

Let's not give The Glasgow Effect project the Glasgow kiss off



Criticism of Ellie Harrison's 'poverty safari' from the likes of Loki may be articulate, but it is ill-placed, writes **Euan McCollm**

The backlash was furious and predictable, perhaps even understandable.

When it emerged that artist Ellie Harrison had secured a £15,000 Creative Scotland grant to enable her to live in Glasgow – and not leave – for a year, politicians and activists had plenty to say.

Ms Harrison's self-imposed internment within the city's limits – which she describes as an "action research project/durational performance" – was denounced as nothing more than a poverty safari, a holiday in the misery of others.

The artist's project is named "The Glasgow Effect", which is also a term used to explain the poor life expectancies of the city's most under-privileged residents. Over the course of a year, Ms Harrison hopes to gain some understanding of how career, social life, family ties, and mental health might be affected if one was unable ever to leave the city where one lives.

This notion is, I think, problematic. The experiences of an artist on sabbatical from a lecturing job and funded by Creative Scotland and the experiences of someone living a hopeless existence in a crumbling estate are unlikely to be especially similar.

It was, then, unsurprising when Ms Harrison became the focus for criticism.

Councillor Frank McAveety, the leader of Glasgow City Council, was not happy at all. If the artist would like to contact Glasgow's Poverty Leadership Panel, he said, they would put her in touch with "legions" of single parent families who could tell her "in minutes" what it is like to be poor in Glasgow and how that affects family health and prevents travel beyond the city. It should not take Ms Harrison a year to understand the poverty trap in which many find themselves.

And the rapper and writer Darren McGarvey – who performs under

the name of Loki – was equally dismissive.

Mr McGarvey – for my money the most articulate and thought-provoking figure to have emerged from the pro-independence Yes campaign – said that there already existed thousands of artists who articulate what it is to live in poverty. Many of these artists are marginalised, he added; Ms Harrison's project epitomised middle-class dominance of the arts.

To Mr McGarvey, it was "horrendously crass to parachute someone in on a poverty safari while local authorities are cutting finance to things like music tuition for Scotland's poorest kids".

The writer added, with an entertaining degree of sarcasm, that although he did not know Ms Harrison personally, he was certain we might all benefit from an insight into the thought processes of some of Scotland's middle class.

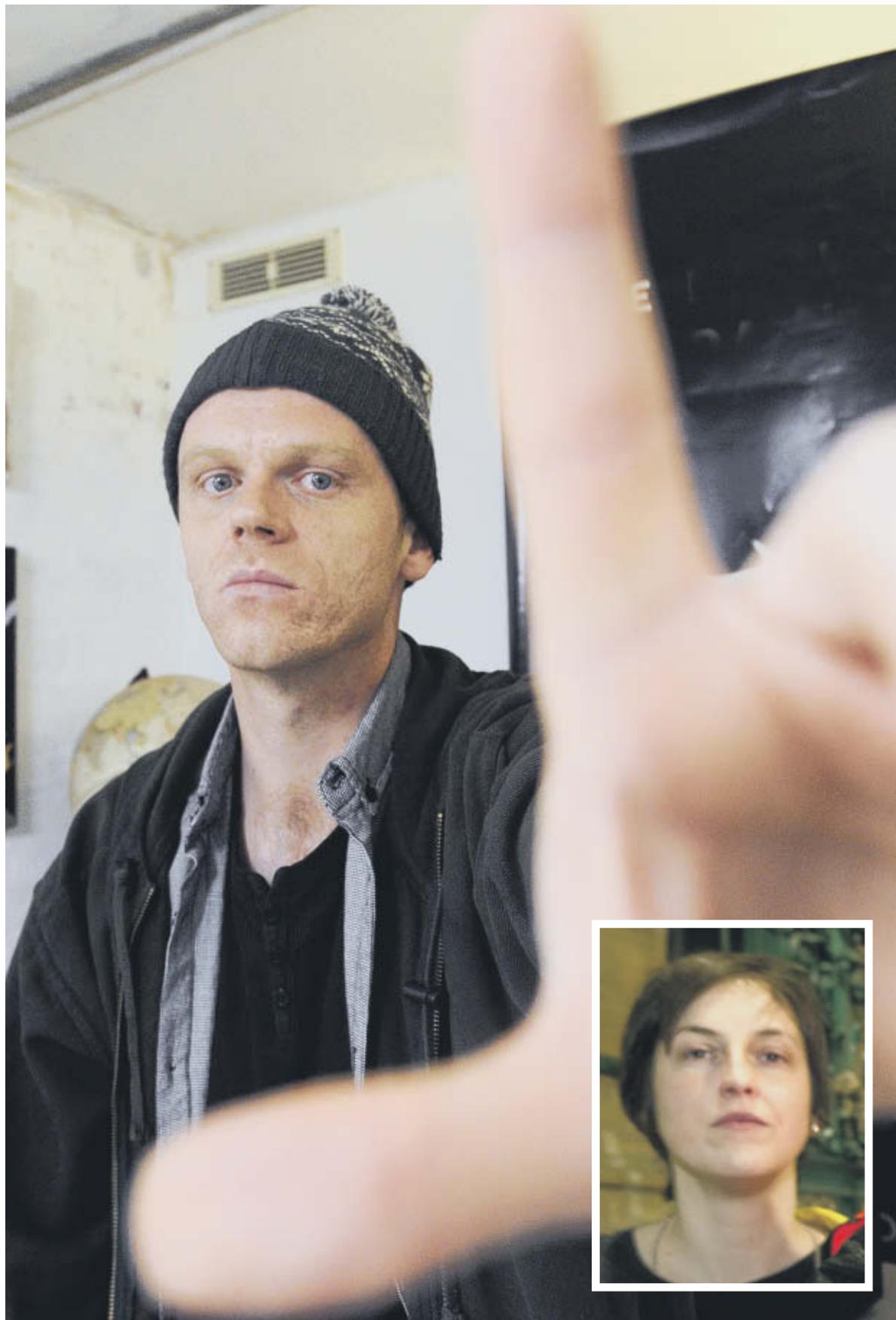
While this public condemnation played out, there were attempts on social media to whip up formal complaints about funding of the project. If you were furious about this waste of money, why not e-mail Creative Scotland to let them know?

But what, really, does anyone expect to happen? The answer – if we value freedom of speech and expression – should be nothing.

I am perfectly comfortable in prejudging Ms Harrison's work as liable to produce little of great value. The project seems muddled and pointless, to me. While I wouldn't wish to be characterised as the sort who thinks someone isn't a real artist unless they can draw hands, I don't get what Ms Harrison expects to achieve.

She has, however, my support in doing what she's doing. How could it be any other way?

If I, as a journalist, defend the right to publish without fear of censorship



PICTURES: JOHNDEVILIN



← Rapper and writer Darren McGarvey, aka Loki, has a suitably mischievous view of Ellie Harrison's project, but we should all defend her right to undertake such a mission

then I have to defend Ms Harrison's right to make the art she wants, even if her work does eat up public money.

If we are agreed that there is value in supporting the arts (and that's my position) then we must guard against decisions on funding being influenced by public outrage.

Creative Scotland – imperfect, as all such organisations are by dint of the fact that they are run by human beings – is charged with responsibility for doling out funds. Of course, it's legitimate to look at where our money goes. If there were questions, for example, about a disproportionately high degree of funding going to artists who loudly proclaimed support for a political party, then we might have cause to call for intervention in the work of Creative Scotland.

But, clunky as the system might be, we can't allow protests to overturn decisions to fund projects.

While the arts tell us about ourselves, they also challenge precon-

ceptions. Artworks do not have to be relaxing. They are permitted to infuriate us.

Ms Harrison's project had barely commenced before it was infuriating a great many people. This, I suppose, could be considered something of a success.

Messrs McAveety and McGarvey both make reasonable points about the reality of poverty; their distaste over the funding of The Glasgow Effect is fairly widely shared.

But if the decision to fund The Glasgow Effect was overturned, what would be next? What other projects might find the plug pulled? Would work challenging government or church suddenly find itself under threat? Would work critiquing big business find itself unsupported?

The arts are not a luxury. Public funding of artists ensures an important sector of our society is sustained.

The discovery and development of original and challenging and pos-

sibly controversial work will not be helped by Creative Scotland being cowed by the mob. Until we decide to abolish or reform the organisation, then its policy must be to fund what it believes of worth and to hell with what the public thinks. That's not to say criticism should be silenced. The same principle of a right to freedom of expression applies to critics as much as to Ms Harrison.

A year from now, we will find out what we get for the £15,000 investment in Ellie Harrison's project. The charitable soul in me says there may be something of interest. The realist, on the other hand, is less optimistic.

But what I am certain about is that Ellie Harrison has my support. I don't know much about art, but I know about rights.

JOIN THE DEBATE
www.scotsman.com