

Frances Johnstone with the view from her kitchen window

Picture by James Millar



Ambitious and exciting interactive art project This City's Centre is using local people as its focus to provide a new perspective on city life

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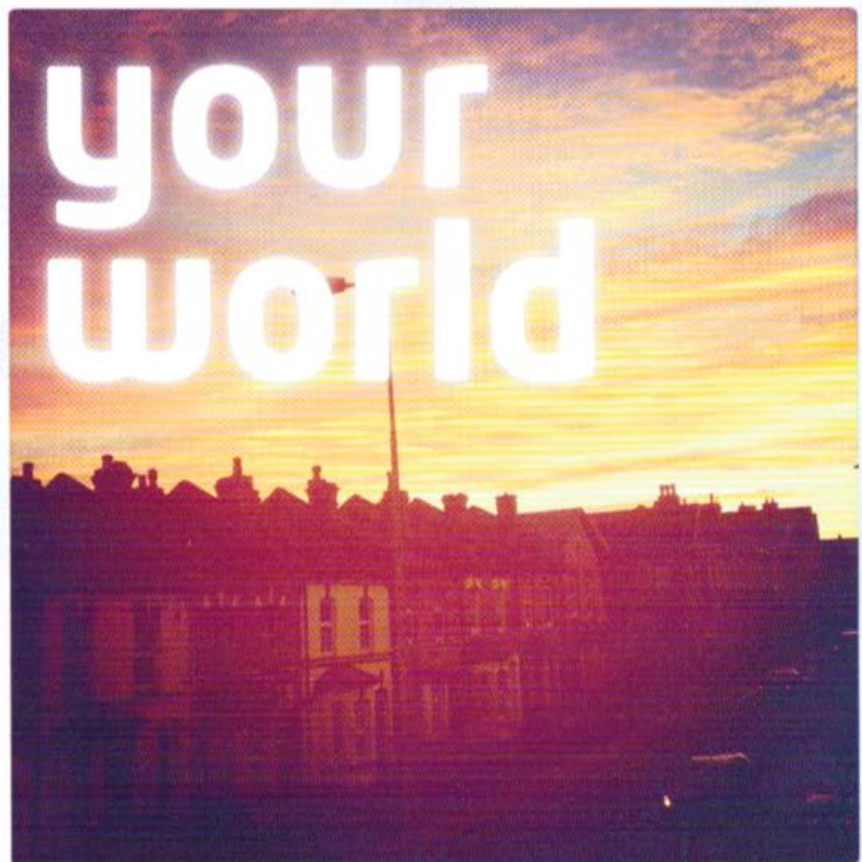
Challenging how well we know Exeter city centre is an intriguing art project looking at familiar surroundings through new eyes. Residents living within 10 minutes' walk of Exeter Cathedral have been invited to share views from their homes of the streets and vistas of central Exeter.

A woman with a view of Exeter City Football Club's ground St James'; a woman who lives in the hustle and bustle of Sidwell Street; and a young family living in inner city bypass Western Way are among those who responded to the project led by Devon-based art collective Blind Ditch.

The outcome of those views, along with contributions from other residents of the city, has resulted in the art project This City's Centre.

The first part to be shared with the public is a video and sound installation at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum.

Running from Tuesday, July 23, to Sunday, September 22, it reveals the work of video artist Volkhardt Mueller who spent six weeks



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He combined the videos to create a portrait of the city as seen through the eyes of its residents



interviewing 40 Exeter residents, filming favourite views at different times of day and night, and lasting anywhere from 15 minutes to several hours.

In the editing suite he combined the videos to create a portrait of the city as seen through the eyes of its residents. Contained within that are themes of civic sentiment and a gentle probing of the boundaries between private and public life.

The video is accompanied by an audio track, created by John Levack Drever and comprising of residents' interviews and the ambient sounds of their homes.

The second instalment of the project is the creation of a map of the city centre that people can buy for £2, as a companion to the Ramm exhibition.

The hope is that the map will inspire a new way of seeing and moving in the city. The map will also include links to video and sound clips that people can download to their mobile phones while on route.

The third and final part of the project is a ticketed live performance in September as part of Unexpected, a new eight-day festival of outdoor theatre run by Exeter City Council. It will take place across two square miles and involve professional performers, along with five of the Exeter residents involved in the project and students from Exeter College. The show will be performed live and via webcam to the audience assembled in the shop, an online audience and others who happen to see them performing on the streets. It will run for five nights between Tuesday, September 17, and Saturday, September 21. Each night will be a unique event in which the company and the audience create This City's Centre together. Tickets can be purchased from Exeter Phoenix.

Proud to be part of the ambitious project is Exeter resident Frances Johnstone who lives in Western Way, and works as a teaching assistant, looking after children with special needs at a local primary school.

She moved into the centre of Exeter from a farm on the outskirts of the city, seven years ago, and lives there with her husband, Phil, a record producer, and their four children aged between 18 and 24.

The view Frances has contributed to the project is from her kitchen window.



"It isn't the panoramic vista from the top of the house which has a lovely view over St Leonard's Church and towards Haldon Hill," explained the 52-year-old. "The one I look at every day is of a rather overgrown flower



bed, with wisteria on the fence and various climbing plants and shrubs.

"The best part about my view is the bird life. There are blackbirds who visit every day for a feast of meal worms and a bath in the water bowl. They raised a chick this spring, which learnt to fly from the branches of the wisteria.

"Western Way is in the heart of Exeter, but it is quiet at night, apart from the occasional rowdy group of youngsters, and it has been such a boon being within walking distance of all the amenities.

"With four teenagers we found it so easy not to have to drive them everywhere and we can walk to restaurants, cinemas, shops, etc."

As well as Frances' view being shown as part of the Blind Ditch project, she is also involved with the live performances.

"It is years since I acted in pantomimes in Salcombe, where we used to live, and it is fun to be taking part.

"The reason I decided to get involved with the Blind Ditch was curiosity. It is fascinating to see the different views from people's windows and to be a part of the project is very exciting. I really like it when unusual art exhibitions are on show around Exeter.



"The project has also been a wonderful way to meet people who live here."

The project has been supported by the National Lottery through Arts Council England and by Exeter City Council. For more details, and to upload your view onto the online gallery, visit www.thiscitycentre.net