

Profile

Ellie Harrison

As a child, Nottingham artist Ellie Harrison obsessively collected sheep postcards. Her latest project is making a daily record of her every conversation, step taken, page read and slightest weight change. Mark Patterson met her

Recording artist

At her current rate of progress, Ellie Harrison will have swum across the Atlantic in 94.2265 years. But the fact that she's making the attempt in her local pool should not raise any eyebrows. After all, here is a young woman who has already attempted to travel the 11,630km to Hawaii with a London travel pass. And that doesn't mean she tried blagging her way across the Pacific without purchasing the airfare. It means she recorded the length of every journey she made on public transport for most of a year and then added the accumulated distances up on a home-made totaliser with the aim of equalling the distance from Ealing to Honolulu. Alright, she failed — she only got to Beijing — but Harrison's obsessive efforts are now recorded for all to see on her website under the title Gold Card Adventures. It was just one of several art projects by Harrison which have all been based around the minute recording of data which most of us would deem completely irrelevant.

Harrison, a 24-year-old fine art graduate from Nottingham Trent University who lives in a hygienically clutter-free apartment in Sneinton, received her single largest burst of exposure in 2002 for a project called Eat 22. This was a photographic record of every single meal she ate over a year.

The resulting 1,640 digital images — all of which showed Harrison stuffing various items of food into her mouth — were edited into an animated film lasting just three-and-half minutes which recently formed part of the Treat Yourself exhibition at the Science Museum in London. For her latest project, Harrison is keeping daily records of her weight at 9am, text messages received, sport activities, number of book pages read, people spoken to, swear words uttered, kilometres walked on foot, kilojoules of energy used in walking — and 'gaseous emissions'.

Harrison isn't po-faced about this very strange business. At the same time, however, it is her current life's work while also reflecting her personal desires for health and personal organisation. In fact, the more she records the minutiae of her life for eventual public consumption, the more she finds that the public and the private Ellie Harrison are merging.

"It's quite fun really because I do take it seriously, but then it's all a big joke," she says, breezily. "It's funny because a lot of pressure builds up when I



Bite-size piece: Ellie Harrison recorded every meal she ate for a year for her art project Eat 22

present such a huge mass of information in a compelling way. Viewed completely without the art tag, Harrison's work is equally a strange and fascinating demonstration of the human powers of endurance and organisation.

speaks to someone, or I swear, because then I have to make a mental note so I can write it down later. In measuring myself, it also affects how I act and what I do. It's certainly got me swearing a lot less because I used to swear a lot!"

But is it art? That debate will be running in various forms among human societies until the universe implodes. Nevertheless, what Harrison does is absolutely contemporary among modern art practice in its acceptance of placing the artist's bare personality at the forefront of his or her work. Ego is naturally all in art, goes the argument, but in the past that fact has simply been better hidden behind canvas and paint.

For all that, though, the call that art? brigade will demand to know what value there is in learning how many text messages Harrison received last Thursday. In itself, not much, except to her. Viewed over a year, though, the accumulation of mundane facts makes an exhibition out of an ordinary life with the added creative challenge of how one

"I always talk about how I've become my own administrator because I've created these tasks for myself to organise. But I suppose it all comes from different things. It comes partly from wanting to know interesting facts and recording facts that other people don't think about so, in a sense, I'm making information out of nothing." It's also about noticing details which other people miss.

One of Harrison's chief inspirations was a Taiwanese extreme performance artist called Tehching Hsieh, whose self-appointed ordeals over the 1970, '80s and '90s included filming himself for one second on the hour, every hour, for an entire year. To prove he wasn't cheating, Hsieh punched a time clock each hour. For obvious reasons, he couldn't sleep for more than an hour at a time and was unable to travel more than an hour's distance from his apartment. The photographs of his year's dour and mechanical existence were made into a film lasting just 365 seconds.

"He also spent a year when he didn't go into any buildings and another year when he was chained to a woman with an eight foot rope," says Harrison. "Then, afterwards, he said he was giving up art. He'd had enough. But his new project was living until he was 100. I decided to make that a project of mine as well."

Is Harrison the kind of person who by any small chance obsessively collected objects when she was little?

"The original things I used to collect were postcards with sheep on them. I was completely obsessive with them. I remember thinking that I'd lost them all and that was really devastating. Now they mean nothing to me."

Harrison's current recording of her walks, conversations and swear words is a long-term project which won't see the light of day for some time.

However, her next visible contribution will be to a computer game art exhibition at Nottingham's Broadway cinema on February 28 and 29.

Just remember that if you talk to her, the chat will be duly noted and logged... your personal statistical contribution to the life and art of Ellie Harrison.

■ To see more of Ellie Harrison's work, visit www.ellieharrison.com

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