

The Glasgow Effect is not in our control

Being in charge of one's own life is key to health

BRICKS in the Tate; chips on a Facebook header. Traditionally, it doesn't take much for the conservative tabloids to get red-faced about "wasting public money" on "the antics of modern artists".

Ellie Harrison's *The Glasgow Effect* – which borrowed the name of a poverty phenomenon to describe her year-long exploration of an artist's livelihood in one city, subsidised to the tune of £15,000 by Creative Scotland – rings all the usual editorial bells. As far as I can see from the artist's own body of work (which I like a lot; it's my kind of socially engaged art), she naturally deploys a cheeky sense of humour.

In retrospect, she might agree that illustrating her project's Facebook page with a graphic of soggy chips – while making ironic reference to a health crisis that results in the early death of thousands of poor

Glaswegians every year – was probably not her best ever jape.

Nevertheless, there are already many thousands of words of commentary out there – a testament both to the health of Scotland's public sphere, and maybe to the antennae of the artist herself.

My contribution is to suggest that her project's accursed title might well be, in fact, absolutely relevant and appropriate.

Indeed, if you dig into some of the research on the "Glasgow Effect" as a health problem, you can see quite quickly how Harrison's work might even provide some answers.

In 2004, Harry Burns – then head of the Glasgow NHS Health Board, and later to be chief medical officer for Scotland – suggested one explanation for the health effect in Glasgow: how much of a sense of "control" someone has over their lives.

The more stressed we feel about our inability to shape our environment, the more our "inflammatory, hormonal and immunological responses" are activated. This stress-induced activation, says Burns, "eventually leads to premature ageing and the early onset of heart disease or cancer".

To state the obvious: the disempowering experience of poverty – whether in work, or at the hands of an increasingly heartless welfare system – is an enormous stress inducer.

This doesn't by itself fully explain the Glasgow "effect" – where the city's areas of poor health are considerably worse by comparison with other UK cities suffering similar levels of deprivation. But if Burns is

right, then maybe we should ask why Glaswegians' sense of lack of control has been so acute, for so long.

In his furious response to Ellie Harrison's project, the Glasgow rapper Loki zoomed in on this control issue. "When Creative Scotland decides to bankroll one person's investigation into how being stuck in Glasgow with no road out affects your social life, career and mental health," he wrote in his *Bella Caledonia* blog, "then you better f****** believe some Glaswegians are going to be fuming about it."

So a sense of control is the big question here – preferably based on real control of the resources you need to shape your life. Now, can't we see Harrison's project as a powerful provocation about how we achieve this?

From reading her blogs, she seems to know exactly what she's doing. "I believe it is the role of the artist to take extreme lifestyle decisions", she wrote in 2013, "which would not be possible for anyone in a less privileged position, and in doing so expose the contradictions in all our lives."

What I think Ellie Harrison exposes is a coming crisis that most of us will have to face – in Glasgow, Scotland and across the developed world: What will it mean to do "good work" in the future?

The Oxford Martin Institute predicts that 40 per cent of existing jobs in America and Europe – both white- and blue-collar – will be directly replaced by automation over the next 20 years, with the rest challenged by cheaper labour costs in emerging economies.

The historic decline in wages for the vast majority of us is accelerating, and – if left unchecked – is about to head downwards off the cliff. We have to start thinking

The screenshot shows the Facebook page for 'The Glasgow Effect'. The page features a cover photo of golden-brown chips. The page information includes:

- Created: 31 December at 22:59 in UTC
- Location: Glasgow, United Kingdom
- Tickets Available: glasgowfestival.com
- Guests: 3.1k interested, 776 going, 860 invited
- Event Description: 'The Glasgow Effect is a year long "action research" project / charitable performance, for which artist Ellie Harrison will not travel outside Greater Glasgow for a whole year (except in the event of the ill-health / death of close relative or friend). By setting this one simple restriction to her current lifestyle, she intends to test the limits of a "sustainable practice" and to challenge the demand-to-travel placed upon the "successful" artist / academic. The experiment will enable her to cut her carbon footprint and increase her sense of belonging, by encouraging her to seek out and create "local opportunities" - testing what becomes possible when she invests all her ideas, time and energy into the city where she lives.'
- Event Details: English (UK) · Prices: From £0.00 · Address: 433-4665P · 0897 · Facebook 02016

f The accursed title of Harrison's project might well be, in fact, relevant... Her work may even provide answers

radically about how we stop the unravelling of our societies in the face of these hugely disruptive forces.

One answer that is gathering pace globally, with prototypes happening across Europe, South America and elsewhere, is the idea of a basic, or citizen's, income (BCI).

This is a monthly payment given to each adult citizen, as of right – and set at a level which could support their living expenses at a modest but sustainable level.

In a sense, this is what Ellie Harrison has been given: a payment for existing. There are more hard-nosed arguments for a BCI, of course, than this. One is that it is a way of redistributing profits from the engorged one per cent – the managers and shareholders of corporate giants, who benefit both from weak labour markets and human-replacing tech – and puts some much-needed demand back into economies. Another is that it might ultimately be the most efficient form of welfare, cutting out the bureaucratic expense of endless means-testing.

But the most profound argument for a BCI is that it will give the majority of people in developed societies some collective breathing space. Within that space, we can figure out what to do with ourselves, our energies, our skills and talents, as the changes of automation and globalisation bear down upon us.

So for me, Ellie Harrison's project is anticipating what's to come. We will all have to relax our standards on what we regard as a legitimate or respectable "job", as the new pieces of our socio-economic future settle.

Harrison's mix of occupational skills, community activism, education and self-expression is going to be more and more the

mainstream experience of "work" in our societies. We should learn from her, and from the new wave of socially engaged artists like her (including the winners of this year's Turner Prize, Assemble).

Will these be lives where more of us will feel more in control of ourselves? And thus – if Harry Burns's theory is right – improve our health indicators? This is the question that the angry young Loki rightly keeps raising. Who gets the right to shape their own future? Are ideas of the future being imposed on poorer communities, suppressing those that might otherwise arise?

He warns us that this kind of discussion may just add to that "exclusive bank of middle-class knowledge most people will never be able to alter or interact with".

I find that viewpoint pessimistic – particularly given the educative role that Loki played in the Yes campaign. Wasn't this an experience where a whole nation (and not just the professional middle class) was grappling with expert knowledges about economics, defence, energy, broadcasting, whatever?

So, between the big deadlines – that is, between one referendum/election and another – this is exactly the kind of stoshie we should be having. In a world where certain kinds of employment will not be returning to heal a broken ex-working class, we must try to think unconventionally about the elements of a good, satisfying, purposeful life.

And I'm happy that Ellie Harrison or any like-minded artistic comrades are bringing the topic to the boil by virtue of their free and creative action. Three cheers for them all.

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