

INSIDE TRACK: Our arts body cannot only back risk-averse ideas



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A LOT has been written about Ellie Harrison's Glasgow Effect art project already. It is only a week into the project which, you may have read, is backed by £15,000 from Creative Scotland. And she already has a lot of opinions, views – alternative suggestions of what do with her money – and data to analyse.

So does Creative Scotland. I understand one of the main threads of debate this week – how “the arts” can mean more, or be less alien to, large swathes of society who don't care or know about “conceptual art” and deadening, euphemistic arts-speak – is leading to some introspection at the funding body.

It is, once again, trying to devise ways to engage with people who regard the contemporary arts world as something other and remote: something distant, alienating, exclusive, middle-class, and, in some

ways, insulting and in some cases laughable.

Looking back over the week, the explosion of interest, anger, bemusement (amusement, too), outrage and insult caused by the project also led to some fine writing and reflections. It would be an oversight to not mention rapper and writer Darren McGarvey's, aka Loki, take on it, or our own Neil Cooper's lengthy observations, among others.

There has, too, amid the debate, been some noxious venom. One didn't have to look far down the Glasgow Effect Facebook page to come across insults, sexism, threats, and general nastiness aimed Harrison's way.

The seed of a lot of the anger this week, initially, before it morphed into a debate about all kinds of other things was the, I think, misapprehension that Harrison's project was some kind of year-long voyeuristic journey into one city's deprivation. “A poverty safari,”

as Loki pointedly put it. And this suspicion seemed to be confirmed by the title – a phrase used to discuss persistent ill health and low life expectancy in Glasgow – and the image used along with it, the now infamous chips.

If the project had been titled Think Global, Act Local, as it was when Ms Harrison, who has lived in Glasgow since 2008, applied, and she had used another image, then perhaps this whole stramash wouldn't have happened. But she chose those images and those

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words. So a national argument, probing into all kinds of wounded areas in the body of the nation, broke out. As is often the case with rows, the actual resentments fuelling the harsh words were more about other things than the case in hand.

There is already a petition calling for Creative Scotland to revoke the award. This is unlikely to happen. And the body is adamant it gave the money to the artist in October, not to her employer, the University of Dundee. Perhaps its funding guidelines need to be clearer.

But it would be an odd arts body which only backed ideas that had no risk of failure attached, or minimal potential to offend anyone. So I suspect this week has, especially given what they believe is over-the-top harsh treatment of Harrison, emboldened the arts body to back artists and their individual visions. Let the chips fall where they may.