



ART
Meet the woman presenting this magazine as her latest work of art
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Review

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THE FINISHED ARTICLE

Ellie Harrison plans to present this page as a work of art in a gallery. Is she breaking boundaries, or is it a gimmick too far? *Moira Jeffrey reports*

I'M IN Ellie Harrison's studio in Glasgow School of Art, a pristine office with a pin-board that might belong to a corporate drone. Pinned up alongside complex graphs and motivational phrases – including injunctions to “read, think and experiment” – is a print-out of her monthly diary.

Harrison is a young artist, just finishing her Masters of Fine Art course at Glasgow School of Art and the diary is full of ominous-sounding words like “final assessment” and “degree show installation”. The problem is that although her room is a testament to her hard work – there are ranks of posters of recent exhibitions, two books she has published, and shelves of volumes on moral philosophy – she hasn't completed a central aspect of her degree show and she wants me to do it for her.

The deal is this: at Glasgow's CCA, Harrison would like to present her work on a pristine white plinth, but it's not a sculpture. It's a newspaper article about her and her work.

“I've been working on disparate projects and wondered how to bring them together,” she says. “I'm interested in ethics and motivation, the different pushes and pulls of being an artist. I thought my individual projects weren't capable of talking about this wider issue and that this would be a way of concluding this two-year period.”

She argues that many artists regard degree shows as a chance for their work to be exposed to the media and buyers – a means to an end, in other words, rather than art for art's sake. Her idea is to turn that process into the artwork itself. Now she must convince me the project is worth it. Is it a critique of the careerist structure of the art system or merely a symptom of it? I'm deeply cynical: is this simply a last-minute cop-out for a promising artist in her early thirties who has already established a reputation outside formal education?

Her work about the credit crunch – a vending machine that spits out free packets of crisps every time the BBC news feed uses a recessionary cliché and her live election night webcast General Election Drinking Game – were one-liners that made it into the broadsheets. But at the same time they were brilliant parables for our disaffection from politics: the clichés, the time-wasting, the inability to take urgent action.

Harrison, who studied at Nottingham Trent University and then at London's Goldsmith's, has spent the past two years analysing her personal motivation, torn between the selfishness of her era and the necessity for altruistic action that issues like climate change demand.

She defines herself as Thatcher's child, born in 1979; her work seems driven in part by guilt about the aspirational world that Thatcherism ushered in. She was brought up in Ealing by lifelong lefties but says she found the hate figure on the TV curiously inspirational.

I look again at the graph on the pin-board; she explains that it shows the career trajectories of two of the world's most prominent women. The long blue line shows the life and career of Thatcher, the yellow one is Angela Merkel. The short green line is Harrison. Can she measure up?

She is torn, she says. “It's a continual sort of battle; perhaps I'll never be able to resolve this conflict.” That's why she spends a day a week on her internet campaign to bring back British Rail, a kind of symbolic resistance



to the rolling privatisation that has been a permanent backdrop to her adult life, “a beacon for my altruistic side”, and reaction to hours spent on the train with three different operators between Glasgow and Nottingham.

Aspects of Harrison's work are narcissistic. Her obsessive self-documentation, for example, has seen her photograph every meal she ate for a whole year for her project Eat 22. At the same time, such projects evoke the seismic shifts in recent culture: the information overload, the endless CCTV and internet monitoring. Finally I realise what the studio, with its colour-coded Post-It notes really reminds me of. It might be an office in Wernham Hogg, the workplace of one David Brent.

Harrison is driven, obsessive about detail and she's serious. Eat 22 might have been a rather silly Facebook page; instead it's now on display in the headquarters of the scientific research body the Wellcome Trust. She is clearly self-aware. Every time I bring up a criticism of her strategies, a nagging suspicion, she pulls out a paragraph of her dissertation that touches on the issue. She has got there before me on each one of them.

So here it is, Ellie, your degree show. You've won me over. I'm not sure if you're going to like it, but I really hope that your examiners do. ♦

The Glasgow School of Art MFA degree show is at CCA and The Glee Factory, Glasgow, from Saturday until 26 June
♦ www.ellieharrison.com



Ellie Harrison makes a statement against privatisation. Left, her vending machine artwork

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