

Being human

Q&A with the artist behind the London UBI posters

Q. Can you give a short "text-book" description of your work as an artist (medium, highlights, other artists who have inspired you, etc.) and your political activities?

Russell Shaw Higgs: Primarily I'm an existentialist and an anarchist. I believe very strongly in living a life based on consciously acknowledging the adult choices that we make as individuals and their subsequent consequences.

I also believe very strongly that ideas shouldn't just collect dust on our bookshelves, nor only take up mind and discussion space. Ideas are to be actively practiced, tried out and experimented with in our daily lives.

The stresses and distractions of full time wage slavery makes that near impossible. And probably deliberately so.

I do not make a distinction between my personal life, my art, nor my political activism.

Highlights over the decades include:

1982/83 - fronting my band Wicked Kitchen Staff. A nucleus of six people, with an open invitation to audience members to come on stage, pick up an instrument or mic and join in. I also used to shoplift food and gifts to give to people in the audience. This was my first adult experience of receiving positive feedback from putting ideas into practice.

1989-91 - my first concentrated period of front

line civil disobedience. Including A.I.D.S activism with ACT-UP London, Anti-Poll Tax actions, and chairing the very first meetings of Queer activist group Outrage.

1993 - I threw myself into Contemporary Dance auditions. And fulfilled a desire to perform live at both the ICA and The Place Theatre in London.

2000/01 - I have a long history of civil disobedience. But my most satisfying campaign was Naked Protest. At the end of 2000 I made a commitment to remain naked for as long as it took for us to win in court. I spent a month in winter, continuously naked, remanded in a Brixton Prison segregation cell, until I eventually appeared naked in court, in front of a judge and jury, and won. And also won several more times after that. This also precedes the now much more common and acceptable World Naked Bike rides etc.

2006-2009 - I made a commitment to create and upload an improvised photographic self-portrait, fresh every single day. Which lasted nearly 3 years. At least one of these also included a reference to Basic Income.

2010 - The subsequent video compilation from that project, 999 days of improvised self-portraits playing out in 3 minutes, was shortlisted for the Guggenheim/Google curated event "PLAY".

2015 - I stood as an independent parliamentary candidate in the UK general election. This

was primarily an opportunity to promote and distribute ideas that are of great importance to me.

My campaign literature, delivered to 62,000 households in the Hackney South Constituency, highlighted Compassion, UBI, and Sortition.

I also took every opportunity to promote the idea that we need to move beyond the false distractions of Punch and Judy party politics, the "my gang is better than your gang" mentality. Instead we should encourage constructive cross-party collaboration, on projects that benefit humanity globally and in our local communities.

Can you describe the moment you first heard about basic income and decided it was a great idea that you were going to promote?

I have been a hardcore and optimistically evangelical web citizen since 2002. Which was when I got my first iMac and Internet connection at home.

For the first three years I was a passionate blogger. And it was sometime in those first three years that I remember first encountering the Basic Income concept. I created a permanent sidebar list of Basic Income links.

The majority of my adult life I have lived in financial poverty (relative to western living). I



Paste-ups in London (photo: Russell Shaw Higgs)

value my time, my adult autonomy and my attention, far far more than I value money or the pursuit of money.

I do not blame anyone for my relative financial poverty. As I say, I accept that it is a consequence of choices I have made and bridges I have burned along the way.

Andy Warhol sums up a large part of my core belief perfectly, when he said: "Being born is like being kidnapped and then sold into slavery."

I refuse to have my life dictated and timetabled by anyone. I find it appalling that most people's lives are fundamentally dominated by (wage) slavery and the corrupt propaganda, from cradle to grave, that results in people colluding in their own slavery, backed up by the false notion that it is all about "morality".

We must uncouple work from money once and for all. And begin to value human lives, not humans as slaves.



Paste-ups in London (photo: Russell Shaw Higgs)

You have noted that basic income was similar to your naked protest, in that it was something very simple that nonetheless has radical implications. Can you expand on this idea?

Basic Income and Non-criminalised clothing-optional living are both very simple and straightforward rational concepts, that would subsequently bring about profound changes to human consciousness and our attitudes towards one another. They are both concepts that value autonomy and that undermine archaic authoritarian hierarchies and deeply embedded power structures. Both concepts place high value on simply Being Human.

What are the main things you have learned about basic income while promoting it (for example politically, as an artist or citizen)?

I'm certainly aware that more people have now heard of Basic Income, than even just a few years ago.

And the fact that Basic Income has support from people both on the left and right of the

political spectrum is interesting and gives me hope.

Innovation seems to be a prominent component of the zeitgeist and people do seem to be open to and crying out for new ideas and solutions. Many people can now see that the old ways of organising society are desperately in need of being revised.

The challenge as always is in finding ways to overcome apathy and to find the most effective antidote to the accumulative drip-drip poison and negativity that is propagated daily by mainstream media and so called "leaders" etc.

You appear engaged at the local level. Do you believe positive change happens from the ground up and what particular things would you note about your part of London?

I think positive change comes from all directions. First of all I truly believe these are the best and most promising times to be alive in the entire history of humankind. And regular people have an opportunity to share and organise and influence like never before.

Second, we need to move on from the simplistic notion that all super rich people are automatic bad guys. Some rich and powerful are, or can become, constructive allies for positive change. We should reach out to those people too. And our new frontier of technological interconnectedness and communication offers us the means to do just that.

It's important to remember that we are diverse. No matter how passionately we might believe in something, not everybody will believe or prioritise the same things, nor should they. Therefore we need positive change to come from all directions.

As I mentioned, this year I stood as an independent parliamentary candidate in the UK general election. In my constituency in Hackney South, we had eleven candidates standing. I think that was very healthy.

I would heartily recommend that everybody experiences standing as a candidate in their local area, at least once in their life. Preferably not as party candidates, straitjacketed by the falsities and dogmas of the parties, but as actively engaged independent citizens. We



Paste-ups in Athens (photo: Russell Shaw Higgs)

all have something worth contributing to the change, no matter how small or large we feel.

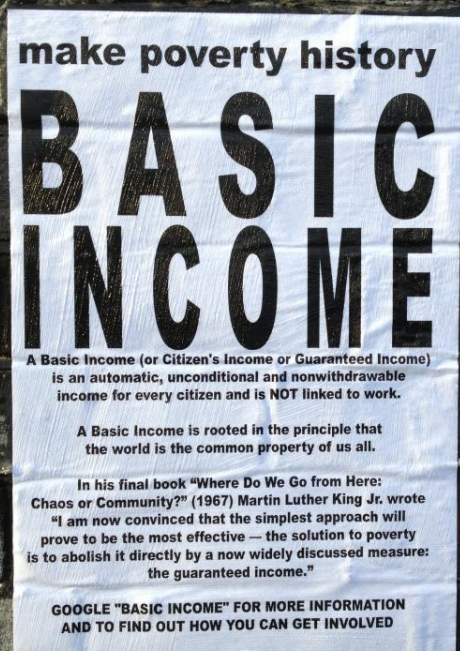
What are your lasting impressions from your trip to Athens? What surprised you on your journey? Can you make any links to Basic Income?

Athens is a truly incredible city.

My very first and most immediate impressions were formed by arriving in the Exarcheia neighbourhood.

I remember in my very first hour here thinking, it is as though Athenian citizens feel a passionate need to communicate on every available inch of outdoor wall space. It's almost like wandering through a physical manifestation of the Internet.

The streets of Athens are a profoundly social space. Here there is a greater sense that the



Paste-up in London (photo: Russell Shaw Higgs)

streets belong to people. Whereas in London the outdoors is a more passive experience, dominated by corporate advertising, CCTV, Public Order Acts, and the general ever creeping privatisation of our commons.

As with anywhere in the world, the people of Athens and Greece would of course benefit from the implementation of an Unconditional Basic Income. But perhaps more than anywhere else in Europe, it seems that Greece has been singled out for a whole special kind of brutal punishment by international bureaucrats and banker racketeers, with undemocratic global corporations hovering in the shadows.

That, combined with the fact that we owe Greece such an immense cultural debt, leads me to advocate that the people of Greece deserve to be gifted an Unconditional Basic Income as a matter of international priority.

What do you make of the refugee crisis? E.g. are you positively surprised that despite years of negativity in the media and politics, so many people around Europe are willing to help?

First off, I believe wholeheartedly in international open borders.

When thinking about refugees it is naturally at the front of my mind that here in Greece, a

European gateway country, the government contains a significant fascist and violently racist party. Golden Dawn. Only a few years back Golden Dawn ran in the Greek elections under the slogan "rid this land of filth".

I am similarly conscious that I am composing this reply on September 11. A date that always brings to mind an especially powerful perspective from Gideon Burrows, when he wrote in the Guardian, 9 September 2003:

"Like most people, I remember exactly where I was when I first heard that terrorists had flown aeroplanes into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon. I was outside a huge arms exhibition in London's Docklands, where 14 Middle Eastern nations were shopping for weapons. While events across the world were cancelled out of respect for the thousands of dead, arms buyers continued doing weapons deals in London for a further three days."¹

America and Britain are the world's largest arms exporters, and therefore their bloody handprints are all over every global conflict. Resulting in so many desperate people forced to flee their homes and homelands.

And I can't think about refugees without referencing the regular poison pen front pages of British tabloids such as The Daily Mail.

These "news" papers persist in referring to refugees in a consistently negative and sub-

¹ <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/sep/09/armstrade.uk>

humanising language, all too reminiscent of the Greek Golden Dawn and their "filth" slogan.

When you promoted Basic Income in Hackney South, what sort of reactions did you get? Did the traditional political parties engage with you in debate or did they try to ignore it?

I was always pleased that during any live hustings, I was alphabetically positioned next to the local Green candidate. So I knew I had at least one Basic Income ally in the room.

The trouble with most career politicians is that they are programmed to habitually distort and mutate their thoughts and words, to fit the narrow and unimaginative limitations of their party policies.

However, as I mentioned previously, in 2015 it is certainly my impression that a large number of people are at least now familiar with the idea of a UBI. Probably the most common question asked now, tends to be around how a Basic Income would be financed.

And we'll finish with the habitual: what are you going to do next? Do your plans for the future include any stuff on Basic Income?

It often seems to me that many of the people in my life who are regularly unhappy, they also tend to be people who spend time thinking and worrying about their future. While I confess that I rarely ever bother thinking about mine. I often half joke that I'm probably nothing more than a contemporary barbarian. All too easily pleased with the now.

But this particular period of my life is without a doubt a crossroads of sorts that could have manifested in a number of significant directions. So I can tell you what I am definitely not now doing.

I'm not now recommitting to taking my clothes off for another indefinite period. I had considered it might have been necessary for me to lend active support to the Naked Rambler Stephen Gough. But after a decade or so of unjustifiable imprisonment, he seems to at last now be living a free range existence.

And I am also not now going to stand in the London Mayor elections in May 2016. I seriously considered it.

Instead, spontaneously, I currently find myself in this magnificent city, Athens.

And without a doubt there'll be new Basic Income paste-ups appearing both here in Athens and in London. Coming Soon.