

V O Ĩ C e D

The Festival for Endangered Languages

October 2025 — February 2026

barbican



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

LOTTERY FUNDED

Voiced: The Festival for Endangered Languages

Voiced, hosted at the Barbican Centre in October 2025 and with UNESCO Manchester City of Literature in February 2026, was the first UK creative festival to celebrate the linguistic vitality of countries around the world, as well as the endangered languages and dialects that continue to thrive within the UK. Through visual art, poetry, literature, sound, performance and talks, the festival brought together a remarkable line-up of artists whose work marks the vast impact creativity has on language and language has on creativity. Co-curated by Sam Winston and Chris McCabe, Voiced introduced audiences to new ways of thinking about and engaging with language.

Creatives and Performers:

Batool Abu Akleen
Raymond Antrobus
Shamim Azad
Liz Berry
Bidisha
Tim Brookes
Troy Cabida
Afshan D'Souza-Lodhi
Jez Dolan
Norma Dunning
Rosie Garland
Hawad
Mererid Hopwood
Hanan Issa
Kabir Kapoor
Hanna Komar
Vivi Lachs
Rachel Lichtenstein
Fran Lock
Lisa Luxx
Chris McCabe
Montenegrofisher
Jamie Perera
Mandana Seyfeddinipur
Talulah
Joelle Taylor
Cristina Viti
Stephen Watts
Irvine Welsh
Sam Winston

Curated by:

Sam Winston
Chris McCabe

Dates & Location:

Barbican: October 2025
Manchester: February 2026

Exhibition Design:

Modern Activity

In collaboration with:

barbican



“Having worked individually on endangered language projects from establishing the Endangered Poetry Project (National Poetry Library) to writing the picture book *One and Everything* and editing *Poems from the Edge of Extinction*, we asked each other why there wasn't a creative festival for unheard languages in the UK? So, we made *Voiced* happen. The first UK festival to showcase the incredible creative work of poets, writers, visual and sound artists and musicians who draw power from their indigenous languages to move, surprise and excite audiences throughout our islands and beyond. This festival brings these essential voices together for an explosion of creative multilingualism across London's Barbican Centre”.

— Sam Winston & Chris McCabe, Curators of *Voiced*

“We are excited to collaborate with Sam and Chris to welcome this line-up of incredible artists from around the UK and the world, to share and amplify their voices. We are celebrating the power of language and art to locate who we are, from our history to our culture to dreams for the future. Whether in this country, or on the front line of climate change, communities are fighting to survive and keep their shared identity alive. The Barbican is holding this vital space and inviting audiences to explore and share their own experiences of connection, home and hope”.

— Karena Johnson, Head of Creative Collaboration, Barbican



Creative Hub Space Exhibition

1–31 October 2025
Level G Hub Space
Barbican Centre

This month-long foyer exhibition featured a visual showcase of five newly commissioned poems, a major new artwork commission – *Seed Syllable* by Sam Winston – and spaces to discover dialect poetry and endangered texts. Audiovisual content from the Endangered Languages Archive was showcased alongside a hand drawn map with over 500 points, representing over 3,500 languages worldwide. Exhibition design by Modern Activity.
Exhibition Elements:

- Global Poems for Home
- Seed Syllable Flags
- Dialect Poetry
- The Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)
- From Ancient Letterforms to Living Languages: The Script Keepers Network
- Hand-Drawn World Map



Western Siberia, Russia, S. Medvedchikov, 2009, Courtesy of Endangered Languages Archive

Creative Voice Hub Space, Barbican Centre, 2025, Exhibition design by Modern Activity
Photo: Andy Sewell



Across: Creative Voice Hub Exhibition, Barbican Centre, October 2025
 Above: The ELAR is a digital repository for preserving multimedia collections of endangered languages from all over the world, making them available for future generations. Nlabephee Kefas Othaniel, June 2023, Nigeria, Courtesy of the Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)
 Below: Creative Voice Hub Exhibition, Barbican Centre, October 2025
 Photos: Andy Sewell



Above: At the heart of Voiced are five brand new poetry commissions from poets working in endangered languages or minority languages within the UK. Each poet writes upon the theme of 'home'.
 Below: The Script Keepers Network is a global community of people who document, preserve and revitalise some of the world's 250+ endangered scripts. Photos: Andy Sewell

Above: In creating the flags above, each word was dyed in a unique ink made by Winston from substances foraged from a poet's home landscape.
 Below: This large, hand-drawn map plotted over 700 languages across the globe. Photos: Andy Sewell



Seed Syllable

by Sam Winston

At the heart of *Voiced: The Festival For Endangered Languages* is a set of five poetry commissions exploring the links between habitat and home. In creating the *Seed Syllable* flags, Sam Winston asked each poet to select a single word to be typeset in their endangered or minority script. Each word is rendered in a unique ink from substances foraged from the poets' native landscapes. The traditional term *Seed Syllable* (Sanskrit: *bīja* or *bījākṣara*) is a short, sacred sound or mantra.

"In his studio, Sam Winston appears less artist, more linguistic alchemist"

— The Guardian



Across: Making chokeberry ink in the studio, August 2025
Above: Sam Winston and flags in the studio, September 2025
Photos: (previous page) Philipp Ebeling, (above) Andy Sewell



Taureg poet Hawad's flag is covered in ink made from red ochre, while the inscription, blood ochre, remains without colour. For Hawad, red ochre is a symbol of the nomad home of his childhood. Hawad is no longer able to access these ancestral lands to source ochre (which has been contaminated and polluted by mining activities). He chose to present the colour of the text as white, and the remaining colour comes from Vaucluse, near to where he currently resides.

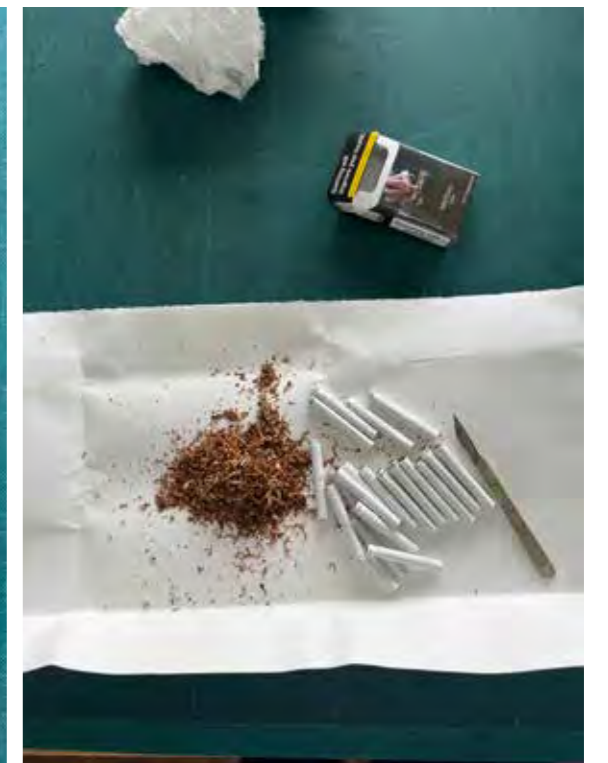
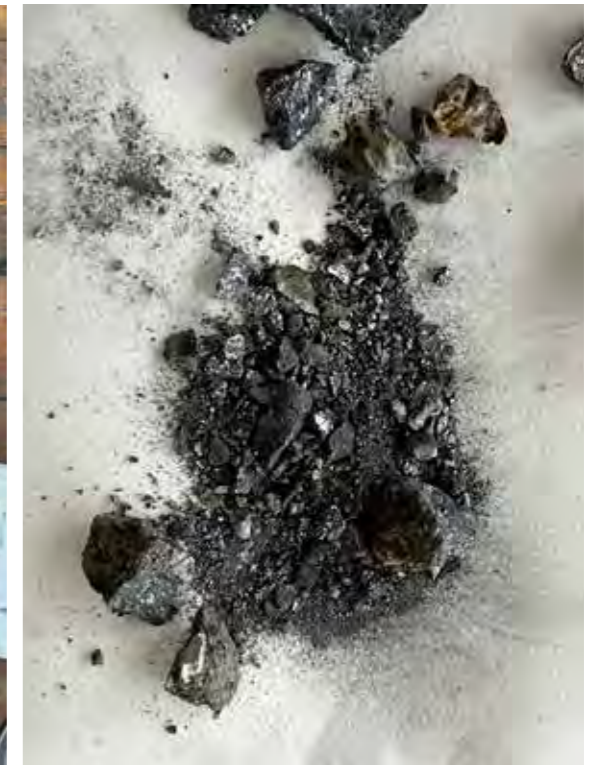
Inuk poet Norma Dunning's word, veins, was painted in an ink made from wild blueberries grown in Quebec. Norma asks, "Can blueberry water flow into someone's veins? Can my heart drum the tundra? What does blood memory look like?" The wild blueberries create a deep, indigo-blue pigment, reminiscent of veins seen through skin.

The flag related to Filipino poet Troy Cabida's poem is covered in ink made from imported Marlboro Red cigarettes. This substance references his memories of buying cigarettes for his parents as a child growing up in the Philippines, which he experienced as an urban space, in contrast to often romanticised ideas of the archipelago. Reflecting these ideas, Troy's word is smoke.

Iraqi-Welsh poet Hanan Issa chose the material of kohl, the charcoal substance used to line eyes and in traditional Marsh Arab tattooing. An ink was created from Arabic ithmid kohl, mixed with Welsh galena, a lead substance often used as a kohl ingredient. Hanan's word, *shlawnich*, is an Arablish word used to ask, *how are you?* Arablish is a mixed form of communication blending Arabic and English. The literal translation of this phrase is *What colour are you?*

Belarusian poet Hanna Komar's flag is covered in an ink made from chokeberries, which she remembers picking in her grandmother's garden as a child. Hanna's word, pronounced *poh-v'yaz*, translates as continuity or continuous connection.

Right to left: Hanna Komar, Troy Cabida, Hawad, Norma Dunning, Hanan Issa
Photos: Image courtesy of the artists



Materials for making ink in the studio.
Chokeberries and tobacco; crushed galena; Marlboro Light cigarettes. August 2025
Photos: Sam Winston



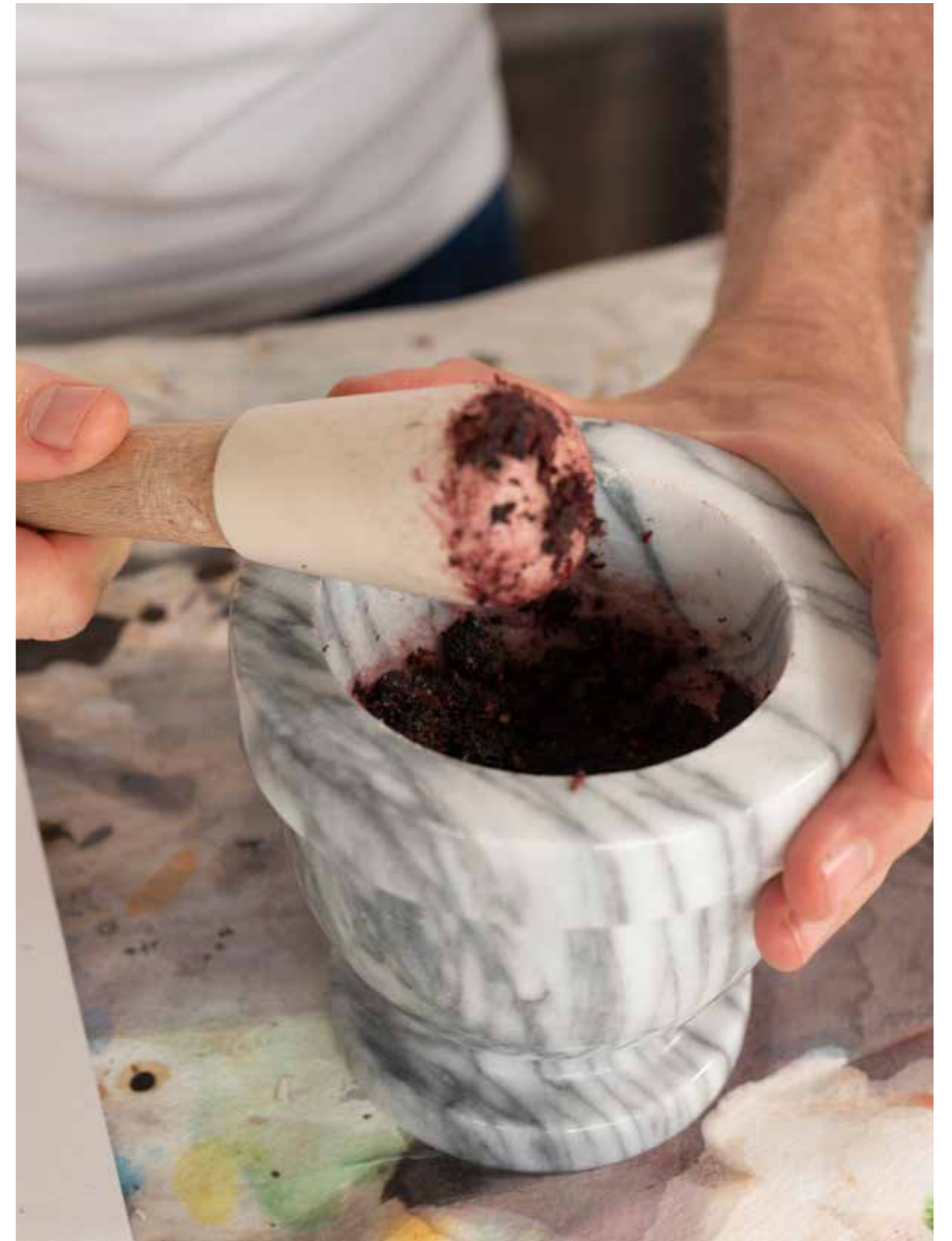
Hanna Komar, Troy Cabida & Sam Winston in the studio. August 2025
 Photos: Philipp Ebeling (above)



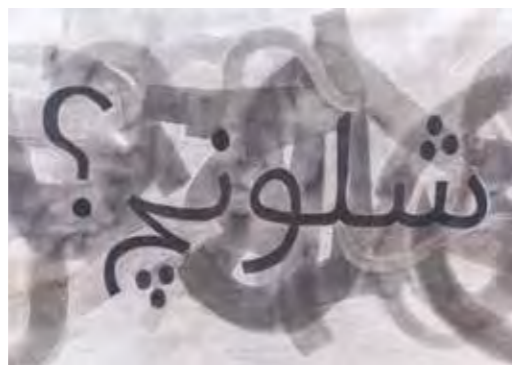
Above: Troy Cabida with Marlboro Reds flag, August 2025
 Below: Installed flags at the Holden Gallery. February 2026
 Photos: (above) Philipp Ebeling, (below) Evan Wilson



Hanna Komar in the studio. August 2025 Photo: Philipp Ebeling



Preparing chokeberries, August 2025 Photo: Philipp Ebeling



Texts chosen for *Seed Syllable* flags. Winston asked each Global Poems For Home poet to select a single word to be typeset in their endangered or minority script. Each word is dyed in a unique ink. Photos: Andy Sewell





Live Literature Programme

Pit Theatre
Barbican Centre
16–18 October 2025

Through poetry, performance, talks, live events and visual art, the festival brought together a remarkable line-up of artists whose work marks the vast impact art has on language and language has on art. Across 8 events and a weekend takeover at the Barbican Centre, the *Voiced* Live Literature Programme showcased a diverse and talented group of creatives, including Irvine Welsh, Raymond Antrobus, Joelle Taylor, Stephen Watts, Liz Berry, Batool Abu Akleen, lisa luxx and more.

Performers:

Batool Abu Akleen, Raymond Antrobus, Liz Berry, Tim Brookes, Troy Cabida, Hanan Issa, Hanna Komar, Vivi Lachs, Rachel Lichtenstein, Lisa Luxx, Montenegrofisher, Mandana Seyfeddinipur, Talulah, Joelle Taylor, Stephen Watts, Irvine Welsh

Talulah and band performing at the Pit Theatre, October 2025

Thursday 16 October

Opening Event

Hear from curators Chris McCabe and Sam Winston, along with special guest Raymond Antrobus whose poetry has won the Ted Hughes Award, the Somerset Maugham Awards and Rathbone Folio Prize – his poems was simultaneously performed live in British Sign Language.

The Art of Language: Panel Discussion

Join speakers and artists of these languages who are activating new audiences with their work. Speakers include Director of the Endangered Languages Archive, Mandana Seyfeddinipur; author of *An Atlas of Endangered Alphabets* Tim Brookes, and award-winning poet Raymond Antrobus.

Friday 17 October

Global Poems from Home

The five newly commissioned poems exploring what home means around the world and how language shapes our relationship with place, performed live in their original endangered languages and an English version with poets Troy Cabida, Hanan Issa, and Hanna Komar, followed by an in conversation.

Without an Army and a Navy Dialect Poetry

A live extravaganza of dialect poetry including Forward Prize-winning poet Liz Berry (Black Country), Scouse from Chris McCabe, and poems in Sylheti from Bangladeshi British bilingual poet Shamim Azad.

Saturday 18 October

Yiddish Poetry of the East End

The East End of London contains more than 90 languages including the once widely spoken Jewish minority language of Yiddish. Performance and conversation from Rachel Lichtenstein and Stephen Watts; exploring the hidden work of the legendary East End Yiddish poet, A.N. Stencl (1897–1983).

Say Again: The Poetry of Invented Languages

Today's poets who go beyond the confines of their mother tongues to create poems in languages that communicate before they are understood. Poet Stephen Watts presents echoes of Gaelic/Italian, and artists montenegrofisher present a soundscape poetry performance.

Language as a Political Act

With passionate vocal performances including Palestinian poet Batool Abu Akleen and her translator Cristina Vita reading works in their mother tongue and discussing how their language provides a home as well as offering a form of resistance.

Open Mix Closing Event

Whether you took part in a workshop as part of *Voiced* or simply have a poem or work of your own to share, it's time to bring this to a Barbican audience. Hear new work from speakers from the hundreds of languages spoken across the UK.



(Above) Hanna Komar performing at the Pit Theatre, October 2025
(below) Joelle Taylor performing at the Pit Theatre, October 2025



Above: Tim Brookes, Mandana Seyfedinnipur & Talulah, October 2025
Below: Chris McCabe performing at the Pit Theatre, October 2025





Raymond Antrobus and Petra St Hillaire performing at the Pit Theatre, October 2025

Do you speak Sylheti? Tamajaght? Klingon? Inside the Festival for Endangered Languages

Every two weeks, a language is lost – and by the end of the century, half of the world’s 7,000 tongues could have vanished. We meet the artist using eyeliner and chokeberries to rescue everything from Ogham to Arabliish.

— Etan Smallman



In his studio, Sam Winston appears less artist, more linguistic alchemist. He is experimenting with manufacturing inks out of tobacco from Marlboro cigarettes, the juice of Belarusian chokeberries imported in a 100g packet small enough to make it past customs and a strange brew of kohl eyeliner from the Middle East and galena – the mineral form of lead sulfide – from Wales.

The coloured substances are used to conjure words on to giant canvas flags that will soon hang from the ceiling of London’s Barbican Centre – connecting a group of poets’ native languages with materials from their native landscapes. The quintet speak marginal or at-risk languages covering five continents, and their newly commissioned poems all speak to their sense of home.

The kohl concoction will spell out “How are you?” in Arabliish, a melding of Arabic and English, taken from a poem by Hanan Issa, the half-Iraqi National Poet of Wales. Quebec-born writer Norma Dunning’s flag will bear the word “veins” in Canadian syllabics, made out of wild blueberries foraged from her home terrain. The piece, *Seed Syllable*, will welcome visitors to Voiced, Britain’s first arts festival celebrating minority and endangered languages, or what the Barbican calls an “explosion of creative multilingualism”. In February, the extravaganza will travel on to Manchester, one of the world’s 53 Unesco Cities of Literature “dedicated to promoting cultural diversity and literary richness”.

Sam Winston making flags in the studio, September 2025
Photo: Andy Sewell

“If we only have one colour and one paintbrush, that’s a disaster”

Winston has been playing with language in his art for more than 20 years, including using cuneiform and Egyptian hieroglyphs in his celebrated picture book *One and Everything* – itself translated into 23 languages. His co-curator, poet Chris McCabe, is editor of *Poems from the Edge of Extinction* and founder of the Endangered Poetry Project. Based at London’s Southbank Centre, it invites the public to submit poems in threatened languages, collating them for future generations.

Winston acknowledges the “sense of urgency and loss” – every two weeks, another language falls silent and by the end of this century, half of the world’s 7,000 tongues are expected to become extinct. But he was determined for this to be much more than a mournful symposium: “It is a festival and you want to have that playful and joyful element.” After an opening event featuring *Trainspotting* author Irvine Welsh, there will be workshops including interactive sessions on the 94 languages spoken across the London borough of Hackney, and how to create your own alphabet. The live literature programme will showcase dialect poetry (from Scouse to Sylheti) and invented languages (from Klingon to Polari).

Throughout next month, there will also be the free-to-access Creative Voice Exhibition – an immersive area where you can contribute to a collaborative artwork by drawing, writing or rhyming your response to your favourite piece of language – and a family-friendly listening trail in which you can discover hidden languages using a map that will take you to quiet corners of the Barbican’s brutalist complex. “You’ll walk to different stations and you can hear all of these different communities,” says Winston. “It’s not really about language, it’s about how people get married and how people go fishing.”

Winston grew up in Devon, Wales and Yorkshire as a dyslexic boy “suspicious of all these tiny black marks ... It felt like language was something that was quite authoritarian,” he says. It was only at Camberwell College of Art that he made a breakthrough, on a design course learning about typography and letter form.

“That experience of not being able to communicate what’s important to me, even in the English language, made me very sympathetic to a situation where Hawad” – one of the five poets, a Tamajaght-speaking artist from the Aïr region of Niger – “cannot share his language and his culture in a way that is supported by anyone beyond this small community. That made me an ally. It’s really important that we create spaces, and say these voices are valid.”

At the heart of the “audio treasure hunt” by sonic artist Jamie Perera is a piece titled *Babel Reclaimed*, in which a cacophony of hundreds of voices come together in perfect harmony. It was made in collaboration with linguist Mandana Seyfeddinipur, director of the Endangered Languages Archive (a Berlin-based digital repository for “unique records of local knowledge systems encoded in their languages”), and came from her rejection of the Tower of Babel parable, about humanity speaking in a unified tongue. Some still regard the prospect of a single universal language – such as the 19th-century attempt to get the world to speak Esperanto – as a utopian ideal. Not Winston. “If we only have one paintbrush to paint in, and only one colour to paint with, that, from an artistic perspective, is a disaster.”

He has not yet properly engaged with the languages of his mother’s Irish and father’s East-End Jewish ancestors, but has explored Tibetan through his meditation practice and Hangul via his Korean partner.

“Language is an expression of being human, and that’s at the core of the festival,” he says. “You can turn up and learn about a lot of diverse cultures. But really what I would like is that you turn up and you learn a lot about yourself: ‘What is my past? Why don’t I know Ogham or Old Irish? What is my relationship to Yiddish?’ That would make me very happy.”

Engagement Figures

33 Creative Practitioners
8 Events
7 Workshops
48,000 Exhibition visitors
3,804,500 Digital broadcast and press audience

Selected Press & Media



The Guardian

<https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2025/sep/23/sylheti-klingon-tamajaght-festival-for-endangered-languages>



BBC Radio London Live

with Aaron Paul

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0crbggj>



Altreconomia Italy

<https://altreconomia.it/sam-winston-alfabeti-in-via-di-estinzione/>



Resonance FM

with Dylan Trenouth

<https://www.resonancefm.com>



The Journal of Music

<https://journalofmusic.com/listing/14-08-25/voiced-festival-endangered-languages>



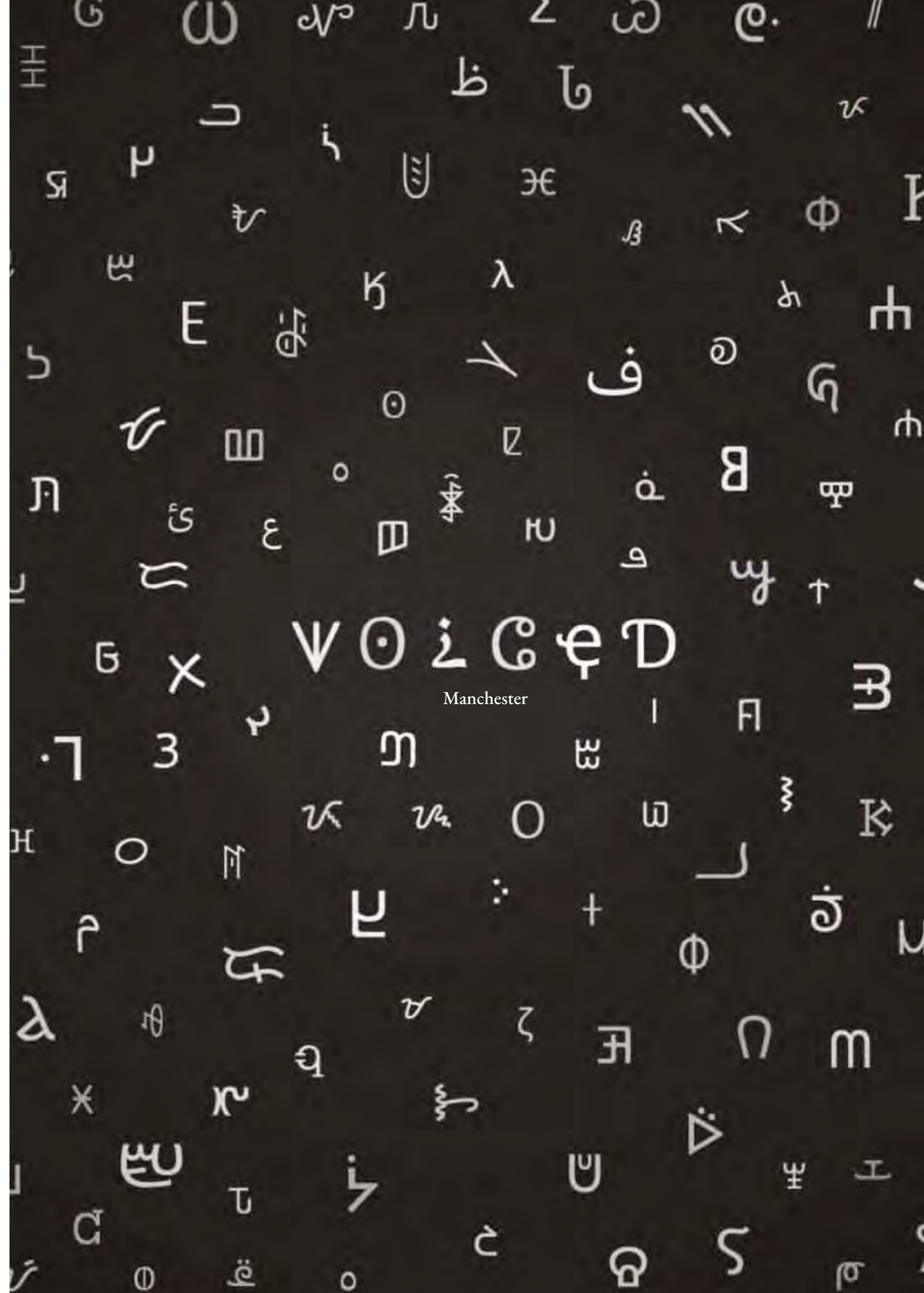
ABC Radio Sydney

<https://www.abc.net.au/listen/programs/weekendevenings/language-festival/105838214>



The Hollywood Reporter

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/trainspotting-author-irvine-welsh-tech-slaves-adolescence-1236402867/>



Manchester



Seed Syllable Exhibit

20–21 February 2026
Holden Gallery, Manchester School of Art,
Manchester Metropolitan University

“Just as it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a global effort to recognise the importance of minority cultures and their scripts, and to introduce a new attitude in which they are regarded with respect as equals.”

– Tim Brookes, founder of the Script Keepers Network

This free exhibition and series of events featured a visual showcase of five new poems and a major new artwork commission – Seed Syllable – by visual artist Sam Winston. A host of poets, artists, and creators joined together to celebrate our linguistic freedom. There were over 7,000 languages worldwide that could be written in over 300 different alphabets and scripts, yet that number was shrinking dramatically. Visitors dropped in on Manchester School of Art on Cavendish Street to explore why that was and to discover a diverse cast of creatives who were bringing endangered languages and stories to life..

Installed exhibit at the Holden Gallery in collaboration with Manchester Poetry Library, February 2026
Photos: (opposite) Identity design by Modern Activity, (above) Evan Wilson

*From Ancient Letterforms to Living Languages:
The Script Keepers Network*

If something is important, we write it down. Yet 85% of the world's writing systems are on the verge of vanishing — not granted official status, not taught in schools, discouraged and dismissed. When a culture is forced to abandon its traditional script, everything it has written for hundreds of years — sacred texts, poems, personal correspondence, legal documents, the collective experience, wisdom and identity of a people — is lost. The Script Keepers Network is a global community of people who document, preserve and revitalise some of the world's 250+ endangered scripts.

Tim Brookes is a researcher in the field of script loss and revitalisation on a global scale. Excerpts taken from *An Atlas of Endangered Alphabets* by Tim Brookes, published by Quercus in 2024.



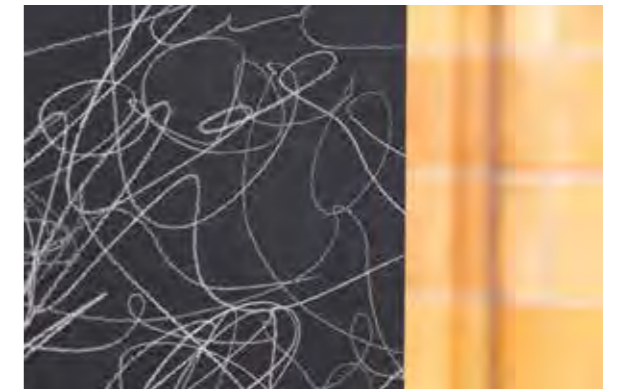
Scripts in the Holden Gallery, February 2026
Photos: Evan Wilson

Three Dialect Poems

Dialects are all around us, expressing unique ways of speaking in our communities and connecting us to local landscapes. The UK alone has dozens of dialects with hundreds of regional variations, which can change rapidly from one location to the next. At the heart of *Voiced* is a foregrounding of dialects as languages in themselves. *'A language is a dialect with an army and a navy'* is a quote popularised by Max Weinreich that highlights how majority languages are often privileged over dialects with power and resources. For this reason, linguists increasingly talk of dialects as 'language varieties'. These language varieties are a rich linguistic medium that provide exciting possibilities for poetry, dynamised through the expressive voices of poets.

Here you will find poems in Black Country dialect by Forward-Prize winning poet Liz Berry, a poem exploring the history of Scouse by *Voiced* co-curator Chris McCabe and a poem in Sylheti by Bangladeshi-born British bilingual poet Shamim Azad. Each of the poems can be listened to through headphones where the voices of the poets themselves bring dialect to life.

Poets:
Liz Berry
Chris McCabe
Shamim Azad



The *Seed Syllable* exhibit consisted of three booths with visual and textual content covering *Global Poems for Home*, *Dialect Poetry*, *Seed Syllable Flags*, *Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)* and *The Script Keepers Network*.
Photos: Evan Wilson

কাণ্ডনোর ফুরি

আমার দুই পাও'র ডলে নখীর দুই-ডানা
হাজি ভরা থুয়া লইবা আমি বড়ই বেফানা।

আমি রে গোকাণ্ডনমাস'র আঞ্জোর ফুরি
একইশ আইলেই আমার বহ উড়াউড়ি।

থুয়া কাটি কাটি আমি বেড়াইসো মাই
পদ্য'র পিরানী আমি বিলাতী ম্যাগসাই।।

My wings are hidden
under two busy legs
My bones are filled with
fog and distress.

I am the blazing daughter
of *Fagun*, I grow countless
With the arrival of *Ekush*,
my sky becomes endless.

I make my poems out of fog and fly
I am a *Piranee*, a British Magpie.

Fagun/Phalgun — a month in the Bengali calendar
which falls in February. On 21 February 1952,
during the Bengali Language Movement protests,
students sacrificed their lives to achieve the right
to speak in Bengali, our mother language.
Ekush — the number 21 in Bengali.
Piranee — female saint, who has magical powers.

Shamim Azad
The flaming girl of Phalgun

The Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)

The *Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)* is a digital repository for preserving multimedia collections of endangered languages from all over the world, making them available for future generations.

ELAR preserves collections of audio and video recordings, transcriptions and translations, dictionaries, and primers in and of endangered languages created with and by speakers of the endangered languages. ELAR makes these collections accessible free of charge to the speakers and signers, their descendants, scholars, and the public.

ELAR currently holds materials for over 770 endangered languages recorded in over 90 different countries.

The Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR) was created in 2002 together with the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme in response to the dramatic decline of linguistic diversity with a generous donation by Arcadia, the charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin. Humanity is losing its linguistic diversity at a rapid pace due to the impacts of climate change, globalisation, and urbanisation. Fewer and fewer children are learning to speak the language of their heritage and as the majority of the world's over 6500 languages are unwritten and only existing in the minds of their speakers and signers and in the social fabric of human interaction. In response to this development linguists, documenters, and speakers/signers are creating multimedia collections of endangered languages establishing a documentary record of these languages.



The following communities and languages were part of Voiced, through audio and visual installations.

Zoroastrian Dari, Iran
Tshwa, Botswana
Ngaanyatjarra, Australia
Eastern Khanty, Russia
Dza, Nigeria
Rengmitca, Bangladesh
Waata, Kenya
Djeoromitxi, Brazil
Lhokpu, Bhutan

Installed exhibit at the Holden Gallery in collaboration with Manchester Poetry Library. February 2026
Photos: (opposite) Evan Wilson, (above) Courtesy of Endangered Languages Archive

ELAR x Jamie Perera Endangered Voices Listening Trail

Created by sound artist Jamie Perera, this self-guided trail led visitors to discreet audio beacons gently broadcasting endangered languages. Visitors were encouraged to seek out these sonic moments, pausing to share space with vanishing voices in quiet, often unnoticed corners. It was an invitation to lend their ears, reflect, and connect with cultures and languages at risk of being forgotten. Finally, at the centre of the audio trail was an installation where visitors could hear 'Babel Reclaimed', an ocean of endangered languages moving around the world.



The Holden Gallery exhibit consisted of three booths with visual and textual content.
Photo: (top left) Courtesy of Jamie Perera, (top right and below) Evan Wilson



Live Literature Programme

20–21 February 2026

Holden Gallery, Manchester School of Art,
Manchester Metropolitan University

Performers:

Afrocats
Jez Dolan
Afshan D'Souza-Lodhi
Rosie Garland
Mererid Hopwood
Kabir Kapoor
Rachel Lichtenstein

Kabir Kapoor, poet, visual language artist and the British Deaf Association's first UK BSL Poet Laureate
Photo: Evan Wilson

Opening Event

20 February 2026
7:00 pm to 8:15 pm
Poetry Library

Join us for the opening event to discover writers and poets working to keep their languages alive through their work. Hear from Rachel Lichtenstein, who has been learning her heritage language of Yiddish to inform the book she is writing, a journey she will share at this event. And if you have never been in the presence of an Archdruid, now is your moment as Mererid Hopwood performs her work and talks of her role in activating the Welsh language through poetry. Kabir Kapoor, the UK's first BSL Poet Laureate, brings British Sign Language poetry to the stage in an embodied performance which foregrounds British Sign Language as a beautiful and expressive visual language of poetry. All performers will take part in a Q and A exploring questions at the heart of the Voiced festival: how can creativity help keep a language alive? What is the role of the young in language activation? And how might we think of the relationship between language and landscape?

Multilingual Open Mic

21 February 2026
2:00 pm to 4:00 pm
Manchester Poetry Library

Manchester Poetry Library are delighted to be hosting our fourth multilingual open mic night to celebrate International Mother Language Day 2026. We welcome readings in any language. You can choose to read your own poems or a poem by a well-known poet (or not so well-known). If you're still unsure, please just turn up and you can decide whether you want to read on the night. You might want to choose something spontaneously from our collection or just stay and listen. This year we will also be joined by special guests to celebrate our collaboration with The Festival for Endangered Languages, Afrocats and Manchester City of Literature.

Polari & Poetry in Manchester

25 February 2026
6:15 pm to 7:30 pm
Manchester Central Library

Presenting Polari, a hidden language of Queer experience, which will come to life in performance with Jez Dolan. Rosie Garland performs poems from Polari Prize-shortlisted *What Girls do in the Dark* and her recently published *This Is How I Fight*, an Observer Poetry Book of the Month. And poet afshan d'souza-lodhi explores Queer language through her mother tongue Konkani, a minority and national language in India. Join us for this electric evening exploring the intersections of Queer languages, poetry and performance.



Kabir Kapoor, British Deaf Association's first UK BSL Poet Laureate
Photo: Evan Wilson



Photo: Image courtesy of the artist

Altreconomia Interview

Across the world, it is estimated that at least 7,000 languages are spoken, 40% of which, according to UNESCO, will become extinct by the end of the century. This means, on average, one language disappearing every two weeks.

Sam Winston is an English artist who has been working with language for over twenty years, using letters from different alphabets – many of them endangered – in his artworks and translating them visually through different shapes and colours.

Since 2025, he has been co-curator, together with the poet Chris McCabe, of the first edition of “Voiced: The Festival for Endangered Languages”, a series of international events hosted in London which, throughout the month of October, raised awareness among visitors about languages at risk, inspiring new ways of thinking about and engaging with words.

Top images; Jez Dolan and Afshan D’Souza-Lodhi Kapoor, exploring the intersections of Queer languages, poetry and performance. Bottom image; Mererid Hopwood, poet, lyricist, Archdruid of Wales
Photos: Evan Wilson

When and why did Winston begin working with languages?

As a dyslexic and neurodivergent child, I struggled a great deal at school and letters appeared to me as small, unreadable black marks. I always felt excluded from the education system: only one kind of “correct” language was taught in class, and if you couldn’t apply it as required, you were automatically reprimanded. This quickly made me understand the power and authority that words can confer. After secondary school, however, I went to art school and began to look at letters differently, noticing the visual aspects of language. That’s when I understood that, by moving beyond the binary logic we are taught from a young age, there are many ways to say something, and that diversity is an essential form of richness.

What is the power of language?

For me, its power lies in the quality of listening and in creating spaces where things that have never been said can finally be spoken. When we talk about language, we are not only talking about tongues, but about people, cultures, and societies that reflect power structures and determine who is invited to the table to speak and who is not. In the case of endangered languages, these dynamics become even more evident, and the question to ask is: “Why are these people’s voices not being allowed into the conversation?” In my creative projects, I always start by asking myself, “Who is the quietest?” Finding the loudest person in the room is far too easy, and they are rarely the most interesting.

Why is language loss happening so quickly, and what are the consequences?

I think language loss fits perfectly within the general acceleration of the world, and there is a link with the increasing reduction in biodiversity. There is no single answer as to why this is happening; it is clear that the more connected we become and the more pervasive the online environment is, the more useful it becomes to speak a single language –just as you and I are doing in this interview–. This has its usefulness, but it also comes with a great cost.

Do you think younger generations are more sensitive to this issue?

They are certainly more sensitive; they reflect on themselves much more and ask how they can define themselves and find an identity in a space that appears uniform, like the online world. When people hear “endangered languages”, many immediately think of something belonging to the past, a legacy or heritage. But a language only survives if the next generation chooses to carry it on. When I think of artists like Tarrak, a rapper from Greenland who sings in Kalaallisut, or Kneecap, a group that raps in Irish, these are people young people look up to, not only because they embody a sense of identity, but because they are also cool. Thanks to them, language becomes alive and modern, a powerful act not imposed from above but born from a grassroots movement that honours the past by reinterpreting it in a contemporary way, even on TikTok or in rap lyrics. Linguistic survival is linked to cultural vitality. Languages must face the future, and creativity is one of the keys to this. An example I love is that of Sequoyah, a Native American who, in the 1800s, created his own syllabary for Cherokee. At first he was accused of witchcraft, but his invention later became a symbol of identity: the perfect balance between tradition and innovation that we should seek today.

How do you think ChatGPT is influencing the way we use languages?

It’s the antithesis. Having a festival about endangered languages is like having an anti-ChatGPT festival: it celebrates everything that falls outside that model. I’m almost sorry to bring up the subject because it doesn’t deserve more attention, it already gets far too much. The world is much bigger than that, and the more we focus on that tiny bubble, the more we lose sight of everything else. There’s a risk of believing there is only one way to understand reality through language models or artificial intelligence but these systems are trained on a handful of dominant languages –English, Spanish, Chinese– while most of the 7,000 languages have never been read by artificial intelligence and remain excluded. One of our tasks, as the “older” generation, is to introduce the idea that there is not just one way to say things.

With your book “One and Everything” (2022), you addressed children. Why this choice?

Because children enter the world without opinions. Everything is new and wonderful; they walk down the street and can’t go straight because everything fascinates them, this sense of wonder must be protected. If we manage to convey to them the message that language is never just right or wrong but a creative space in which to imagine sounds or drawings –just as Sequoyah did– then we give them enormous freedom. The frustration that comes from being excluded, whether due to dyslexia or not speaking the dominant language, can easily turn into anger or indifference. We must avoid one-dimensional thinking and remember that linguistic wounds, like those of Native peoples in the Americas, have left traumas that are still felt today.

What is your creative process for making visual works?

I’ll tell you an interesting anecdote. Once, I went to the offices of the Oxford English Dictionary, and a woman showed me a room saying, “Here we keep all the words that aren’t in the dictionary.” And I thought, “Wow.” There are words that exist but that we don’t know. It was the first clue that language is like a shoreline: what can or cannot be said is partly decided by someone, but it also evolves naturally thanks to others. As a child, I found words hard and impenetrable; growing up, I discovered they were malleable. Now I take them from the page, use ink to create new colours, extract the shapes of letters to make drawings, transform texts into sculptures. You can contain infinite meanings within a written word, but you can also set it free. And that liberation, whether in drawing, writing, or singing, is the most fascinating thing of all.

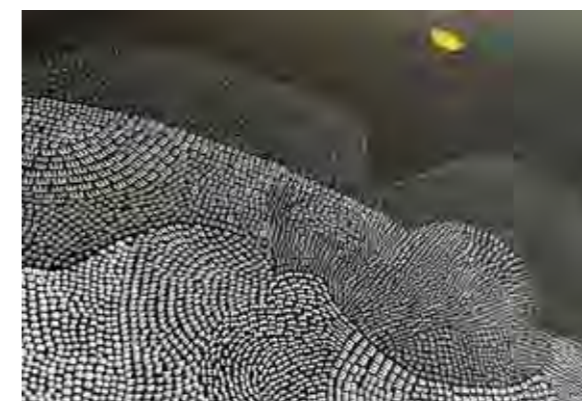


Photo: Image courtesy of the artist

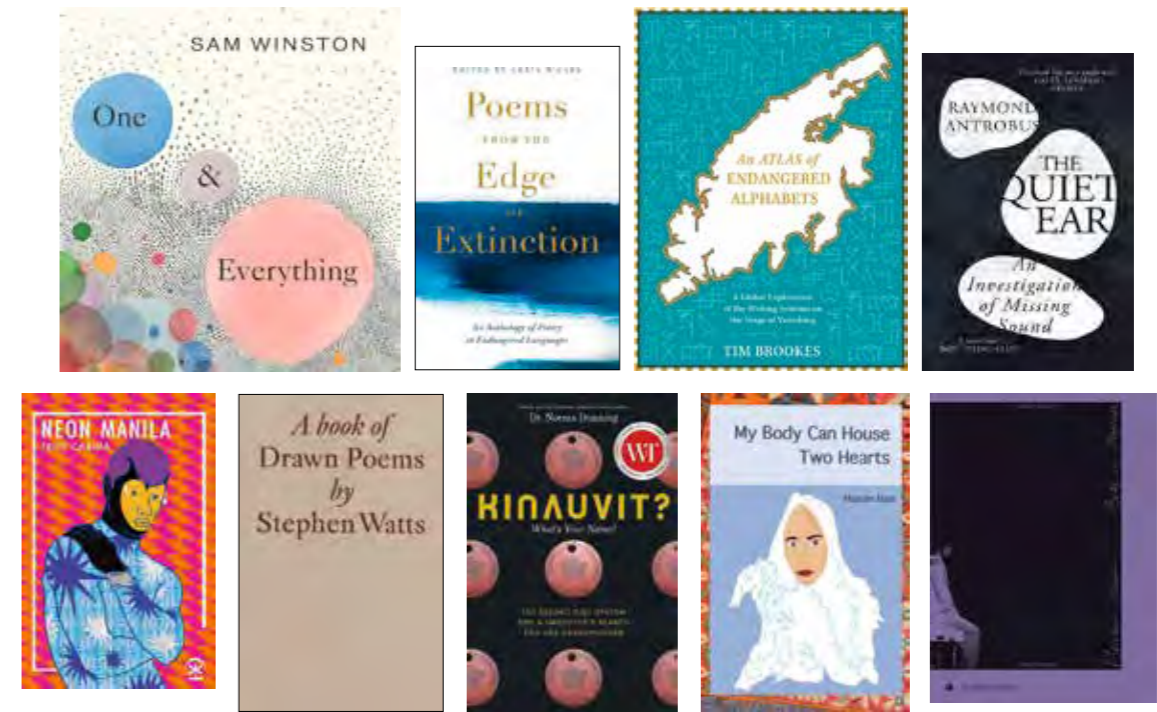
Partners and Community Groups



- Afrocats
- British Bilingual Poetry Collective (BBPC)
- Endangered Alphabets
Tim Brookes
- The Endangered Languages Archive (ELAR)
Mandana Seyfeddinipur
- Garston Adventure Playground
- Manchester Poetry Library
Martin Kratz
- National Poetry Library
Endangered Poetry Project
- UNESCO Manchester City of Literature

The Afrocats (Lingala group) with Martin Kratz, Manchester Poetry Library

Related Publishing



- The Quiet Ear (2025)
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