

I'M STILL STANDING:

How To Keep Surviving As An Artist

On Fri 13th May 2016 Residence held a day of talks, provocations and good-natured shouting about how we're surviving in the art wilderness. They invited some of the UK's most inspiring artists who've been in it for the long haul to share their experiences over food, tea, and cocktails from Residence's legendary Bookshelf Bar. This was our contribution...

Contributors:

Andy Smith	Search Party
Duncan Speakman	Sheila Ghelani
Julie Vulcan	Sue MacLaine
LOW profile	Sue Palmer
Residence	Tim Etchells

Residence is an artist-led community in Bristol sharing space, resources, knowledge and opportunities.

FAN (Family Activist Network)

In 2015 we travelled to Paris with four other families for the COP 21 climate change protest, whilst world leaders were in the city negotiating a plan to tackle climate change. It was the culmination of a yearlong project in which 11 families had sent letters, parcels and postcards every month to each other, a slow mail conversation over a year interrogating, confessing and attempting to think about our relationship as families to climate change. Less than a month before our planned activities at COP 21 the Paris attacks happened. We watched them unfold on the news and wondered briefly what this might mean for a group of new-to-this-artist-family-activists travelling to the city. We spent the next month emailing one another, not able to wait for the slow mail and the chance of refunding tickets. We confessed our worries, created cycles of fear and wondered quite simply how we could take all these children to Paris, a city in a state of emergency on a protest that had been officially banned all for the sake of art. We have a selection of snippets from the emails sent between the group that followed shortly after the Paris attacks that we wanted to share with you.

Dear FAN

What are we to do?

After the devastating news from

Friday, are we to go to Paris?

Do you still want to go?

Do you think it's safe?

Do you think it's worth it?

Do you care that much about the planet?

Who wants to be a martyr?

Do we go and stay inside Hotel Baby?

Do we claim back the money from Global Justice Now train, cancel our reservation at Hotel Baby and do something else with the £4300?

Something 'safe at home', here in the UK, or shall I say, England, that green and pleasant land, in our living room, on our comfy couch...

Dear FAN

I am thinking about how nobody is willing to die for climate change. And of course, I agree with that! But I still think about it... People are dying because of climate change but not for it. Friday night shows us it's all rather random. How random do we feel our lives and lives of our children are? I know it's all rather unlikely... unlikely that we are to be hit, 40 of us in the city of more than 2 million, but I'm not sure the Paris trip can be as enjoyable now. Can it? Am I just panicking for nothing? Can you find pleasure and joy in this movement for

climate justice, still? Can we ride on anger, or devastation, or sadness, or compassion?

Dear FAN

The rest of our (French) family are very clear they don't want us to go.

Dear FAN

For my part watching the news yesterday and seeing people running because there was an unexpected noise clarified for me that it would not feel at all safe with a 10 month baby strapped to me or in a buggy.

Dear FAN

We are also frightened. My daughter is crying a lot. For the first time she has realised bad things might happen in places where she is. She has asked if we are still going to Paris. She also says "please don't go". She asked "will people bring bombs to Cardiff?".

Dear FAN

Perhaps if we can cancel tickets and claim the costs back we should? Perhaps we should send postcards to Paris and stage our own protest somewhere closer to home, not because London is safer, but because being outside of the big crowds and the inevitable high security measures they'll attract in the circumstances

might make this safer and happier for the kids?

Dear FAN

We're not sure what to do. The attacks in Paris and the impact that has had on our thinking in regards to the FAN trip has made us depressed about everything, depressed about our efficacy, depressed about our ability to do anything, to affect any sort of change. But we must do something... somewhere, mustn't we?

Dear FAN

Would I risk my daughter's trust in the world, trust in me, and physical safety to be present as part of a massified immanent critique of non/representative government elites meeting to discuss not saving the world but balancing the books of their own interests with its destruction? Definitely not. I don't believe COP21 or the protests against it are going to make a fundamental difference, the point is that if I were to risk my life for the cause of fundamental economic and cultural change and for climate justice, it wouldn't be at this big protest party.

Dear FAN

We won't be coming to Paris

Dear FAN

Do I think there is actually a greater risk at this event now? I don't know. Maybe I do, because of the nature of the summit and the confluence of people that will be there, and because there has been a lot of 'activity' in recent months. Or maybe that risk was already there and we didn't think about it because we take so much for granted, not living in any of the other parts of the world where people experience some version of it weekly (though I did think about the single train full of climate activists, and about Calais, and I had already wondered). Or maybe there is nothing going-to-happen but the imaginaries necessarily (and intentionally) colonise the future with fear. Or maybe the future is not foretold. There is no rationalising this.

Dear FAN

I also think that we have a responsibility to make pleasure and joy in any movement away from all this violence, and that we need to learn to be angry and compassionate and hopeful together.

Dear FAN

We've both been kettled in the UK and whilst studying in Paris, witnessed the brutality of the riot police in the context of industrial

action there. That kind of police violence, which it seems to us is especially likely now that the defence forces are primed for action, would be terrifying with children.

Dear FAN

I am also ashamed - I am trying to explain climate change to my son in time for the marches. The science is very easy to explain to a 3 year-old. It is so very simple. & it brings on feelings of shame because I can't believe we are in this situation and I think our children will rightly ask us why we didn't do something.

Dear FAN

I can't stop thinking about the fact we have said we won't go to Paris

Dear FAN

I know that this situation is one we MUST tackle for all our children's sake. I understand that many parents around the world are not able to make 'safe' choices and are experiencing terrible violence every day. I get that nothing is safe anyway. And yet I still have a very emotional, gut instinct response that I just don't want to take my children into an environment where the security forces are on high alert, the state is upping air strikes, people are retaliating, fear and hatred are

running high, people are becoming polarised and the responses from state and individuals are all so bound up in violence and oppression. I cannot see any way that Paris on high alert is a place that I will feel OK.

Dear FAN

It has just been announced that France has banned marches during the climate summit. As I suspected, the matter has been taken out of our hands (the matter of taking part in the march, at least).

Dear FAN

Our imaginations, when we ask them to put us in Paris for the protests, puts us straight in the middle of a swaying mass of untold thousands, stuck, in the centre, police sirens everywhere, crazed people panicking, batons smashing down, water cannon, kettles, brutality, children crying scared, 'mummy, mummy, I want to go home, I want to go home'.

Dear FAN

Will it matter that I go?

Will it matter that we go?

Who will it matter to?

I suppose we've been a little depressed about the efficacy of the trip, how can we make ourselves heard now, how can we make climate change into the narrative when all we

hear in our media is SECURITY, SECURITY, SECURITY (despite the fact that the two issues are fundamentally co-dependent)

Dear FAN

What does it mean that other families have now decided not to go?

Dear FAN

We really feel that FAN should, can, (must!) continue, even if it goes through different organisations, and different ideas. I'm not too concerned with the group splitting up and some going to Paris. It's not about those who are brave and those who are not. we think that these things are at their best when fluidity is celebrated and embraced, that the network can take multiple forms and exist in a multitude of ways, in Paris, in London, online, in our own homes as we wrangle with these difficult choices.

Dear FAN

What does it means to be engaged, active, and to participate in public action, while also being an adult, someone who carries fear from previous public actions (this category includes me) and a parent who is responsible for little people's wellbeing. i find all this both fascinating and timely; and perhaps

as relevant -to me, at least- as taking part in a march, if not even more so.

Dear FAN

We will not be coming to Paris as a family.

Dear FAN

Please cancel our tickets and room

Dear FAN

We are sitting on the sofa, thinking this backwards and forwards.

In the end six families chose not to travel to Paris. They didn't feel the risk was worth it, the extra security measures with screaming toddlers and the very public display of guns was enough to stop them. We thought so too. We sent an email a few days before saying that we weren't going to go. But then we sent another email 10 minutes later saying we've changed our minds, we do still want to come, don't cancel our tickets.

We asked permission from the head teacher, we travelled by euro star on a train full of climate change activist, 10 adults and 14 children a bit scared and a bit excited, we wrangled toddlers and teenagers, we overtook an entire hotel in the red light district called Hotel Baby, we scrawled our

names and numbers on our children's arms in case we lost them, we managed prams through the metro. We got to the protest and it was eerily quiet apart from a group of men shouting "REV-O-LUTION!". We saw no other children, unlike the carnival feel of the climate change protest in London. People took photos of our children. We wore red and stood in the streets of Paris. We got out the way where the riot shields came out and found lost French to ask the police to let us get out of the kettle.

On the train home we plan what to do next...

How do we maintain resilience and integrity in tough times, in the face of austerity and terrorism, in a world that is on fast-forward? How do we continue to make work with a family, How do you carry on? How do you keep on keeping on? How do you decide what is the right thing to do?

Jodie Hawkes & Pete Phillips

Search Party