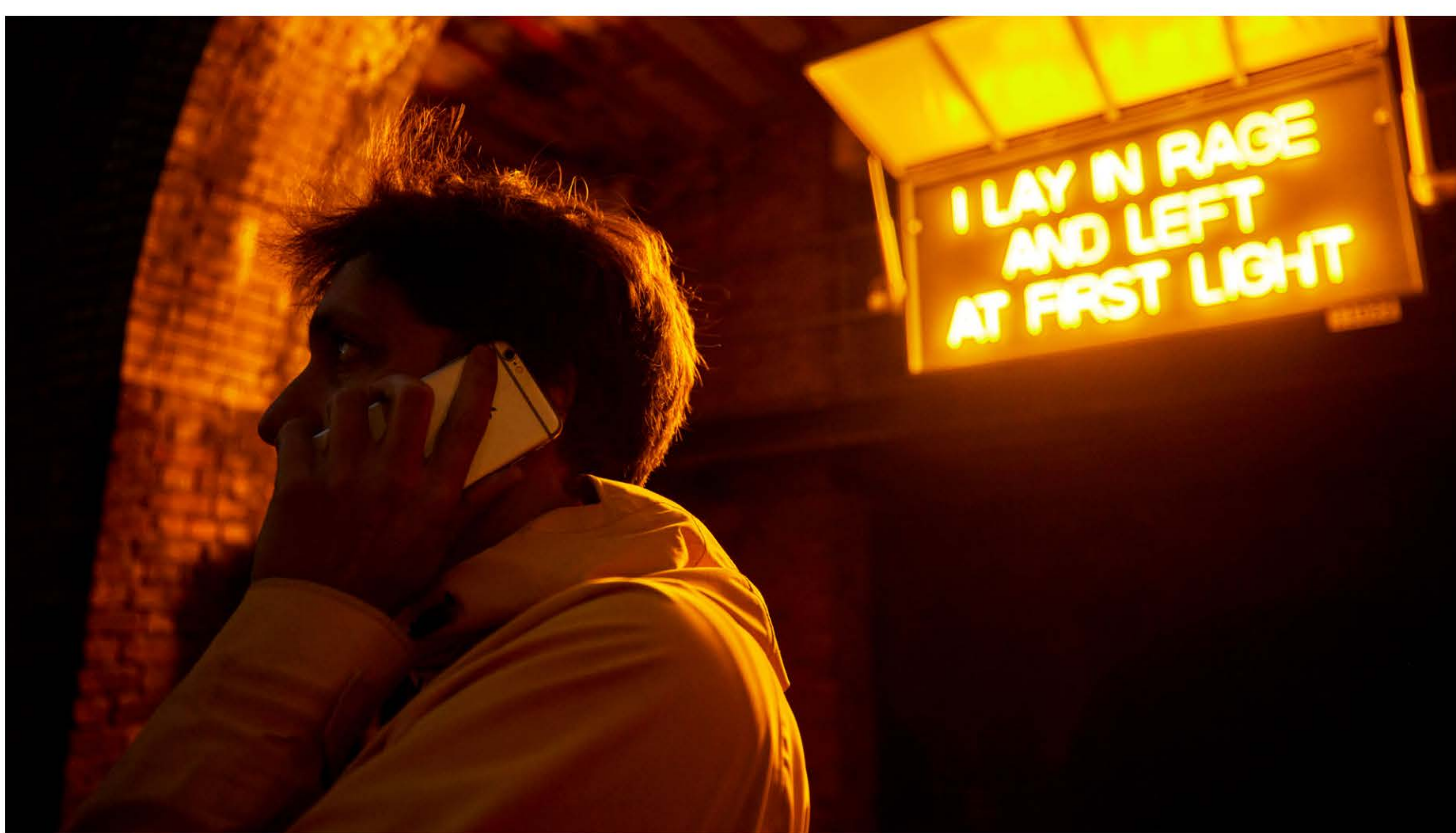


ART

Journey into a post-apocalyptic Manchester

We Cut Through Dust is an immersive walking tour of Manchester that seeks to amplify the voices of the marginalised

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We Cut Through Dust goes on a tour of hidden Manchester. Photo: Mark Waugh

“Those with most money went first.” *We Cut Through Dust* offers an apocalyptic vision of Manchester in the not-too-distant future in which those with the means to flee have done so, leaving the disempowered to inherit the city. It begins with a phone call: yours.

We Cut Through Dust is an immersive walking tour devised by art collectives Blast Theory and Manchester Street Poem for this year’s Manchester International Festival (MIF). Participants station themselves outside Deansgate’s railway and Metrolink stations and call a number. The response guides them through backstreets, along canals and under viaducts as the audio story unfolds.

“We were looking for tucked-away spaces in Manchester that people wouldn’t normally go to,” says [Manchester Street Poem](#) project manager Simon Leroux.

As well as enabling audiences to “take a moment out to engage with the piece”, this also reflects the collective’s ethos. Founded in 2016 and an MIF partner since the following year, the team comprises people from marginalised communities, including numerous members with experience of homelessness.

The tour provides a view of the city through their eyes. “As we developed the story, [Deansgate] became more perfect,” adds Blast Theory’s Ju Row Farr, “because it’s about places where you can get in and out of the city. You’ve got a railway, main roads, tramlines, so it fits into the story – exit points and travelling points.” The area was also “one of the first in Manchester to undergo gentrification”, Leroux says, “so there’s a rubbing up of the super fancy with scruffy little areas.”

This juxtaposition of wealth and poverty – and of futuristic developments with the city’s industrial, working-class history – helps *We Cut Through Dust* examine the extent to which personal circumstances determine our capacity to withstand disaster.

The work has been in progress since 2020. “Covid heavily informed the piece – this idea of this slightly post-apocalyptic, emptied out metropolis,” Leroux says. During the walk, participants encounter several signs with a number underneath. On phoning the numbers, the signs open, and the story continues. The first is in what is now a secluded and litter-strewn section of the canal, but was once the entrance to the city for trading barges during Manchester’s industrial boom.

“This is what grew Manchester, this network of linkways,” Leroux says, noting how the story draws attention to the invisible labour that underlies the glamour of Manchester’s nightlife.



Photo: Mark Waugh

Blast Theory and Manchester Street Poem strove to make their piece as accessible as possible. “The technology is called Twilio, and it’s quite old. It’s not super-sophisticated,” says Row Farr. “You can do it on any phone, and we’ve got free phones for people who don’t have one or don’t want to use their credit up.”

“We really wanted to get people that don’t usually engage with art to engage,” Leroux adds.

The story was also created by people not typically represented at arts festivals. The process of collaboration between members of Manchester Street Poem took several years.

“There’s been a lot of tears and there’s been a lot of laughter,” says member Sheena.

The writing process took place over Zoom, in the Manchester Street Poem studio in Salford and even at a writing retreat in nearby Hebden Bridge.

“Very early on, we did an exercise about what you carry around in your pockets,” Farr says, “and then about a month ago, we did, after the apocalypse, what do you carry around in your bag?” The writers also recorded the story, emphasising Manchester Street Poem’s dedication to centring the voices of people with lived experience of homelessness and other forms of marginalisation. The piece is also the result of organic growth.

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- [Has Manchester found an innovative way to tackle begging?](#)
- [How Manchester became the UK’s jazz capital](#)

“Last week, we realised it was not quite working, so we made a conceptual pivot,” says Farr. “Everyone’s really good at generating material. They were involved in decision making about the title, about how people might hear it – a lot more than just making material. It’s about trust and risk.”

“We really feel that we’ve achieved something,” says Manchester Street Poem member Norm. “Row made us feel that we were all really contributing; that everyone’s as important as each other.”

“Well, you are,” says Farr. “I know that we all come from different backgrounds, but I can feel that bond between us. I know it’s hard work, but it’s about what’s similar, not what’s different – where we can meet rather than why I’m not like you. That’s the relationship between the work and the audience as well. You can go, ‘this is a work about this kind of people about this kind of thing,’ but actually, we’re all very similar.”

We Cut Through Dust runs until 16 July. Ticketing operates on a pay-what-you-decide basis. For further information visit [Manchester International Festival](#)

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