

Art as Protest: With Our £2000 Artist Fee We Are Going to COP15

By Lena Simic for the University of Cambridge Graduate Drama Seminar in association with Cultures of Climate Change Group, Jan 2010

<http://www.crassh.cam.ac.uk/events/1245/>

This presentation will introduce the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home, outline our performance methodology and aesthetics (family picnic, political speeches, domestic arguments and red banner) through an example of *The Hazardous Family* performance intervention. I will then move onto discussing and contextualizing two of the Institute's recent art projects in relation to climate change: *A Promising Family Picnic* at Two Degrees event at Artsadmin London and the Institute's residency *Half-Term Holiday* at C Words: Carbon Climate Capital Culture exhibition at Arnolfini in Bristol.

For anarchists, means and ends must be consistent: freedom cannot be achieved through the paradox of limiting it in the present. People learn the habits of freedom and equality by attempting to practice them in the present, however imperfectly. The primary means of doing this is through building alternative forms of organization alongside the institutions of the larger society.

Carol Ehrlich in 'The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Can it be Saved?' in Sargent, Lydia (ed.) *Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism* Boston, South End 1981

The Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is a home-run initiative, run out of the spare room of a council house in Everton, Liverpool, UK. The Institute is run by a family of two adults and three kids, collectively, twoaddthree (Gary Anderson, Lena Simic, Neal 9, Gabriel 7 and Sid 2). The Institute is a self-sufficient and sustainable initiative drawing from 10% of all income from its members (Gary and Lena work as university lecturers as well as freelance artists, children receive child tax credits and child benefit). The Institute is concerned with dissent, homemade aesthetics, financial transparency as well as critiquing the capitalism of culture as was embodied (and continues to be) in Liverpool08, European Capital of Culture. The Institute is interested in social transformation and has refigured a part of the family living space (third spare bedroom) into a meeting place for artists, activists and cultural dissenters. This activity is undertaken in order to develop and extend dialogues about a 'culture' not necessarily driven by market forces. The Institute has hosted a number of artist residencies and events, ranging from individual encounters through group conversations to theatrical performances.¹

The foundation of the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home has arisen from both my and my partner Gary's practice as research PhD's projects and our arts collaborations over the last 10 years, all of which in some sense were concerned with homemade and DIY aesthetics. This particular approach to arts practice is informed by

¹ See <http://www.twoaddthree.org> for information on residencies and events.

Gary and I starting a family at a relatively early age of 25 and 28, and thus managing to involve the children in our arts making processes and research ‘careers’, having them side by side, Secondly, the Institute comes about as the answer to the questions of how does one prepare the children for the world; how does one raise the children critically, socially and lovingly. The Institute has provided us with a formulation of a methodology and ethics of parenting of our three young children: education and the raising of our children through art activist activities, creative expression, critical debate and social encounters in our home and beyond (with other artists and activists as well as their children).² Thirdly, the Institute is a direct response to explicit link between art and capitalism, which was apparent in Liverpool 08, European Capital of Culture and subsequently instrumentalization of contemporary arts practice. Geographically, the Institute for the Art and Practice of Dissent at Home is situated in Everton, L6 postcode, less affluent, less desirable, ‘deprived’ area of the city, a place where culture doesn’t happen, and where none of the important international arts events took place during the Liverpool08, European Capital of Culture year.

PERFORMANCE LANGUAGE

In trying to find an adequate performance language whilst working with our children, we stumbled across ‘family picnic’ as our performance methodology. The idea of a public family meal was appealing for a number of reasons: it gives children a clear task, a structure, something to do whilst on stage; it provides the adults with the platform for critiquing the construction of the family by playing out traditional family roles through our division of labour (the mother takes care of the food and the children, the father addresses the audience). Each family picnic has similar structure: there is a red banner already set in place underneath which the action takes place, mother and children are asked to set out the family picnic space with hazardous tape, the instructions are shouted at them by the father, the mother and children put out the picnic throw and the food, the father sets out a soap box from which political speeches will be read. Father starts the speeches and mother and children join in later. There might be a staged domestic argument, and mother and children interrupting the father and undermining his authority. During the picnic mother and father will take turn at painting a relevant slogan onto the red banner.

One of our family picnics was *The Hazardous Family*, a part of HAZARD 08 breaks of hazardous behaviour and guerrilla live art – public interventions in the city of Manchester on the 12th July 2008. Through this event the Institute investigated Fredrich Engels’ legacy through political speeches and a family picnic at Parsonage Gardens and in front of Chetham’s Library, two prominent locations in relation to Engels’ 22 year long stay in Manchester. Inspired by Engels’ quote ‘He is the bourgeoisie and the wife represents the proletariat’ (1884), *The Hazardous Family* was a performance intervention. This was an opportunity to investigate the construction of the family within present day consumer capitalism through a reading of Engels’ texts, the extracts from *The Communist Manifesto*, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Family picnic took place under the red banner in which it

² The Institute could in a sense be viewed as a form of home schooling, a critical complement to school education.

was written with white paint 'The first division of labour is that between man and woman for the propagation of children.' Marx & Engels. Lena, the mother, and Gary, the father, took turns between taking care of the children Neal Gabriel and Sid (feeding them and playing with them) and making political speeches. The children distributed propaganda leaflets containing information about Engels' stay in Manchester and extracts from our performance text. Full version of the performance text and a video extract from the performance are available for download from www.twoaddthree.org/documents

I will now move onto the year 2009 when we arrived at Climate Change as our predominant theme in the Institute's projects. The Institute's participated at *Two Degrees* event at Artsadmin in London in July 2009, and subsequently, straight after the event slow travelled to Dubrovnik (my hometown). *Two Degrees* was Artsadmin's week long programme of work by 'radical and politically engaged artists about climate change and our relationship with the environment' (quoting the Artsadmin brochure). Featured artists included Amy Sharrocks, Lottie Child, My Dads Strip Club, The Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, Richard Dedomenici, Daniel Gosling, Magnificent Revolution and The Institute.

As the Institute, we found it a challenge to be invited and consider the issues around climate change - we never saw ourselves as a green family. Yes, we did our recycling, and we tried to shop local (particularly after having been visited by Reverend Billy and His Church of Life After Shopping), we have a small car, we get our fruit and vegetables delivered by Organic Direct and that's it. We wondered why we got this invitation... and then realized this might be a good opportunity to learn something about climate change and get worried! So 6 months on here we are in the camp, worried and fighting for Climate Justice.

Building on our work which looks at family construction critically, for *Two Degrees* we got self-reflexive in our position as a transnational (frequent travel between England and Croatia) family with 3, not the ideal 2, 3 kids. We thought we might come out clean, confess our sins in relation to climate chaos and see what happens next. We performed *A Promising Family Picnic* on the 16th June at 7pm. Working from the prototype performance we had devised for Hazard 08 we decided to make speeches and promises to end climate chaos as a family.

Performance text extract:

Now, we are a transnational family, see we got married for the papers, so that we could build our lives here in the over affluent UK. I'm Croatian whilst Gary is a proper British Citizen. The children are both. As a transnational family, we travel a lot. We are addicted to travel, to flying, to cheap low cost airlines. Ryanair, Easy Jet, Wizz Air, SkyEurope, BmiBaby... Actually being here today in London is our pit stop on our route from Liverpool to Dubrovnik. Our overall carbon footprint for the household according to direct.gov.uk website is 7.06 tonnes a year. Average household of our size is 9.96 tonnes. According to these figures we are doing pretty well, however resources aren't infinite ... and our largest carbon footprint comes from our flights. Can we, a nuclear family unit, be helped? So, on this road to change, we have come here from Liverpool today to explore what a family might mean in the face of climate chaos. Can we better ourselves? Can we save the planet?

We listed both in words and in paint on the red banner all of the flights we have taken over the past nine years, most of them to get from Liverpool to Dubrovnik - where I am from. In addition through this performance we were inspired to forego the chance of flying directly from Liverpool to Dubrovnik - with EasyJet which was running this connection for the first time ever and so, as we packed our family picnic away, we declared that this performance would end with a four day slow travel to Dubrovnik. We were going to Croatia anyway for the Performance Studies international conference.

The following video extract is 10 minutes long.

From Liverpool to Dubrovnik in June 2009 - part of *Two Degrees* commission:

Liverpool - London train, sleepover at Ben and Tina's 16/6

London - Paris train, Eurostar 17/6

Paris- Munich overnight train 17/6

Munich - Zagreb, all day train, sleep at Branka and Sandro's 18/6

Zagreb -Split overnight train, 4 hours late, makes us miss our ship to Dubrovnik 19/6

Split - Dubrovnik coach 20/6

From 3rd October to 29 November 2009 PLATFORM (art activist organization based in London) curated a series of events, talks, performances, discussions, symposia for C Words: Carbon Climate Capital Culture exhibition at Arnolfini, Bristol. The Institute was one of the new commissions together with African Writers Abroad, Ackroyd & Harvey, Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, Hollingston & Kyprianou with Tamasin Cave & Spinwatch, Trapeze Collective and Virtual Migrants. As noted by PLATFORM in the especially produced newspaper accompanying the exhibition:

‘The fact that there is a current rise in contemporary art’s engagement with climate change issues across the range of discipline is significant. Climate issues have featured in FACT’s *Climate for Change* (Liverpool), Artsadmin’s *Two Degrees* (London), Barbican’s *Radical Nature* (London) and the Royal Academy’s *Earth: art of a changing world* (London) to name but a few. The RSA’s Arts and Ecology (2005), Tipping Point (2003), Cape Farewell (2001) and the EU’s 2020 network (2008) are long-term programmes fostering culture’s engagement with climate change.’

In the Guardian article which reviews *Earth* exhibition, ‘The rise of climate-change art’ Madeleine Bunting interviews some of the artists and draws attention to some of the contradictions inherent in the running of global art market and issues like climate change. She writes: ‘Contemporary art is an expensive, global business. Artists, curators and the works all end up flying, while galleries themselves require expensive climactic conditions. Indeed, curators in London and Copenhagen admit they have no idea of the carbon cost of their exhibitions.’

In this article Gary Hume, one of the artists featured in *Earth* says: ‘The people who do the most damage [environmentally] buy my work, and I’m not using ecologically sound paint. I feel like apologising – I can’t help the world. Climate change is too big for my art. My painting is a small thing, like a child might do.’ In the same article, James Marriott (PLATFORM) is also critical of the way how art institutions, artists and curators are

blind about their own carbon footprint, but is at the same time delighted that the issue is attracting the attention.

In that light, C Words saw itself as a part of and in the context of the direct action movement, COP15 and climate justice action. One of the commissioned pieces for C Words tackled this issue head on. Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination used their commission to build a proto-type weapon for the day of civil disobedience *Reclaim Power* on the 16th Dec in Copenhagen: a bike bloc. The C Words exhibition provoked a debate about the explicit link between art and activism, starting with the opening weekend event 'How Did We Get Here'. Steven Morris from the Guardian wrote an article 'Artists to use public money to fund Copenhagen summit protest'

With that debate in mind, the Institute took up a residency *Half-Term Holiday* from 27th Oct to 1 Nov. We decided to paint the banner with words 'With our £2000 artist fee we are going to COP15' which can be seen as our provocation/contribution to the art vs. activism conundrum. Furthermore, we felt we should use the money we received from this commission towards further investigation into the issue. We stayed on a barge with an array of events, performances and activities. Here's a peek at the Institute's week diary:

- Monday 26th October: Gary Neal and Gabriel arrive in Bristol, sleep in a canal barge with the Arnolfini to one side and LloydsTSB to the other. We live that way for a week.
- Tuesday 27th October: Spending taxpayers money on an ethical shopping tour and picnic (led by Bristol based James from Action Hero)
- Wednesday 28th October: A performance 'Planes, Trains and Slow Travel' at the Embedded Symposium. Branka, our eco-au pair arrives from Zagreb, Croatia just in time to take part in the performance
- Thursday 29th October: Branka's performance with Neal and Gabriel 'Acid Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head' about the easy flow of Acid Rain from affluent to non affluent nations in this case Austria to Croatia. Lena and Sid arrive.
- Friday 30th October: Mizzy day in the gallery (inspired by mischief night) + the painting of the banner with a new slogan 'With our £2000 artist fee we are going to COP 15'.
- Saturday 31st October An anti-capitalist Halloween. We sat in Trapese's Geodome and reached group consensus with children and others on how best to protest the current banking crisis under the disguise of Halloween.
- Sunday 1st November: A Performance Report - A performance that detailed most of the week's highlights (and lowlights).

There is a 10 minutes video of our Performance Report on You Tube. One of the main issues was yet again was the notion of Slow Travel. (6:30 minutes into the video clip)

In December 2009 we travelled to Copenhagen. We spent the money and accumulated rubbish. Here's our breakdown of expenses and all the rubbish collected along the way.
open xml file for projection and put all the rubbish on the table

We have £248 left from £2000 artist fee. We have all this rubbish. These are materials for a new performance.

And finally, I would like to leave you with the image of this banner, which was put together by James Leadbitter of Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination. The way it was put together was by sending out an email that asked people what their favourite acts of disobedience were - the responses were edited into the final text.

When at C Words, I took this photograph of Neal, my child looking at the banner. I really love this banner because there is something so positive about it, connecting the past and present of protest and giving hope to the future - I like the fact that Neal, a child of 9, is reading it, learning about protests in past and hopefully taking it into the future.