

CLIMATE

CHANGE

Ellie Harrison A Good Climate for Business



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A Good Climate for Business

From 12 - 18 June 2011, Ellie Harrison was resident artist at Artsadmin's Two Degrees. Responding to the themes of 'art and activism, climate and cuts' she developed two new projects for the festival: the first Work-a-thon for the Self-Employed took place on Monday 13 June and was an attempt to set a new world record for the most self-employed people working together in the same place at the same time, over the course of a normal 9-to-5 day. The second was a research project under the banner of 'A Good Climate for Business' which aimed to explore the relationship between capitalism and climate change and resulted in the development of her Early Warning Signs project.

This, her guest text for the Artsadmin website, aims to provide a context for these works by summarising her thoughts in the run-up to the festival and showing how they developed in response to the week's events.

I hadn't set myself the easiest of tasks - 'researching and exploring our understanding of the relationship between climate change and capitalism'.

It seems that the possibility of finding a happy union between the 'sustainability' required to avert climate catastrophe and the 'economic growth' demanded by capital is by far the greatest conundrum of the twenty-first century. This is why, I think, it is such a pertinent issue for artists (and everyone else) to be addressing.

This also explains why I spent numerous hours sat in my temporary studio during Two Degrees overwhelmed and slightly confused about what one artist, or one activist for that matter, could do to attempt to tackle it...

We all know that the more we buy, the more we consume, the more we produce, the more we deplete the world's resources and contribute to global CO2 emissions which are causing our climate to change. This is not new news. In fact, the 1972 book 'A Blueprint for Survival', which I brought to the festival with me, succinctly defines the problem: "**Indefinite** growth of whatever type cannot be sustained by **finite** resources. This is the nub of the environmental predicament."¹

But despite this very rational-sounding prediction, made nearly forty years ago, the capitalist machine has not been halted. It marches on with our reluctant complicity: continuing to expand both geographically and to the extent that market

logic is increasingly permeating every last aspect of our lives². Just two weeks before Two Degrees kicked-off, figures were released showing that global emissions for 2010 had reached a record high, demonstrating that “the link between rising GDP and rising emissions has [still] not been broken.”³

Why are we, as of yet, unable to break the link which causes ‘economic growth’ to have such self-destructive consequences? Or, better still, why are we unable to break away from the system and the mindset of capitalism which places such an irrational goal at the top of all the world’s priorities?

My first step was to admit to my own ineptitude at solving this conundrum, if indeed it is possible. My next was to use my week at Two Degrees to begin to think about the nature of the **contradiction** that appears to exist between the demands of ‘sustainability’ and ‘growth’. I began to notice an interesting parallel with the other key theme of the festival and with my own personal experience of the (sometimes) contradictory demands and motivations of being pushed and pulled between the roles of ‘artist’ and ‘activist’, between ego and altruism.

At the very least my week at Two Degrees enabled me to analyse my own behaviour, to think about my own priorities and about how I have been, and how I should be, spending my time. Maybe this is self-indulgent, but I’m now slowly coming to realise that reconciling these contradictions on a personal level is, perhaps, where the key to resolving our global predicament actually lies.

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Traffic enforcement cameras

ROUTE
No stopping on any day 7am-7pm

Ring for Tower 1

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In the run-up to Two Degrees I was almost entirely in 'artist' mode. I was under pressure (some self-imposed), to create something visually stunning - a 'spectacle' - to sum-up this all-important research. Not much more than a week before I set off for London I came up with the idea for the Early Warning Signs. It was simple: to utilise the brazen marketing techniques of capitalism, not as tools to sell us more, but as tools to remind us of the consequences of our consumption. The aim was to 'advertise' climate change: to put the issue back into the public consciousness, from which it has long since been sidelined by the dreaded financial 'cuts' and other short-sighted concerns.

Throughout Two Degrees, the four signs designed to mimic those you might find outside a garage or a Bureau de Change, took up residence along Commercial Street - inspiring, provoking and confusing passers-by to varying degrees. One bemused tourist actually did come all the way into Toynbee Studios asking to exchange some currency and, one morning as I was putting the signs out on the street, an arrogant businessman stuffing a croissant into his mouth heckled "so much for climate change" as the uncharacteristic June rain poured down around us.

They provoked thought and / or physical reaction. The signs were a success! They may not have fitted the bill of the grand 'spectacle', but they looked good; they acted as beacons for the festival and they ticked the box of one of Larry Bogad's top tips for 'tactical performance' (recounted in his lecture on 18 June), by "drawing on existing signs and signifiers and inverting them". And yet despite all this, all week I could not help feeling slightly compromised by their existence. I was embarrassed by their unequivocal materiality. Confronted on a daily basis by their objectness, I became overwhelmed by a 'guilt of production' that perhaps only an environmentally-concerned artist can.

In February 2010, I had become the self-declared 'first individual artist to openly publicise an Environmental Policy' on my website. The fourth section of the policy entitled 'Reduce, Reuse, Recycle' presents my guidelines for producing what I term as 'gallery based work' (loosely categorised as work which takes a more conventional form. ie. an object / collection of objects that take up space in the real world). It is my publicised goal to "attempt to use objects or materials which are either temporarily loaned or secondhand from local sources or eBay."

It was therefore ironic (and disappointing) that it was for Two Degrees - the first art project I'd been involved in that was actually acknowledging / dealing with the climate crises - that I had been forced to compromise this policy. It was for Artsadmin - one of the few artworld institutions I'm aware of that has actually begun to take the threat of climate crisis seriously - that I was forced to spend more than £480 having four brand new rotating signs produced and delivered (at short notice) by the RotoSigns Company in the West Midlands.

It was a compromise indeed: a contradiction, and so acknowledging and exploring the circumstances further seemed the logical next step. Not only had the production of the signs presented me with a real and tangible problem - what to do with them after the festival - which it could then become my main mission to solve, but, in unpicking the reasons **why** I was forced to compromise I found the key to tying together my research with my other contribution to the festival - the Work-a-thon for the Self-Employed.



Most of the 57 workers who came together to set a new world record on 13 June 2011

Looking back now, it seems obvious why I was so keen on making the Work-a-thon project happen at Two Degrees. I'd either managed my time very badly for the previous six months or I'd taken on too much - whatever it was, as I sat in my studio on 13 January 2011, I quickly came to realise that in order to get through everything I'd committed to doing for my job as 'artist', I was going to have to work nonstop (without a day off) for at least the next five months. Motivated by a fear of failure, I was about to launch into my own personal work-a-thon, which would see me launch a major web-based project, make a new solo show, prepare two online performances, attend jury service and teach part-time in Nottingham (and complete a 5km Swimathon!) all before I could even get stuck into thinking about Two Degrees.

It was "self-exploitation"⁴ to the extreme. It resulted in my working long and unregulated hours in isolation in my studio or at home. It left me without any real time to socialise, to meet new people and make friends in Glasgow - the city which I have chosen to make my home, but yet am continually being dragged away from 'for work'. These were all the negative side effects of the freelance lifestyle that, by creating a social working environment and enforcing a 'normal working day', the Work-a-thon for the Self-

Employed was attempting to challenge.

Not only had my lack of any workplace solidarity left me depoliticised in terms of addressing my unhealthy labour conditions, but my own personal work-a-thon - undertaken in order to keep my 'small business of one' afloat - had led me into compromising my principles due to sheer lack of time⁵. Overwork was responsible for forcing open what Lucy Neal (one of the 57 people who took part in the Work-a-thon event) referred to as my "value-action gap". The gap between what I believe in and what I actually do.

My own personal work-a-thon had no doubt upset the balance between my life and work. But more than this, within the field of work, it had also upset the balance between the roles of 'artist' and 'activist'. For the sake of my 'career' (and perhaps for the sake of my ego), I had prioritised my artwork over my activism and had sidelined my campaign.

Screenprint made from a
small sketch of an idea for the
campaign in January 2009

**BRING BACK
BRITISH**



RAIL

As you may well have gathered from my hectic self-employed lifestyle, I spend a lot of time on trains. In 2009, motivated by an endless string of frustrating journeys courtesy of a variety of this country's incompetent 'train operating companies', and by an increasing anger at the continual depletion and privatisation of our public services, I decided to set-up and begin to run the Bring Back British Rail campaign.

Bring Back British Rail aims to act as "the collective voice of disgruntled rail passengers and disheartened train employees...", as well as serving as an important symbolic reminder of what the people of this country used to have. When Clement Attlee's government inaugurated British Railways in 1948 (the same year it launched the National Health Service and oversaw numerous other nationalisations), it was motivated by a moral vision, which aimed to make the provision of public services a priority over private profit.

The campaign may well not have the most realistic of goals given our current Conservative government's agenda, but it is a bold statement that "privatisation is not progress!" It is a call for a return to the moral vision that motivated post-war policy. Something which now seems all the more essential faced with our drastic need

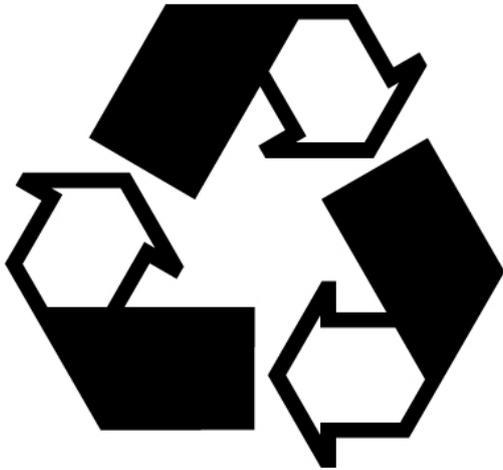
to reduce CO2 emissions by prioritising the most environmentally sustainable transport - ie. public transport - trains and buses rather than planes and cars.

I always knew that this is what forged a strong link between the Bring Back British Rail campaign and the fight against climate change, but my experiences at Two Degrees served to make the connection on an additional level. On the final day of the festival, the lunchtime debate addressed some important questions about the future of climate activism post-Copenhagen; questions which were also raised by Emily James' documentary Just Do It (previewed earlier in the week). At the debate, one of the founders of Climate Camp spoke about their decision to wind down the camps in the wake of the Copenhagen summit.

This was not a resignation, but more an acknowledgement that directly focussing efforts on climate change was now not the best way forward. In light of the failed negotiations at Copenhagen, the task should now be to focus on various aspects of the system and the mindset of capitalism, which was causing climate change. Hence the poignancy of the slogan "System Change not Climate Change". He spoke about the role of the camps as 'training centres' for swathes

of new young activists. The main aims being: to provide them with essential practical skills and, just like Just Do It, to make clear the theoretical link between capitalism and climate change; between "rising GDP and rising emissions".

A new movement of splinter groups had been created, as a new wave of inspired and motivated activists turn their attentions to tackling a variety of social justice issues, which they can now see as contributing to the climate crises. The success of groups such as UK Uncut - targeting corporate tax dodgers - is just one clear example. Their "open space" workshop at Two Degrees created a flash mob pillow fight in Liverpool Street station filmed to make a viral video inspiring people to support the strike of public service workers planned for 30 June 2011. I took part in this action: my first move as an activist from "clicks to bricks". I felt energised and inspired. I knew that Bring Back British Rail should become an important part of this new movement. Two Degrees had made me realise that I needed to find a way of **reducing** my art workload so that I could make it a priority.



**REDUCE
REUSE
RECYCLE
YOUR ART**

During my final days in residence at the festival I began to realise that, along with a renewed vigour for fighting for railway justice, my main mission post-Two Degrees should be to ensure that the Early Warning Signs be **reused** to maximum effect. It should be my responsibility as an artist to ensure that the money and materials required to produce them, would not be just for the sake of a one-week festival, but that the signs should be allowed to continue to provoke reaction - to 'promote' their cause - long into the future.

I decided to use the final day of the festival to launch the second phase of the Early Warning Signs project - a campaign to find new homes for the signs, to find organisations to 'adopt them'. Following on from my previous writing criticising the artworld institution's lack of acknowledgement and action over climate change, I became increasingly interested in specifically targeting galleries as potential hosts.

By offering the signs free of charge, the traditional economic (and power) relations between the artist and gallery would be sidestepped. Rather than a financial transaction, this would be a 'responsibility exchange', a 'burden exchange', perhaps even a 'guilt exchange'. For the year after adopting the sign it would become the gallery's responsibility to look after it and to

make the daily ritual of putting it out on public display. A daily acknowledgement and reminder of climate change. I hope that there will be a positive response to this campaign and that I will be able to put together a schedule of venues enabling the signs to continue to tour the country indefinitely (or at least until they eventually decay / break and need to be retired).



Now as I sit back in my studio in Glasgow, I am devising ways of addressing my labour conditions. With no boss to complain to and no company to strike against, I've begun to impose my own limits on what I can commit to as an 'artist' for the rest of the year. There's no point falling into the capitalist trap of churning out more-and-more at a faster-and-faster pace. What is more important is reversing this logic, slowing things down. Only this will allow the time to think and to make the right decisions, without compromise, and to restore a healthier balance between life and work, between 'activism' and 'art'.

But if I learned anything from the closing discussion at the festival, it was that clear-cut distinctions between roles are actually never all that helpful. Whether we're making art or we're taking action (or anything in-between), the strength lies in the passion with which we approach our activity, and in the knowledge that our beliefs are not being compromised. As we break down the distinctions between these roles, so too shall we have the opportunity of closing our "value-action gaps"; of 'practising what we preach' in every aspect of our lives. Perhaps if we are each able to reduce contradiction at the personal level, then the irreconcilable contradictions of global capitalism which are currently leading us on a path to self-destruction, may not seem like such a daunting challenge.

References

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Biography

Ellie Harrison's practice emerges from her continual attempt to strike-a-balance between the roles of 'artist', 'activist' and 'administrator'.

She uses skills and strategies drawn from each of these perspectives to create playful and engaging work, in-and-out of art world contexts, which aims to expose and challenge the systems which control and rule over our lives, be they political, ethical, social, economic, technological or infrastructural.

Her work takes a variety of forms including performance spectacles, interactive installations, collaborative projects, political campaigns, media interventions, lectures, websites and coach trips.

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'A Good Climate for Business' was written as one of the outcomes of Ellie Harrison's residency at Artsadmin's Two Degrees festival, a week of art and activism, climate and cuts, which took place from 12 - 18 June 2011.

artsadmin.co.uk/twodegrees