

WORK-A-THON FOR THE SELF-EMPLOYED ELLIE HARRISON

‘The meaning of life is work’. That was the world according to my grandpa Goronwy Daniel. His words seem to have loomed as a spectre over my entire adult life. I got my first personal computer in December 1999 when I was 20, and my first mobile phone exactly one year after that. With hindsight, the working methods I developed to launch my ‘career’ as an artist, were archetypal in the state of ‘continual labour’ communication technology has ushered in.

It wasn’t until 2006, that I became conscious of my own labour conditions and attempted to deconstruct this feeling that I was ‘always at work’. As one of my ‘data collecting’ experiments, for the project *Timelines*, I decided to track and map everything I did, 24 hours a day, for four weeks. All that happened was that I drowned in data entry and cursed all the additional unnecessary ‘work’ this process required. I later confessed that “I felt I was spending hours each week employed as the administrator for my own life.”¹

It was only when I took real ‘time out’ to reflect when studying for my Masters at Glasgow School of Art in 2008, that I began to realise the potential of this obsessive ‘work ethic’. If only it could be applied to a more worthwhile cause than the bolstering of my ego and the furthering of my own ‘career’. In my 2010 thesis *How to Reconcile the Careerist Mentality with Our Impending Doom*,² I defined a new role for myself and other artists of my generation, which would hover somewhere between ‘artist’, ‘activist’ and ‘administrator’.

Ellie Harrison's
Work-a-thon for
the Self-Employed,
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Photo by
Steven Aitchison



I discovered that I could use the ‘flexibility’ championed in the post-Fordist world of work, coupled with the unique ‘work ethic’ of artist (not only are we ‘always on’, but there is also rarely any connection between this labour and a wage) to become a ‘Counter-Hegemonic Propaganda Machine’³. Using a variety of tactics: some more subtle than others, some in the art world and some beyond,⁴ I could attempt to make the case for social justice in every field in which I worked.

In 2011, still troubled by my increasing ‘self-exploitation’, I devised the *Work-a-thon for the Self-Employed*. Couched within the spectacle of the world record-setting attempt for “the most self-employed people working together in the same place at the same time, during a normal 9-to-5 day”⁵, the project aimed to unite an atomised and otherwise hidden ‘community’ of labourers within our new ‘creative industries’. By actively addressing the negative side effects of the freelance lifestyle – namely the isolation and the unregulated and increasingly longer working hours – I hoped that those taking part would come to notice the problems and struggles we all share and realise the real power we have to address them when we come together.

Reviewing my past decade of work, it is evident that, as Goronwy’s maxim suggests, it is the de-alienating creative practice I’ve been lucky enough to pursue that has given my life ‘meaning’. But as the ‘the machine’ herself can attest, the extreme imbalance between life and work it often requires is not always that healthy. Exploitation of any kind (whether in the cause of social justice or not), should never be encouraged and so I must keep reminding myself to take that all important ‘time out’ from my technology, relax and occasionally have some fun.

CROSSING THE RIVER OF FIRE

At ‘Power Shift’ in Washington DC in April 2011, climate activist, Bill McKibben, made clear why we need to think differently about what it means to be radical and why a practice of activism is required of us all:

‘You are not the radicals in this fight,’ he said addressing 10,000 young people at the conference: ‘The radicals are the people who are fundamentally altering the composition of the atmosphere. That is the most radical thing people have ever done.’⁵⁷

As distinguished climate scientists James Hansen and Kevin Anderson call on their colleagues to ‘revolt’,⁵⁸ the fight to prevent the altering of the atmosphere is ‘sharpening’.⁵⁹

Numbers of UK citizens taking part in protest have doubled since 1986,⁶⁰ even if the adversarial nature of direct action is not for everyone. Increasingly activist, people-led movements for equality and justice such as The Arab Spring,