

The Sightseers

James N Hutchinson Interview

Siobhan Carroll: Could you describe the initial research that you undertook for *Rumors of a New Planet* and the methodologies you have developed from that?

James N Hutchinson: I started my research by looking at some of the astronomers who'd been based at Calton Hill. I didn't know what I was looking for, but I knew I didn't want to tell a story of astronomy or make a historical account of the Observatory, as these are already present in one form or another. I became interested in asides that didn't seem to be developed in the stories of the astronomers. For instance, I read that the wife of Charles Piazzi Smyth, Jessica Duncan, had come to Edinburgh to study Geology before she met him. I then discovered that her notebooks are held at Blackford Hill observatory. They contain details of the lectures she attended, translations of articles written in French and Italian, and accounts of the excursions she made around the UK and Europe to look at rocks. When she married Smyth, she no longer pursued this interest, so I thought it could be interesting to use some of this material as a starting point for a new body of work.

Similarly, I discovered that a young woman, Margaret Stewart, who spent some of her youth in the vicinity of Calton Hill, where her father was the minister for the Canongate, would go on to marry the famous English astronomer John Herschel. When the couple moved to Cape Town shortly after their marriage in 1832, they collaborated to produce a portfolio of botanical drawings from samples they gathered while exploring the Cape peninsula. Margaret learnt how to paint in order to produce this portfolio. I thought this could also be reconsidered in a contemporary context.

I have used accounts of their excursions to isolate specific routes and have mapped them onto the spaces as they exist today. I travelled these routes, one which goes from Calais to Florence and the other from Constantia to Gordon's Bay, and am in the process of making some texts and drawings that consider how they appear today.

SC: How did you apply this methodology to work with visually impaired people and produce *The Sightseers*?

JNH: In the accounts I read about Thomas Henderson (the first Astronomer Royal for Scotland) and Thomas Anderson (a shy amateur astronomer who made some important discoveries) I noticed that there was mention of poor eyesight. I also realised that James Gall, who was writing and publishing texts about the constellations, also had a desire to integrate the blind into wider society, and did a lot to make this happen, through publishing and education. I decided to connect these astronomers through their relationship to sight. I thought that, since the RNIB is based at the foot of the hill, we might be able to work together to produce a working narrative, in which these connections might naturally sit. When I discovered that this RNIB branch is the central meeting point for the Lothian Blind Ramblers I thought that it would be interesting to see how they navigate the landscape and how they talk about it. This is similar to how I approached Jessica and Margaret's outputs. The former talked about the landscape through geology, the latter through botany. The LBRs would surely have a way of talking about how they make their way through the landscape that would be new to me.

SC: Could you describe the process of producing the script?

JNH: I spent an afternoon with eight members of the walking group. There were four visually impaired ramblers and four guides. Only two of them had been to Calton Hill before and even then it was many years ago. They were formed into four duos, each containing a visually impaired

rambler and a rambler guide. I had designed two routes around Calton Hill that would each take about forty minutes to navigate and that passed by some of the main sights, involved some tricky terrain, and some positions from which the places connected to Henderson, Anderson and Gall could be seen. The duos were not told about the routes in advance. Each duo went separately around one of the routes. I told them that they should follow me but to pretend I wasn't there, so they never knew which direction to go in until I directed them. A sound recordist recorded their conversation as they traversed the route - including discussions of the ground beneath them, instructions and warnings of hazards, descriptions of objects and views, and general conversation and asides that occurred to them as they went. After each duo had been on one of the routes we all sat in the gallery and talked about the experience they'd just had but also about guiding and being guided, which included a wide variety of anecdotes and accounts of experiences. This conversation was also recorded.

When back home, I transcribed the recordings and then broke them up into fragments, placing each fragment at a different point along the routes. I then wrote three new fragments that were about Henderson, Anderson and Gall and incorporated them into the route. Finally, I placed specific, relevant fragments from the group conversation in the gallery into the route so that there were a string of fragments that make up a functioning narrative. I ended up with a script for a 'guide' and a 'guided' that was an amalgamation of everyone's experience on the day. Every person who took part said something that made it into the script.

For the final stage I returned to the site and walked around it reading the script to get a sense of the timings. The script was then performed to tape by me and my partner and sent to the participants, who suggested modifications. The final script was then sent to the actors.

SC: The Observers' Walk has been performed and recorded live – why was that important for the final work?

JNH: I wanted there to be a small element of the work left to chance. For example, poor weather, breathlessness at certain points, people getting in the way, or changes in the surrounding soundscape. I also decided not to script moments when the guide was helping the guided over certain obstacles or bits of terrain. Instead, I played the actors examples from the initial sound recordings so they would get a sense of what that entailed, and then they could improvise when we encountered obstacles in real time. This way, the final scripted performance would be more authentic, and also if one decided to follow the route whilst listening to the recording, one could also locate oneself in relation to obstacles and terrain, as much as to the sights one was expecting to encounter.

SC: What did you find most challenging and most rewarding about working in script and audio?

JNH: Assembling a functioning narrative was challenging, as it was difficult to think myself out of each of the personalities of the eight participants, and to imagine them into two new characters. I wanted to keep a verbatim representation of what they actually said, and not to dramatise it in any way. Also, this kind of working – with participants, actors and crew – is new to me, even though I have managed this kind of work for other artists. I am an artist who works mostly in isolation, in a way I can control every element by myself, so I would never choose to do this kind of thing without the level of assistance I was provided by Collective. I was very anxious about it all, and controlling my own levels of anxiety was a challenge! However, I am delighted with the results, and especially pleased that the participants are so happy with it.

James N Hutchinson interviewed by Siobhan Carroll, Head of Programme, Collective for the launch of *The Sightseers* Observers' Walk. October 2017.