

Art

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Mary Kelly

Interviewed by Maria Walsh

Criticism v Critique

JJ Charlesworth

Sharjah Biennial

Kathy Battista • Kathy Noble

Ellie Harrison

Profile by Martin Herbert



Ellie Harrison



Financial Crises 2009

Greed 2002
detail



Let's say you want to raise public awareness of the colossal slow-motion civic disaster – to be polite about it – that has been the sell-off of the UK's public utilities since the mid 1980s. What might be required? According to Ellie Harrison's exhibition 'A Brief History of Privatisation', recently on show at Watermans Art Centre in London, the somewhat sardonic answer is: free massages, free crisps and free rides in a children's coin-operated vibrating car. In the venue's darkened main space, a circle of six electronic massage chairs – each representing a public utility (health, railways, gas, electricity, telecoms, post) were synchronised to a DVD projection that, over half an hour, ticked progressively through the years of the last century, the colours flipping primarily between blue and red according to which party was in power. At the date when one of the public services was created, the relevant massage chair powered soothingly on; when it was privatised, the seat switched off again. By the end, of course, only the 'health' chair was still thrumming away; outside, in the real world, the coalition government appears hell-bent on privatising this one too.

Elsewhere were other synced devices: in the lobby, a vending machine programmed to release free crisps whenever search terms relating to the economy appeared in headlines on BBC News's RSS feed; and, parked in the cafe, the aforementioned kids' ride, which became 'free' under the same criterion. Here was an opportunity to discover what might make a casual viewer pay attention to politics (a prospect that swiftly inverted itself as a critique of indolent consumerism: is this really all we want – calorific snacks, massages, infantilisation?) and a demonstration of how the intangible contours of history might memorably and probingly be visualised. The issue of how data is sorted, structured and made meaningful is a key one of our age – see David McCandless's 2010 book *Information is Beautiful* for examples of desiccated facticity turned gorgeously indelible – and has been a central aspect in the London-born, Glasgow-based Harrison's art since her student days. For *Greed*, 2000, aged 21, she went to New York and photographically documented every meal she ate over four days, weighing in and out; two years later, in *Eat* 22, 2002, she followed the same food-diary programme for a year. But

Harrison's practice is far from a straightforward inquiry into how, in order to represent partisan partialities or not, to make one's voice heard.

Driven as she is by a politicised conscience – 'A Brief History...' is nothing if not a sincere, remonstrating response to the annexing of every part of our lives by market forces – Harrison is equally aware of, and absorbs into her art, the problematics and contradictions that attend operating simultaneously as an artist, activist and administrator. The first category, she notes, has an egotistic, look-at-me undertow; the second reflects her morality; the third, underwriting her long-term interest in data, she sees as a function of growing up as a guinea pig of the target-driven culture of neoliberalism. In this sense, projects such as Harrison's recent Artist's Lottery Syndicate – established in July 2010 and convoking some 40 artists in an attempt to win the lottery over the course of a year – are not just wry responses to cuts in arts funding but articulations of the multiple hats an art practitioner today might be required uneasily to wear.

In 2009, Harrison self-published *Confessions of a Recovering Data Collector*, a slim book which operated as a knowing sayonara to an art practice founded on what the introduction described as 'time-consuming, self-imposed projects which both attempted to document, but also plagued, her daily life and routine'. For *Gold*

Card Adventures, 2002, she recorded the 9,236km she had travelled on London transport over a year; for *Tea Blog*, 2006-09, she spent three years recording her thoughts while drinking the caffeinated beverage. As the subject of an administered society, she had absorbed the poison, it seems, and become what Harrison described in the book – in an ostensible session of ‘Hysterical-Historical Praxis Therapy’ with Sally O’Reilly – as ‘the administrator of my own life’. Even though the tessellated project might operate as a critique of her cultural context, she had to give it up. The giving up, of course, serves as a para-artistic statement in itself. Harrison is a tail-biting thinker par excellence; see *My Head’s Swimming*, 2003, a record of her thoughts while doing laps – among them ‘how boring my thoughts must appear’.

Since her *Confessions*, Harrison has been a moving target, her projects dodging between art and non-art, practical purpose and, maybe, parody of bureaucratic process. *Work With Me*, 2007-08, for example, was ‘an international campaign to help find a long-term work partner for Ellie Harrison’, involving a website with extended CV, testimonials, a ‘manifesto’ and an invitation to get in touch. As part of her manifesto, Harrison outlined her belief that ‘an artwork may take any form and use any media that the artist finds most effective for conveying their ideas’, a familiar enough formulation, but one that accrues motive force in a practice that has taken in numerous projects that seem at once extramural and sympathetic to Harrison’s official art. Her ‘Bring Back British Rail’ campaign, for example, launched in 2009, is avowedly not art – Harrison says she pinned a note to her studio wall reminding herself of that fact – but it obviously chimes with ‘A Brief History of Privatisation’ and functions as part of a process of self-definition as an artist, in terms of what matters to her. The discussion group she is currently organising among Glasgow-based artists, ‘Artists Anonymous’, held at the city’s CCA – a ‘support group which aims to provide a safe space for its members to speak candidly, honestly and confidentially to others about the anxieties and stresses of their professional lives’ – may not be art per se. But given that so much of Harrison’s art revolves around what it means to be an artist, and given that, in conversation, she self-consciously identifies even her compulsive work habits with the larger culture’s latent approval of workaholic careerism, ‘Artists Anonymous’ is hardly dissonant with her primary practice.

As such, part of the radical heft of her art lies in its suspension of familiar boundaries, and its suggestion that only such a beclouding of habitual distinctions might allow the artist to operate outside the short-circuiting procedure that identifies art as art and then prevents it from touching on real life. If her non-art verges on art, the inverse also feels true. On 13 June, at Toynbee Hall in London, Harrison is presenting *Work-a-Thon*, an ‘attempt to set a world record for the most self-employed people working together (on their own individual projects) in the same place at the same time, over the course of a normal 9-5 day’ – see www.selfemployed.me.uk. The participants will be at once alone and together, in what amounts to a blindingly logical, hopeful sidestep of the atomising that attends the self-employed – a rising, barely-on-the-radar, fragile demographic in the UK, as Harrison notes, lacking ‘the luxury of employee benefits or the concept of workplace solidarity’. *Work-a-Thon* is at once a symbolic and potentially literal counterforce, aiming at modelling or realising community. Is it art? Personally, I’d rather not know. ■

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Confessions of a Recovering Data Collector 2009

Work With Me 2007-08