

Artist as Active Citizen

Ellie Harrison

I was first approached to write this text for a-n's Artist Council on 22 July 2019. I was in the final week of an epic year-long project to write my first book, [The Glasgow Effect: A Tale of Class, Capitalism & Carbon Footprint](#), inspired by the controversy surrounding my 2016 'durational performance' [The Glasgow Effect](#) (for which I refused to leave Glasgow's city limits, or use any vehicles except my bike for a whole calendar year). The UK was at the start of a [heatwave](#) which would see the hottest temperature ever recorded on our island – 38.7°C in Cambridge – and result in hundreds of deaths.

The original brief, was for a new project about 'making artists activate!' Looking at 'how artists can also sit around board room tables or negotiate with councils etc.' Despite being up-to-my-eyeballs with proofreading, tweaking typesetting, endnotes and illustrations for the book – trying my best to focus amidst the haze of heat – this invitation immediately grabbed my attention. The whole driving force behind The Glasgow Effect project was to attempt to live what I called a 'low-carbon lifestyle of the future' – where I would reject the demands of a globalised 'knowledge economy' to travel excessively for work, and instead see what I could make happen if I invested all my time, energy and ideas in the city where I live.

Once I emerged from the [social media shitstorm](#) sparked by the project (largely because of the £15k public funding I received from Creative Scotland to undertake it), I began to make myself a familiar visitor (if not to say an irritant) at many public bodies around the city. As well as meeting and attending seminars with researchers from Glasgow Centre for Population Health who were investigating the so-called '[Glasgow Effect](#)' (a term they'd coined to describe Glasgow's mysteriously poor public health compared to similar post-industrial cities in England such as Liverpool and Manchester), I was also in-and-out of the Glasgow City Chambers most weeks. First, I wrote to the head of the Council, then Frank McAveety, to ask for a meeting. He was 'too busy' but put me onto his deputy Archie Graham. I met with him and Jill Miller, the Director of Cultural Services at the Council's [ALEO Glasgow Life](#) on 3rd May. They thought I wanted to talk about 'art', but actually I wanted to talk about piloting new economic models, challenging car-centric culture and improving public transport to the poorest parts of the city – all the stuff that had been concerning and frustrating me since I moved to the city seven-and-a-half years before, but which I hadn't previously had the time or resources to address.

Eventually, I got closer to some of the answers I was searching for. On 24th May another Councillor mentioned that the [Strathclyde Partnership for Transport](#) (SPT) – the public body which was meant to be overseeing our region's expensive and fragmented public transport network – had open board/committee meetings once a month, and, that as a member of the public, I was allowed to attend as an observer. And so began my six-month stint as 'undercover artist in residence' at SPT – watching, learning, frantically scribbling, tutting and sighing disapprovingly (that was the only contribution I could make without being thrown out), but most importantly, just being present to hold them to account. I was always the only member of the public in the room, and once counted that I was one of only five women amongst twenty-four men (this in itself is a massive problem given that it's women who disproportionately rely on public transport, but yet clearly aren't being properly represented in the decision-making process).

I learned so much. It reinforced my understanding that it is the de-regulation and privatisation of our public transport since the 1980s and 1990s that has been the biggest barrier we face to

delivering the affordable (if not [totally free](#)), efficient and fully-integrated service that we need to encourage sustainable transport choices and fight climate change (this is what had motivated me to launch the [Bring Back British Rail](#) campaign in 2009). And that public bodies like SPT do not have the powers or the funding necessary to rectify the dire situation. I fed all this learning back into helping to develop and launch a local campaign [Get Glasgow Moving](#).

Although none of these projects were 'art', I continued to stress that it was the art school education I had been privileged enough to receive, which had equipped me so well for activism. For it is only an art school education (and indeed an art practice) and the freedom it allows to pursue our own research and ideas – finding answers and solutions to problems as we go – that enables us to develop the eclectic mix of essential life skills that are so valuable. I began to identify these skills as:

- **critical thinking** – enables us to see through the bullshit, to analyse the evidence and offer an alternative perspective
- **practical skills** – enable us to build our own solutions from scratch if they don't exist elsewhere
- **confidence** – enables us to 'speak truth to power' and to know how to get our voices heard
- **self-motivation** – enables our obsessive work ethic – where wage and labour are often completely decoupled – and we keep going for so many other reasons: curiosity, the need to know, the desire to change the world, or simply just [for the love of it](#).

I was originally awarded the funding to undertake The Glasgow Effect under the 'working title' [Think Global, Act Local!](#) That was a phrase coined in 1915 by the great Scottish thinker Patrick Geddes (1854–1932). As I went through the year, and whilst writing the book, I came to realise the significance of Geddes' thinking to the 'low-carbon lifestyle of the future' I was attempting to pioneer (and how my art school education had prepared me for it). Geddes believed that all citizens should have the opportunity to 'learn about the place they live' and to take on the responsibility for studying and critically interrogating it to help improve the situation for the rest of us. He saw this as a 'precondition for parliamentary democracy', arguing that it was impossible to know how to vote if you didn't understand the place where you live and its place in the world.¹

Geddes was also what was known as a 'generalist'. Like many artists, he refused to specialise in any one thing, and instead developed a knowledge of many different disciplines, working as 'an ecologist, a botanist, a theorist of cities, an advocate of the arts, a community activist, a publisher, a town planner and an educator'.² His definition of the 'arts', for example, included within it: art, architecture, social reform, transport, accounting, insurance, banking, stock raising, labour and more. Geddes' work was based on the idea that 'By Creating We Think',³ and 'By Living We Learn'.⁴ He described his own work in the planning of cities and societies as 'applied sociology', in other words, social thinking applied by activists who used any or all of these 'arts' to help build social groups.⁵

The trouble is that the active citizenship which Geddes advocated *and* lived, is no longer the norm (if it ever was). In our neoliberal world – where all the things we need to live now have price tags attached – it's time and education that have become the real luxuries. It is really only us artists that still possess that eclectic mix of essential life skills necessary to 'Think Global, Act Local'. We must be encouraged, supported and facilitated to use them to challenge the powers that be, to ensure better decision-making and help improve the situation for the rest of us. This is something that the [Artist Placement Group](#) (founded in 1966 by Barbara Steveni and John Latham) aimed to achieve.

They deliberately placed artists into ‘government, commercial and industrial organisations’ to respond to and to influence their policy and practices – not a million miles from the role I created for myself at Glasgow City Council and SPT.

But the outcome of our active citizenship must be to help move towards a time when artists are no longer the ‘special ones’. Our ultimate goal should be to bring down the costs of living (which have skyrocketed as a result of privatisation) so that everyone has the time necessary to participate. We need ‘All Schools to be Art Schools’ as Bob & Roberta Smith demands. We need to work together to create the social conditions where ‘everyone [actually can] be an artist’ (and an activist), as Joseph Beuys so famously said, so that the ‘low-carbon lifestyle of the future’ does become the norm.

Notes

¹ Holm, L, 2018, *Politics of Small Places: Paul Noble & Patrick Geddes*, Cooper Gallery, p.17

² Macdonald, M, 1999, ‘The Significance of the Scottish Generalist Tradition’ in *Popular Education & Social Movements in Scotland Today*, National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, p.87

³ Stephen, W, 2004, *Think Global, Act Local: The Life and Legacy of Patrick Geddes*, Luath Press, p.70

⁴ Stephen, W, 2004, *A Vigorous Institution: The Living Legacy of Patrick Geddes*, Luath Press, p.113

⁵ Holm, L, 2018, *Politics of Small Places: Paul Noble & Patrick Geddes*, Cooper Gallery, p.11

Ellie Harrison (b. London 1979) is an artist and activist who has been living in Glasgow since 2008. Her work seeks to make visible the connections between social, environmental and economic injustices in our world, and to actively address them. In 2010, she became the first visual artist to publish an Environmental Policy. In 2016, she slashed her carbon footprint for transport to zero and made headlines with her ‘controversial’ project The Glasgow Effect, for which she refused to leave Glasgow’s city limits, or use any vehicles except her bike, for the whole calendar year. Her first book *The Glasgow Effect: A Tale of Class, Capitalism & Carbon Footprint* was inspired by the 2016 project and published by Luath Press in November 2019. In September 2019 she premiered a new work at Manchester Art Gallery – *Bus Regulation: The Musical* was inspired by the 1980s hit musical *Starlight Express* and presented in collaboration with the Better Buses for Greater Manchester campaign.

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