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PRACTITIONER REPORT:

Calton Hill Constellations

SIRIOL JOYNER & PHIL SMITH

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Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

Artist and choreographer Siriol Joyner (Aberystwyth, Cymru) and writer and mythogeographer Phil Smith (Exeter, England) worked together with overlaps and collisions of place, dance, description, objects and narratives as part of a series of Opening Line events by Artlink. They combined description, history and storytelling in response to locations around Edinburgh in performances for sighted, partially sighted and blind audiences.

Working for three days in Cramond, Siriol and Phil explored an edge-place, drawing both on research about it and on

their physical and emotional encounters with it. Playing at the edges of overlapping senses and spaces, they explored the meeting place of sacred and non-sacred space; searching for what is there and what is changing there; for what can be told, performed, what can be felt and touched; reaching for what eludes, listening and waiting for what might emerge.

They next took a group on an exploratory journey around the grounds of the Old City Observatory on Edinburgh's Calton Hill. This descriptive performance, designed for sighted, non-sighted and blind audiences, responded to the historic and evocative site of Calton Hill by overlapping and colliding place, dance, description, objects and narratives. Phil and Siriol invited the group to experience the site in different ways, challenging our perception of the space through a series of actions, moments and stories.

This is their report on the two events.

Keywords: dome, hill, takeover, lentils, gloaming, monument, authentic, rocket

In bare terms that hide too much, *Calton Hill Constellations* was a two-hour performance journey into a partly ruined Observatory, running with rats. It was created for a visually impaired audience, as part of a bigger experiment by Artlink Edinburgh and the Lothians in creating description performances. In our two attempts, tentative and brazen (our first around the waterside at Cramond in 2013), we pushed what 'description' might mean, tangling the spoken with touching, leading, holding, carrying, re-speaking, journeying, moving, cooking, eating, playing and dropping in and out of different speech registers: telling stories, extemporising, describing our associations rather than what we see, lecturing, chatting.



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

An automated voice with a Belfast accent informs us that we have crossed a line. We are not as we should be. The Observatory is a shocking ruin and should be left alone. A woman calls out to us over a wall: 'You shouldn't be in there'. 'It's alright, we're artists, it's probably just the rats'. Silence and a shift. No more questions. The authorities have not been informed. We are not where we should be. Our subversion suits this place. Some telescopes are still here. We are on a meridian line. We practice authentic movement, riff off the stuff and tap into some of that fairy boy sap that keeps spouting up. Did you notice the giant upturned telescope? Did you hear me slap the National Monument? One day we walked up a different way: not the civilised route but the way of strewn condoms and thorns.

In both of our pieces we trapped ourselves in snake-like routes that ate their tails. On our return the starting points were changed. Darkness had fallen. At Cramond, a fish that

the audience had handled and carried was cooked. On Calton Hill, above the spot where the audience physically modelled orbits (re-working a moment from Béla Tarr's *Werckmeister Harmonies*), rockets were fired into the night. There was something conservative about this coming back. The body of the route, segmented into its stopping points—our structure laid out in paper fragments on the floor of a flat in Easter Road—weighted by the baggage of tours that it traduces.



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

We carry extraordinary baggage—in a few days we created around 20 segments of action and information—then we tried to ease its tense patterns with interruptions of communality; ordinary and extraordinary. Under the spidery rusted metal frame of an observatory dome, so lost and hollowed that it constitutes part of an informal pathway around the Observatory complex, we all stand with our hands on each others' heads. The dome is our collective skull, our dream dome; we overprescribe what all the bony domes can hold.

Dome, skull, palate, diaphragm, instep.

Instep, diaphragm, palate, skull, dome.

The touch of Henderson's Globe on our hands. The Hill.
They defeat our description.

We fail to make enough space, failing better than if we had succeeded in making an invitation open enough to make dreaming comfortable. It is a place of failure, of inaccurate measurements, of interrupted attempts and incomplete projects. Of ill-fated, improvised technologies.



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

We make revealing mistakes. To avoid taking everyone down steep stone steps we break the rule of never retracing our footsteps and drag a large stone to make a single step back down to our way in. The drop is too deep.

Kirsty has borrowed prisms from Camera Obscura for us. I hand them out. So smooth and heavy. Bath towels are a canvas upon which we play the spectrum.

Speaking in the quoted 'character' of Charles Piazzzi Smyth was too rude, or not rude enough; we interrupted ourselves. We did not explain why Phil was wrapped in the towels (Smyth wrapped himself in flannel to prevent his body heat affecting the instruments). We opened the doors to reveal the shapely and massive white column at the centre of the dark temple, and how the rock shifted and rendered lifetimes of measurements irretrievably randomised.

Four
fathoms
make a
column.

I guide four of you to make it and we feel the gist of its weight and space. We are not allowed into the building to show you how it really feels, but we shine our torches on the treacherous white stone.

It is a difficult separation. The proximity of the telescopes is palpable; the space is tabooed and creates a mischief in me.

We do not explain or debunk everything; we over-explain some things and leave fancies hanging. We are not easy in evenness, we keep disrupting ourselves. At one moment there is a sentimental magic in everyone coming forward to the wall of the central building to climb and touch the voluptuous globe, stars and a comet tail carved onto the planetary monument to Henderson, Astronomer Royal; the next, we tenderly lead you to lie face down in the gravel. An echo of the echoes of ceremonies some astronomers

imagined restoring, by measuring pyramids.



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

The performance ‘falls apart’ around the fire and the audience take over; telling their own stories. Some are ‘too long’. We know exactly what we are doing and where we are doing it and part of our exactitude is improvisation, giving up, failing and having to be happy by being on the cusp of happy / not happy. Our responsibility not to let down those who come and place their trust in us, and our responsibility to fail to attain the monolithic in a successful description; we are jesting with huge (for a body) stone structures.

We are not ourselves. ‘You must be taxidermists!’ Mouse, Moose, Rat, Dog, Cat, Hare, Elephant, Guinea Pig. What rhythms are already in a place?



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

In Cramond, Siriol had a direct personal connection having visited the site years before and the fish swam directly from her memories. Phil connected through a childhood memory of driving home in the dark, looking at large brightly lit houses and wanting to knock on their doors. This became a shared folly for us: 'give us your money! What's for pudding? Will you adopt us?' We are liars and fantasists. Not entirely ourselves.

On Calton Hill we mythologised ourselves more; we began by waving branches along a route up to the Observatory as the audience arrived. We stood to the side of a tree covered in yellow rags, playing off the fire ceremonies held on the hill, we made our own movement with the hill and then recruited the audience into a forest that had gone from here. Yellow becomes a signpost, signal. Hello conductor.

The uncivilised trees. Something happened to me at one of the trees. Something aligned through my gesture. A vertical slotting. Hello conductor.

Yellow must be a signpost, signal. Hello conductor.

Siriol sculpted audience members into planets, using the traffic markings on the tarmac; making silently explicit that we all 'stand for' something else that is unstable, shifting in gravitational pulls, then jerking out of each narrative that we start.



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

Tell them about your dream, Phil, that terrifying image of the giant screen swinging in front of the National Monument. That apocalyptic scene that was real on the next day: snow, sun, rain and the four winds. I had dreamed overnight of a huge rectangular screen swooping wildly through a panelled room; nothing swung it, for it moved by the force of its own representations. When I saw the incomplete and abject National Monument in the sun next morning, tourists framing themselves between its pillars and conducting their images with selfie sticks, I knew what power it was I saw.

I slap my hand on you, monument. I slap you and take the

cold, to steal it back and be warmed by a person who is now also a tree.

Around the neo-classical pseudo-temple in the middle of the complex we adapt the 'authentic movement' that we have used to interrogate our corporeal relationship to the Observatory's spaces. But rather than one observe the other as witness and holder of the space (first the mover and then the witness describing what they felt / saw; weirdly traduced in those obsessive selfies around the National Monument), we take both roles, moving while wired with microphones, reflecting as we move, out of earshot of the audience. Our comments are re-spoken for the audience by the two sound artists who are recording the event. We are getting beyond ourselves. The visually impaired audience, braced in the cold, hear the space doubly narrated as our feelings and associations are triggered by the falling away of the ground, the embraceable pillars, the possible voids, the forest that has returned as limestone 'trunks'.

One 'authentic movement' we did in preparation was at the most ruined of the domes. Phil moved around its remains, shifting against, on, balancing, lying, resting, pushing, drawn simplistically to its circle, testing inside and out and edginess. Siriol holding the space; witness, watcher, memory. The solid ground becomes dark and soft underfoot, falling away precipitously to the bottom of the forbidding perimeter wall of the complex. Irrecoverably ruined now, only a low circular wall remains. The temple of the four winds and I watch. Phil moves about on the slope. We the observatories, witness his endless spiralling exploration of that grass edge. I want to watch more, to watch Phil move more, more movement as exploration, more dancing as feeling. Inside is like being on a stage; a plane across which things might turn.



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

We chose a fire, heat, light, gathering. 'It burns, it gets more complicated'. Or rather, we sifted. For sure, temperature changes and shifts in the ground had been important here, measurements twisted by repetition, telling stories. Lights in the dark, seeing best in darkness, burning and radiating, gathered around an orrery that had lost its mechanical centre, its eye piece, its lenses, its metal casing. We 'stopped' our performance and swung it around this brick sun, because at our Wednesday preliminary sharing, when the temperature hovered around freezing, we wondered about having hot soup to warm the shivering audience.

One of the participants pointed out how appropriate lentils would be; seeds taking their name from the lenses they seem like. So we stood around the fire in the centre of the ruined dome and drank hot lenses, eyes and observatories inside and outside, warm and cold. The stories that people told to each other here, sometimes in small groups, sometimes addressing the whole group, changed the dynamics; from the two of us struggling in the failing light

with this complex of complexity and recalcitrant stone, it became something more like a slithery and incriminating group work.



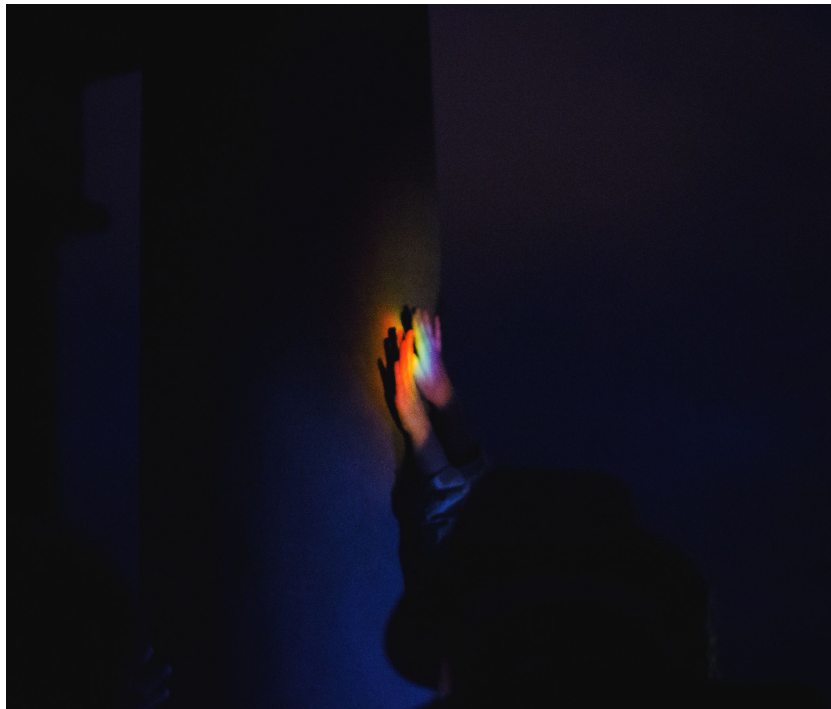
Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

A gallery staff member nursed the brazier he had lit earlier, Kirsty opened the lentil soup she had cooked; the audience's tales spilled about. Disconcertingly, they all had beginnings, middles and ends; now the tasks we had carefully if quickly planned were standing about, separately, alongside unplanned conversations; the meaning of the whole thing was loose. The support that Artlink and the Collective Gallery had given us was forefronted as a part of, maybe the best meaning of, the event; the audience took that and made it personal. Abutting the moments when we had been most performatively adventurous, when I asked our audience to lie in the gravel and feel the smoothness of pillars, when I had attempted Piazzzi Smyth's voice, when the symbolism had become too complex and unravelled, against this we were now assembled around a sad-looking brick stump, a structure formed fragile in orbits of conversation, shaped by attractions to the conversing of other orbits. This clunky, un-aesthetic social moment, standing round eating and

chatting, drew in the myth we were trying to set in motion without knowing what it was in advance. F. is showing me the app on her smartphone that speaks the names of planets and stars at which the phone is pointed. A clear voice speaks 'Uranus' into the darkness over and over.

The excessive fireworks display at the end—handed over to the person who offered to do the job (it was now their thing)—and the hole in the ground we found under a tawdry sheet of hardboard, where the huge thermometer had been kept, smashed by a paranoid sailor; we never mentioned that.

The Observatory eventually swamped us in its darkness and we could not light enough; soon its ruins will be tidied and it will become brighter and harder.



Calton Hill Constellations - site specific twilight performance
Photo: Artlink

About the authors

SIRIOL JOYNER is a choreographer from Aberystwyth. A current focus for her practice is the relationship between movement and language and the notion of translation: its possibilities and impossibilities. She is creating movement, text and object works that employ a principle of hybridity and assemblage. She has been collaborating with Puerto Rican dance artist Nibia Pastrana Santiago to develop a movement practice entitled *Dŵr Viva*, their work was shared in Abercych in 2013 and shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art, San Juan PR in 2015. Siriol is also engaged in long-term choreographic research with the Irish choreographer Ruairi Donovan under the name *CELTIC RADICAL* which explores cultural identity, language and place in both Wales and Ireland. Working site-specifically and outdoors is an expanding aspect of her practice, which she is developing by working alongside artists such as Phil Smith, Jennifer Monson and Simon Whitehead and the bio-artist Ariana Jordao. Siriol is part of the team who curate Maynard, a resource for dance and movement arts in rural West Wales.

PHIL SMITH (Crab Man, Mytho) is a performance-maker, writer and ambulatory researcher, specialising in creating performances related to walking, site-specificity, mythogeographies and counter-tourism. He is a core member of site-based arts collective Wrights & Sites, presently working on a new publication: *Architect Walkers*. He has recently performed with Jane Mason in *Life Forces*, and is developing *common dance for threatened subjectivities* with Melanie Kloetzel. He is also a Site Artist for Tracing the Pathway's 'Groundwork' project in Milton Keynes. He teaches site-specific performance at Plymouth University. Phil's publications include *A Footbook of Zombie Walking* and *Walking's New Movement* (2015), *On Walking* and *Enchanted Things* (2014), *Counter-Tourism: The Handbook* (2012) and *Mythogeography* (2010). He is an Associate Professor (Reader) at Plymouth University.