joining us as we open Manifesta 16 Ruhr.

Thank you.