

# Voice from the Movement

## Fusing art and activism



### Ellie Harrison, Artist

#### 1. Tell us about your work as an advocate for climate issues?

My climate awakening occurred in 2009 while studying for a

Masters at Glasgow School of Art. It was the run-up to COP15 in Copenhagen, which many campaigners were describing as our ‘last chance’ for a global agreement to limit emissions. From the safety of my studio, I could dig deep and start making connections between the climate crisis, and the other socioeconomic crises unfolding around us.

I began to question why I was pursuing a career as an ‘artist’ at all. It was clear our greatest imperative was to reduce emissions at all costs – shouldn’t I be investing my time, energy and ideas in tackling that head on?

I made three key decisions which have guided me ever since:

1. Get my own house in order by writing an **Environmental Policy**, outlining the day-to-day actions I was taking to reduce my own emissions, which would provide the foundation that all other activity could be built upon.

2. Transform my artwork to directly respond to these crises, creating awareness and inspiring the world around us to take action.
3. Most importantly, divert more of my time to direct political campaigning.

#### 2. Why do you think it’s important to combine the world of art with the world of activism?

The climate crisis requires us all to become activists. I came to realise that it was the art school education I was privileged to receive – developing an eclectic mix of critical thinking, practical skills, confidence and self-motivation – which had equipped me so well for this task. I chose to channel these skills and attributes into campaigning for better public transport – a key battleground where socioeconomic and environmental justice meet. I launched the national **Bring Back British Rail** campaign in 2009, and since 2016 I’ve been working more in my local community with **Car-free Glasgow** and **Get Glasgow Moving**.

I used to see my artist and activist ‘hats’ as separate – almost as ‘good cop, bad cop’ where the *activist* proposed solutions and optimism about possible social change, and the *artist* asked questions and was more nihilistic in character. But this split personality got me into trouble, causing



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controversy in 2016 with my provocative 'durational performance' *The Glasgow Effect*. Named after the phrase used to describe Glasgow's 30% worse health outcomes, in comparison to its most similar post-industrial cities in England: Manchester and Liverpool. The premise was simple: for one year I would remain within Glasgow's city limits and only walk and cycle to get around. This action slashed my carbon footprint for transport to zero, and enabled me to get more involved in local community activism. But it also motivated me to strive for a greater fusion between my art and activism, and to create fun, playful and inclusive activist-art, which can get everyone on board.

### 3. What role can art and activism play in shaping a greener future?

Artists must be embedded in local communities and use their creativity to fight for positive social change. That's what my most recent project **Bus Regulation: The Musical** is about. The idea came about in 2019 when I was writing my book, **The Glasgow Effect**, and I was invited to make a new commission for Manchester Art Gallery.

I'd heard about the *Better Buses for Greater Manchester* campaign and chose to use my platform at the gallery to create awareness for their aim to re-regulate the region's buses. The Musical was a great success and in 2021 the Mayor announced that Greater Manchester would become the UK's first city-region to re-regulate its bus network since the disastrous policy of deregulation

in 1986. Thereby creating a fully-integrated and affordable public transport network enabling everyone to get around easily without needing to own a car – something our other big city-regions also urgently need.

And so my aim became to bring the Musical home to Glasgow in collaboration with the *Get Glasgow Moving* campaign. Delayed by the pandemic, I was finally able to stage the Strathclyde version at the CCA in April with support from Creative Scotland. The final part of the Trilogy is the Merseyside Musical, staged at the Bluecoat in November with support from Arts Council England, to create awareness for the local campaigns for bus re-regulation across the Liverpool City Region. Connecting the three cities in this way, I'm pursuing my own creative research into the links between public transport policy and population health with a stark warning to Glasgow's transport authority, SPT: if you don't follow Manchester and Liverpool's examples, we will fall even further behind.

### 4. What do you want to see more of from arts and culture?

We need arts and culture that's not afraid to be political or upset the small minority with vested interests in the status quo (aka the private bus companies). We need arts and culture that connects with the real issues facing our communities during the cost of living crisis – be that energy bills, soaring rents or rip-off bus fares and unreliable services – in ways that are inclusive, engaging and, most importantly, empowering so that people can learn how to fight back.

