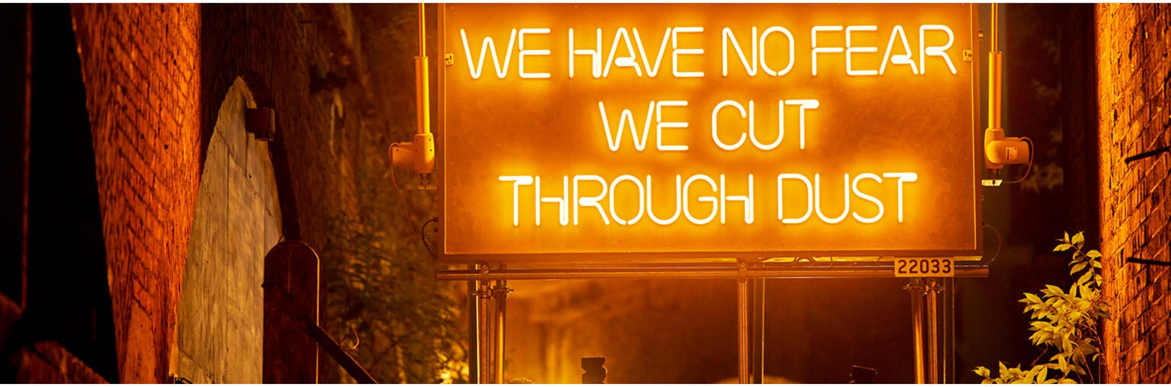
The Best Shows to See at Manchester International Festival

From an interactive walking tour exploring homelessness to a citywide treasure hunt created by Ryan Gander

BY **JAMES LAWRENCE SLATTERY** IN **EXHIBITION REVIEWS** | 13 JUL 23



Blast Theory and Manchester Street Poem

Various locations

29 June – 16 July

Brighton-based theatre group Blast Theory has created an interactive walking tour in collaboration with Manchester Street Poem, an art collective that focuses on stories about homelessness. In *We Cut Through Dust* (2023), participants first arrive at a designated location in the city centre which is communicated via text message. Different characters are introduced through a plot that unfolds via a series of voicemail messages accessed via your phone at specific locations along the route. After an accident at a hotel, the recordings indicate a search for someone, evoking the immediate urban surroundings – but transposed to an alternative reality.

Blast Theory and Manchester Street Poem, *We Cut Through Dust*, 2023. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Andrew Testa

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The dystopian aspects of the world are gradually revealed across the duration of the tour. Between listening to the messages and searching for the next location, participants find moments for contemplation. This melancholic show is at first presented as a solitary listening experiment but becomes a shared experience for attendees as they are guided through the meandering streets of Manchester, accompanied by a cacophony of voices.

Kimber Lee

Royal Exchange Theatre

24 June – 22 July

How can stereotypes, by definition a set of generalisations, come into dialogue with the personal? New York-based writer Kimber Lee attempts to answer this question with *untitled f*ck m*ss s**gon play* (2023), which won the inaugural Bruntwood International Prize for Playwriting in 2019. Mei Mac leads the cast as Kim, an East Asian woman who endures cycles of oppression in scenes that reference popular theatre and television, including *Madame Butterfly* (1904), *South Pacific* (1949) and *M*A*S*H* (1972–83). Even as the settings and details change, each scene entrenches deep cultural fantasies of East Asian womanhood, denying Kim's individuality.

Kimber Lee, *untitled f*ck m*ss s**gon play*, 2023, performance documentation. Courtesy: Factory International; photograph: Richard Davenport

Lee's combination of campy theatrics and weighty realism exposes the ridiculousness of tired cultural and racial modes of representation. Characters are reinvented and tumble through surreal scenes that cut across time and space. Eliciting giggles and tears in equal measure, powerful monologues explain how the characters manage to negotiate challenges and still remain resilient. Eventually breaking with the diegetic world in a self-reflective denouement, *untitled f*ck m*ss s**gon play* is a rambunctious and thoughtful whirlwind that explores the injurious effects of white Western hegemony on identity.

Tino Sehgal

The Whitworth

29 June – 16 July

Located in a hall on the ground level of the Whitworth Gallery, different performers take to the floor to display erudite skills with either a bicycle, football, violin, or voice. A man circles the perimeter on a bike performing a rear wheelstand; in a balletic balancing act, he displays inventive ways to pedal and glide around the room. A woman showcases her vocal dexterity while moving slowly across the floor. Another woman kicks a football, alternating between balancing it on her head or legs and catching it in crevices on her body.

Tino Sehgal and Juan Mata with the performers of *This Entry*, 2023. Courtesy: Factory International; photograph: David Levene

Sometimes performers are in physical dialogue with each other, creating playfully constructed choreographies. Footballs and the bicycle, typically out of place in a gallery setting, transform from quotidian objects into surrealist instruments as performers use them to create unusual shapes and acts that blend colloquialism with refinement.

It is worth pointing out that the Whitworth Gallery also has a free group show running until 22 October, 'Economics The Blockbuster: It's Not Business As Usual' (2023), where different artists and collectives rethink financial relationships to art and inventive ways to disrupt the economic status quo of art institutions.

Benji Reid
Manchester Academy
12–16 July

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Benji Reid's live art performance brings together dance, theatre and photography in what the artist has coined his 'choreo-photolism' practice. *Find Your Eyes* (2023) draws on Reid's autobiography, influenced by hip-hop music, dance and culture, while revealing the inventive image-making strategies that have enabled his oneiric images.

Benji Reid, *Find Your Eyes,* 2023, performance view. Courtesy: the artist

The Manchester-born artist began his photographic practice in 2012 with portraits of his daughter, actors and dancers. The magical quality of these images also colours his self-portraits, which often capture the artist in surreal situations. In his living-room studio, Reid constructs sets where his body appears to be either tethered to or transported across the room – often with theatrical athletic dexterity. These self-portraits are playful yet poignant, touching on issues of mental health and resistance to anti-Black racism.

Ryan Gander
Various locations
28 June – 16 July

Ryan Gander has two works in this year's Manchester International Festival. For *The Find* (all works 2023), Gander minted thousands of collectible silver coins and hid them around Manchester, encouraging festival attendees to focus their attention on discreet crevices and overlooked areas throughout the city. Each coin bears an aphorism, lines of motivation or instruction, and comes in one of three graphical designs. Gander's second work, *Intervention Space*, is housed in Selfridges department store. Two black walls flank the entranceway and a vending machine stands in the centre of the shop floor.

Looking for change?
You choose.

Ryan Gander. Courtesy: Factory International; photograph: David Levene

Some of the phrases from *The Find* adorn one wall, and on the opposite is a 'translation' of these words into pebble-like shapes. The vending machine contains large round pebbles, collected by Gander, which sell for £10 GBP each via a QR code. Much of the joy in *Intervention Space* comes from watching shoppers approach the machine with confusion; some laugh while others remain perplexed. Spending £10 GBP on a rock may seem ridiculous until one looks across the department store and notices the price of luxury products. The humble pebbles puts into question the construction of value.

Manchester International Festival takes places at various locations until 16 July

Main image: Blast Theory and Manchester Street Poem, We Cut Through Dust*, 2023, installation view. Courtesy: the artist; photograph: Mark Waugh*