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Looking for the poet

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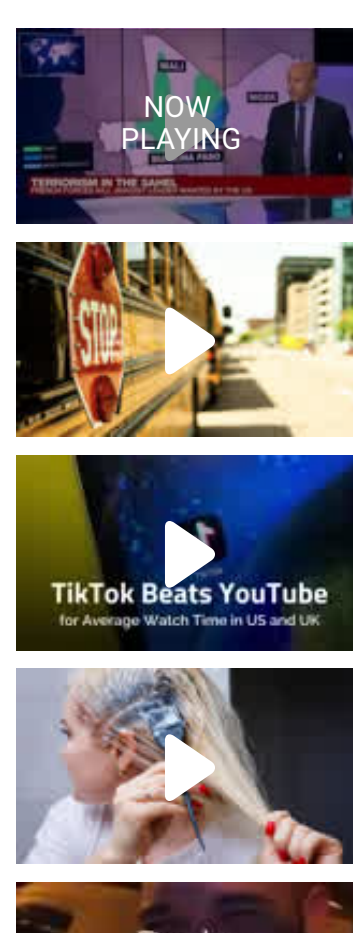
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Virtual reality, live performance, creative coding, film and sound art come together in an upcoming cyber theatre piece which allows viewers to steer the journey

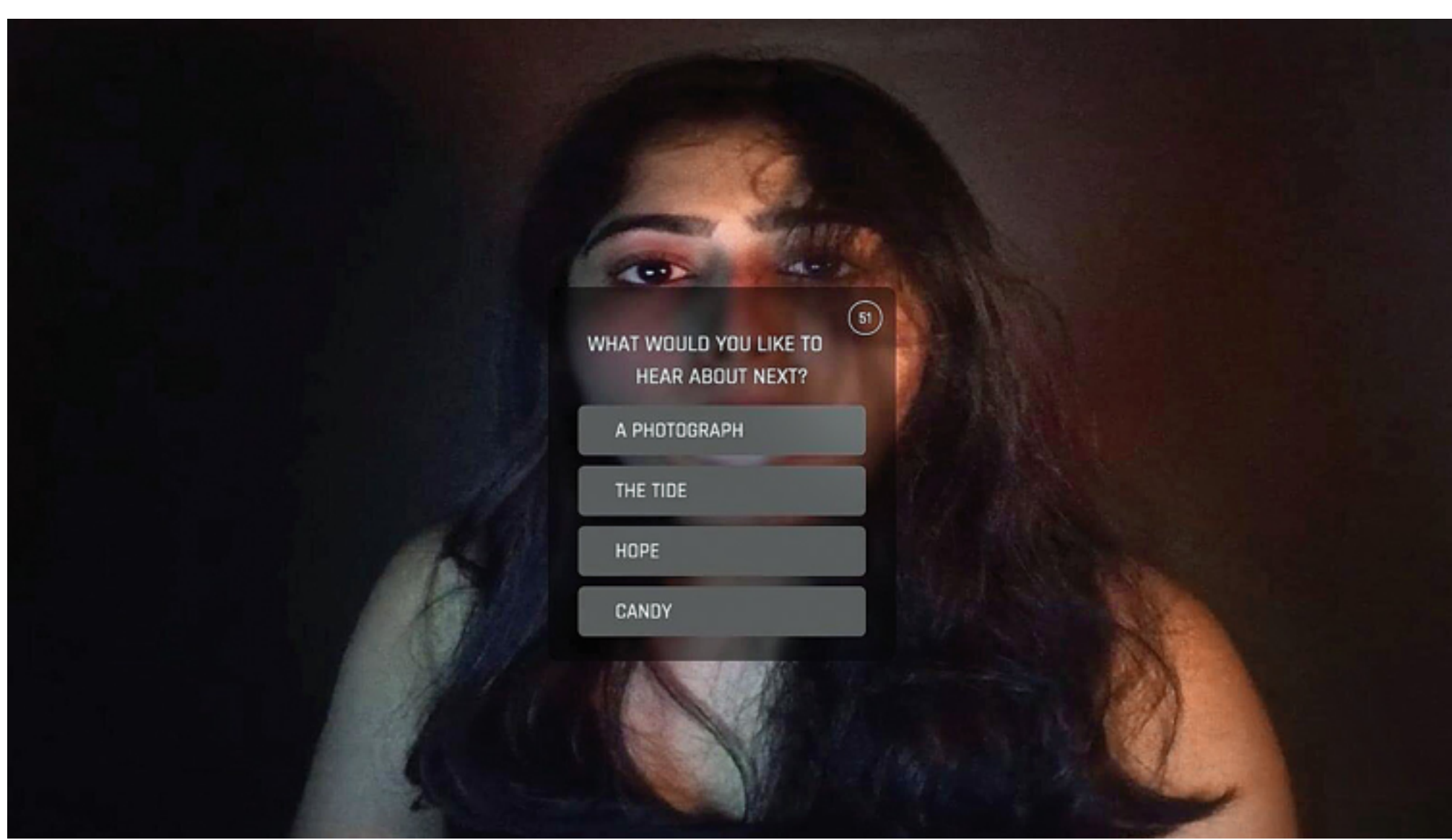


Stills from *The Last Poet*

FEATURED VIDEOS



After the first lockdown last year, Delhi-based interdisciplinary artiste Amitesh Grover started musing about how he could respond to the times we were living in. Not just to the biological virus, but also the other kinds of viruses plaguing us, such as the fear of the truth-speaker. "I started thinking about what kind of society we're becoming — where our truth-tellers are languishing in jails, being publicly attacked, and whose books are being banned or burned," he points out. Around this time, Grover also chanced upon a quote by one of his favourite poets, Jonas Mekas: "In the very end, civilisations perish because they listen to their politicians and not their poets." It set off a chain of thoughts in his head, leading him to imagine a fictional world where a people's poet goes missing, which forms the premise of his upcoming cyber theatre production, *The Last Poet*.



The 90-minute interactive performance, which Grover developed along with writer Sarah Mariam and a crew of coders and tech designers, boasts of layers of art — live theatre, film, sound art, creative coding and digital scenography. It features actors Atul Kumar, Ashwath Bhatt, Bhagyashree Tarke, Pallav Singh and Dipti Mahadev. The narrative takes off from the poet's mysterious disappearance. The audience saunters through a virtual-tentacular city, meeting different characters — a weaver, a prosecutor, a daughter, a publisher, a student, a friend, the poet's wife and more — who speculate where the poet vanished, and reveal how he touched their lives. But not once does the viewer get to meet the central character; his poems appear as phantom notes that speak truth to power.

Thematically, Grover shares, he wanted to play with the idea of absence, because we were suffering a lot of loss last year, and a burgeoning sense of distrust. "There was a lot of doubt and rift in our social fabric. I started wondering what people would say if a poet went missing, and it became like an unravelling mystery of rumour, desire, regret and speculation, revealed through the characters," he tells us.



The piece came together in four to five months, with Grover and team building a virtual-reality world from scratch, where the story is set. The actors came in last, and it took them all a fair amount of technical groundwork to livestream their performances and embed them into the virtual world. The five performers essay multiple characters, Grover reveals.

What lends the show an interactive, almost Bandersnatch-like edge, is the way the viewers get to choose which character — and their story — comes next. No two sets of audience members can thus have the same experience. "After each character's story plays out, there's a poll on the screen that prompts the audience to vote for the scene title that they'd like to watch. So, there's no one way to watch the show; there are 125 ways," the director informs us. This is why several viewers have gone back to the "infinity city" multiple times, although they know the central plot — much like an epic.



Kumar, who's part of the cast, shares that working on the production was a learning experience. "The audience keeps us on our toes. There are so many things I didn't have a clue about with regards to cyber theatre before this. Mariam's characters portray an array of emotions. Through some, you feel close to the poet, while some outcast him. It's been a satisfying, fun experience," he adds. The *Last Poet's* next virtual stop is at a theatre biennale in Canada. Catch him if you can, before he goes missing again.

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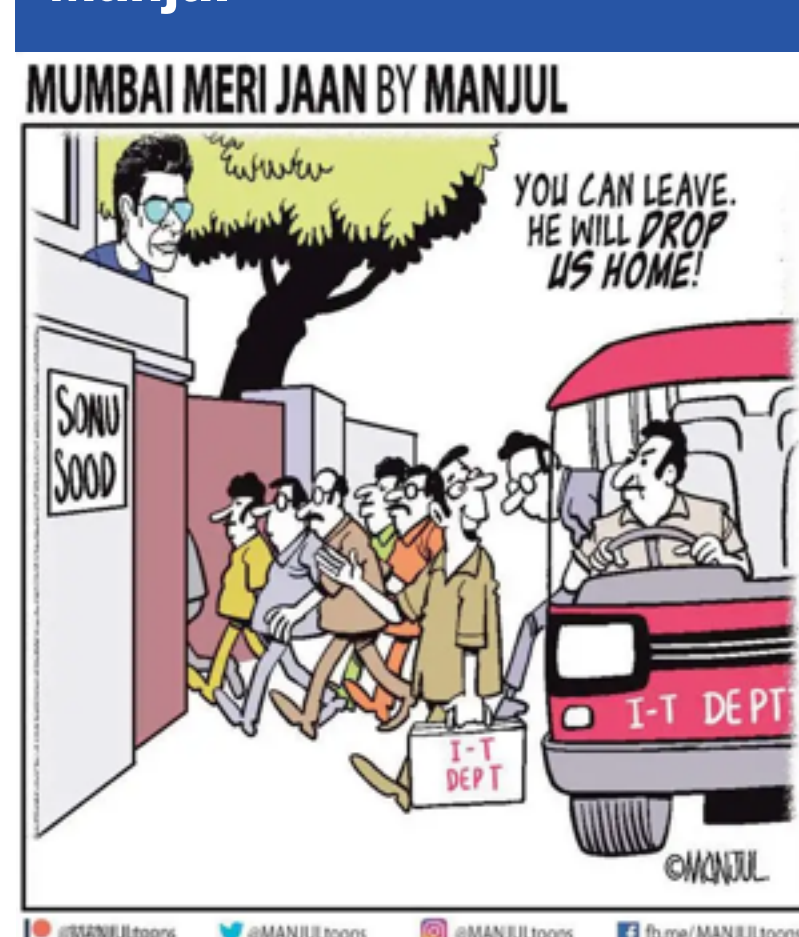


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