

Annexe 1 Manifesta 16 Ruhr Creative Mediators and Conceptual Framework

25th of September, 2025
St. Josef Kirche, Gelsenkirchen, Germany

Manifesta 16 Ruhr's Focus

Manifesta 16 Ruhr, to be held in 2026, will focus on the historic architectural and social renewal that occurred in the post-war era of the Ruhr Area. This time was marked by the construction of Modernist and Brutalist churches, built to address the urgent needs of reconstruction and rapid population growth. The churches became a powerful new symbol of democracy, exemplifying citizen involvement as they were constructed with the physical manpower of the local communities.

Although these post-war churches have left a significant architectural legacy, a decline in church attendance over the last 30 years has led to many being abandoned or underused. The fate of these churches—whether they are to be demolished, repurposed or left to decay—requires urgent attention.

Manifesta 16 Ruhr Conceptual Framework

It is within this historically and spatially layered context that Manifesta 16 Ruhr positions itself—not merely as an art biennial curating some exhibitions, but as an incubator of change and a transdisciplinary mechanism for urban and cultural reactivation.

Manifesta 16 Ruhr presents an Artistic Team of eight interdisciplinary Creative Mediators. They will work on implementing this neighbourhood concept and bring together a selection of participants such as artists, architects and social designers to form the biennial's artistic programme. The Artistic Team consists of the Catalan Josep Bohigas, who will develop the programme's urban interventions, Gürsoy Doğtaş who takes the lead in developing the Public Programme as well developing artistic interventions in three churches and an intergenerational team working in three tandems. These tandems are: Polish Anda Rottenberg with Krzysztof Kosciuczuk, German René Block with Leonie Herweg and English Henry Meyric Hughes with Michael Kurtz. Building upon the pre-biennial research, the three tandems will work each in their own churches and venues in the cities of Bochum, Essen, Gelsenkirchen and Duisburg.

Their creative artistic engagement with these churches will unfold through three conceptual lenses: *Proximity*, *Transformation* and *Curation as a form of geopolitical investigation*. The idea of *Proximity* is understood not only in spatial terms but also as a political and social condition—encompassing the intimacy of neighbourhood relations, the solidarities of care and the shared temporalities of local life. The project seeks to “unveil” these proximities by activating informal networks and everyday solidarities that persist despite urban fragmentation. This is not an attempt to romanticise the neighbourhood but to reclaim it as a communal space of agency in an age of disconnection.

“The public space and the space for art have been essential notions for free or dissident thought in the countries that found themselves on the eastern side of the Iron Curtain. They were also instrumental in creating a new, different reality during and after the political transformation. This edition of Manifesta engages with a crucial region in the country at the centre of the European Union, one that has been witnessing radical changes. While North Rhine-Westphalia remains Germany’s most populous state, its demographic structure and political sentiments are in flux. It is therefore pertinent to negotiate the notions of public space and art within the context of Manifesta 16 Ruhr, which might help in understanding the different presences, connections or their lack.”

With immediate access and ease of travel, Europe has long been enjoying a vacation from history; it now seems to be returning home to see things differently.”

Anda Rottenberg and Krzysztof Kosciuczuk

Transformation refers to the potential redefinition of public space through experimentation, testing how these abandoned spaces can be transformed and how something meaningful and relevant can be created. Manifesta 16 Ruhr does not aim to monumentalise these former churches, nor to restore them as mere heritage sites. Instead, the Creative Mediators will investigate and ask how these structures might be reimagined as open, participatory platforms—spaces of civic engagement, intercultural dialogue and collective creation. Interdisciplinary artistic practices are key in this transformation process and will operate beyond simple exhibition models. These churches are to function as temporary civic anchors that may offer a new rhythm of cohabitation.

“Having worked with stained glass early in his career, René Block has long been interested in church spaces—particularly in how these formerly sacred sites are reimagined for new purposes and in the question of how the surrounding community can be meaningfully involved in such transformations.”

Together, we (René Block & Leonie Herweg) are developing a methodology for testing different transformative models in the two vacant churches in Essen that not only addresses the “how” but also the “why” of such processes: their cultural and intergenerational significance, their potential for sustainable reuse and the desires and perspectives of local residents. Art serves as a catalyst in this approach, opening a space of possibility in which the sacred can shift into the symbolic, generating impulses for future uses. At the core of this practice are relational models of exhibition-making, which create conditions for dialogue, co-creation and long-term engagement.”

René Block and Leonie Herweg

Finally, the notion of *Curation* as a form of geopolitical investigation responds to the broader history of the biennial itself: from the moment of Cold War optimism and European integration to the current era of poly-crises, from climate change and disinformation to rising populism and an illegal invasion on the European continent. As Europe confronts the fractures of its past and the uncertainties of its future, the Ruhr Area—fragmented, diverse and in flux—offers a powerful stage for cultural experimentation.

“In accordance with the Urban Vision of Josep Bohigas, we (Henry Meyric Hughes and Michael Kurtz) are committed to a community-centred approach to regenerating the Ruhr’s disused modernist churches. This will primarily involve enabling local residents and emerging artists to take ownership of these precious structures.

More specifically, we are guided by a belief in the importance—at this fraught time—of intergenerational conversation, as both our method and our subject. This will involve commissioning participatory works that bring different generations together, encouraging emerging artists to address the region’s cultural heritage and finding novel ways to bring the present into dynamic dialogue with the past. We plan, for example, to commission researchers and artists to engage with the artworks by Yves Klein and Jean Tinguely in Gelsenkirchen’s Musiktheater, as powerful examples of post-war optimism and pan-European collaboration leading up to the 1990s.

The Kulturkirche Liebfrauen in Duisburg will house Manifesta 16 Ruhr’s most “historical” element, which will explore how Europe has transformed since the biennial’s inception in 1994. This will not, however, take the form of a conventional exhibition presenting a grand

narrative about Europe. Instead, it will take the Ruhr Area—with its brilliant diversity, its triumphs and troubles—as a microcosm of the continent and will include participatory practices that allow local people to discuss and represent their own multi-faceted history.

We understand that engaging with the recent history of the region and its modernist architectural heritage is not a retreat into the past but a way of re-enchanting these deconsecrated spaces and a crucial aspect of their regeneration. Looking back is also crucial for highlighting the values of integration and openness, which were so central to the European dream of the 1990s and the ethos of Manifesta, but are now at risk of being forgotten.”

Henry Meyric Hughes and Michael Kurtz

Manifesta 16 Ruhr does not propose a unified artistic thesis, but a constellation of inquiries. It asks how the spatial legacies of industrialism and institutional withdrawal can be repurposed for new forms of collective life. It asks how memory, especially that inscribed in architecture, can be mobilised not to fix identity but to unsettle and expand it. It asks what kinds of institutions, rituals and solidarities remain possible in the ruins of modernity and how culture might contribute to the reinvention of the region.