



## **An Experimental Journey Capturing Voices On Trains Across Europe**

This January and February I took part in two experimental journeys on Europe's railways with my collaborator, composer pianist and artist Lola Perrin. We created a soundscape of specially-recorded voices of business travellers to blend with Perrin's recent piano composition 'Let the birds have the skies'. This was integrated with a stop-motion experience of landscapes, railway architecture and travellers we encountered on trains and stations from Brussels to Davos, Switzerland and from Toulouse to Seville and back, travelling through France, Belgium, Germany and Spain. This was an artistic process which aimed to address the brief given us by Transport and Environment's Travel Smart<sup>1</sup> campaign to "bring home the realities

---

<sup>1</sup> <https://travelsmartcampaign.org/>

of the environmental challenges we face, particularly those arising from unsustainable transport modes and business travel...to encourage people to think on a deeper level about their impact on the environment and equity, and to inspire change; imagine new actions and new ways of being more compatible with the rest of the planet". We purchased two month Interrail tickets and roamed Europe collecting our material, taking in the disparities and quirks of the rail system which still exist despite the best intentions of the rail companies.

We collected visual material from all the train journeys we took from over around 6,500 kilometres of train travel on TGV, Thalys, ICE, SBB, and AVE trains. We took sound samples from business travellers on Thalys and AVE trains, as these were the train companies who gave permission to do the project on their trains. We were declined permission by DB and SBB. Permissions were still pending from SNCF and Portuguese Railways as I write and we are hoping to get some samples from arriving passengers at the Eurostar lounge in Brussels. The artwork process in this project is one in which the attempt to get permissions are part of the art and the letters of permission from the two companies who kindly gave it will be displayed in the final exhibition as evidence of this. When approaching passengers, wearing lanyards issued by Transport and Environment saying we were artist laureates, we took pains to emphasise that we were artists and not market researchers and that the passengers responding would be anonymous. We tried to approach people who we thought might be business travellers not tourists. Many people responded enthusiastically and when we apologised for maybe distracting one passenger from their work she responded by saying she liked to be distracted.

This project followed on from not only Lola Perrin's climate activist work, for example 'Play Piano For The Planet' in which numerous tail-coated pianists played on a bicycle-powered grand piano wheeled past a police cordon, blocking traffic during a climate action<sup>2</sup>, but from my 2019 rail-sea journeys between Toulouse and

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://vimeo.com/618032444>

Finland to undertake an artists residency supported by the Kone Foundation. I made five three-day rail and sea journeys between Toulouse and Turku and documented them in the article commissioned by Kone 'Slow Travel - A Privilege Not A Sacrifice'<sup>3</sup>. In that article I made the case that "artists, curators and writers are 'influencers'. Their behaviour is not just the behaviour of individuals but their decisions have wider effects than just that in their own lives. A recent study in Nature Magazine<sup>4</sup> showed scientifically that individual examples of people (solar panel users) taking action had a greater effect on the rest of the community than when the example came from institutions...So if a large number of artists, writers or curators requested that directors of festivals, biennales, exhibitions and even art fairs, pay for rail travel in Europe as opposed to flying, this would start to have an accumulated effect on the world of the arts". This project gave us a chance to extend this principle to random business travellers at large, not just people in the art business.

Transport and Environment suggested, at short notice, we might go to the World Economic Forum in Davos at the start of the project, and despite being too late to get accreditation we took up the challenge, arriving in Davos as delegates arrived. We positioned ourselves on a public street outside the registration centre, standing in the snow and asked our questions. "How long would you take the train as opposed to the plane? What should change to make you (and your colleagues) increase the time you would spend on the train?" We found that the best time to approach WEF delegates was as they exited the registration centre, as this was the first port of call after having travelled from around the world, and they were more relaxed having received their accreditation. We got varied responses but mainly found it possible able to engage with this demographic, some of whom may even have arrived by private plane. Davos is of course a highly-managed security zone

---

<sup>3</sup> <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/stories/slow-travel-a-privilege-not-a-sacrifice/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41560-021-00888-5>



and as we were there thousands of police and troops were being bussed in to manage any protests, as had happened in the past. We took advantage of being there early as later we would have needed passes to move around the town. Even so, although our questions were innocent and well-intentioned, security personnel from the WEF came out to keep us under observation.

We got some interesting quotes here from delegates after they registered. People at the WEF were very aware of the climate issue and several had been to COP26 last year: "Quite a long way, actually, because I love the train - it's a lot less hassle. So, I mean, for example, last year when the climate conference, COP26 was in Glasgow, I took the train up there and back. And if it's a sleeper even further. I mean, if we can bring sleepers back across Europe, that would just be so amazing. Getting on the train, going city centre to city centre, sleeping and then waking up where you need to be would just be amazing".

People were also pragmatic about integrating flying with the train: "Yeah, it's very difficult. I think here there's a real opportunity for the airline system to start integrating trains into their booking system. You can imagine if the airline started being part of an integrated travel system with rail and with planes. So you do the longer leg intercontinental by plane, but then you can do the sort of shorter legs within a continent by train. It would be amazing. And if you could upgrade the whole booking system, it would make a huge difference. It shouldn't be that difficult to do".

A delegate from Bangladesh pointed out that you could not look at the issue in isolation: "I think it's quite attractive. You can't look at it in isolation. And say, okay, X-number of hours is why I would travel. I think that's not just for business. But even for personal reasons, it's like twenty thousand different considerations, right? If you're traveling with a family versus not, right? Like, our time is of the essence. Let's say, for example, if you're trying to like, if I have to make a family emergency, my family lives in Bangladesh, I can't take a train there. Like, even if I want to. So I think you can't look at it in isolation and say, okay, this is what I would do".

Returning from Davos, we took a deep breath and did our first train interviews with random passengers on the Thalys train between Cologne and Brussels. Trains are highly regulated environments, although perhaps not so much as planes. In each case, not only did we have to get letters of permission for specific trains but we had to approach the train managers and get their clearance to work on their train. We are not naturally extrovert people, so this was not exactly an easy task. However, in this case we were welcomed by the Thalys train staff warmly. We chose to work in the buffet car after observing the atmosphere on the outward journey (we had not got permission for this, yet). It was decided that Lola Perrin should initially approach passengers, as in particular, women travellers would find this less threatening. People were relaxed and happy to talk about their experience taking the train. One quirk of this journey was that there were still COVID-19 mask rules in Germany but





not in Belgium. So after Aachen, everyone relaxed and took off their masks! We decided to leave the interviews until we crossed the border.

Here are some samples of the responses: "Basically, trains should function like the metro system in Paris or London. A lot of trains and at all possible times. For example, this one, this line here is stopping at 19.43 and it's between Cologne and Brussels, which is kind of very early to stop a line between two cities that are so close". "I was traveling over twenty years by plane. And going to Paris might be an hour longer by train. But the stress factor is much more convenient. Or there's much less stress involved. We go downtown straight without arriving somewhere forty kilometres in the middle of nowhere. Prepared to travel? Yes, we are prepared to travel far by train". "It's funny because my friends actually already like to take the train and I'm the one who likes to take the plane, so I'm the odd one out. I think for a lot of people, train is still the better option and they like it because it's much faster to get in and out rather than at the plane. But yeah, I think it has to do with space

for me, if there would be more space or if it would be comfortable, I would prefer to take the train". "Climate change, obviously. My youngest son has never been in a plane. He's seven years old. And we frequently travel all over Europe by train. It's not the train company's job, I don't think. I think we need further legislation on fossil fuels and on all the kind of what is it? Kerosene? Proper taxing. And also, I guess we need to stop the airplane companies to stop lobbying as the same for the car companies. I mean, everybody who's frequently and using lots of fossil fuels, we need to stop giving them a voice so much".

Transport and Environment were keen for our project to engage with Southern Europe, so we chose the route Toulouse-Barcelona-Madrid-Seville and back for our second journey. We had originally planned to go to Portugal, but the connections between Spain and Portugal are so bad (three changes on regional trains) that we realised we would not be able to engage with business travellers. For this journey, having broken the ice on Thalys, we decide to introduce a micro-performance involving one of us presenting a vintage suitcase containing two coloured envelopes each containing more artistic questions, which participants could choose. These were also translated into Spanish: "If you could graffiti the sky what would you write?" "In your wildest dreams, how could you or me or anybody get around the planet if we're not going to use planes?"

People responded well to these, with answers like: "Maybe I will not write something. I will describe a bull. And a bull is a symbol of Spain. Okay. That's what I do. Like, aggravated because it's so artistic and represents our country". "If I could graffiti the sky, I would write, what is the limit?" "With water, the new energy should be water and even more through the air, like a plane with water energy, because you don't have to do roads. You would better to protect the environment, and you will use really sustainable energy. But that's a dream". "I will use my kids wildest dream. And he's always said that we should develop teleportation".



The AVE train between Barcelona and Madrid is clearly a European success story, the quickest being two and a half hours and completely rendering the plane route less practical. According to a RENFE press release celebrating 15 years of this service: "Over the past 15 years, RENFE moved more than 140 million passengers between Madrid and Barcelona. The company estimates the CO2 savings to be in the range of 4.7 million tonnes<sup>5</sup>". These trains go at least every 30 minutes and at peak hours averaging every fifteen minutes. They are popular, too. As our Interrail pass could only allow us to buy reservations in Spanish stations, we had to wait nearly two hours on Barcelona Sants station on arrival as the previous trains were full. People on this train seemed to think two and a half hours were a good payoff.

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.railtech.com/infrastructure/2023/02/20/renfe-marks-15-years-of-high-speed-rail-between-madrid-and-barcelona/>



"Well, to Barcelona, Valencia, Malaga, Sevilla. Yeah. It's two hours and a half for travel".

People were positive, but here is the elephant in the room: "I just think flying is horrible. I think everyone if there's a chance to take a train, you take a train. It was huge. It allows me to interact with people to move to do something. And it could allow to do something for it. Because I think trains have to be more accessible. There's countries where choice of trains are very good there's many other countries where they aren't. And I think the moment you start crossing borders, getting even more complicated because you get into dealing with different train systems. And then I think it becomes a matter of timing. Like can I spend twenty four hours on the train versus four hours on flying? You know, I think timing and efficiency will play its part a bit more". This passenger could be talking about the previous journey across borders we had taken to get into Spain's rail system, We had come on the Paris-Barcelona train, picking it up from Narbonne. There are only two of these a day! And they stop everywhere.

This is the downside of these successful flagship routes such as the the AVE and Thalys. According to the Euractiv website in 2022: "On Wednesday, the French company announced that it would not renew the agreement with its Spanish counterpart. The deal reached in 2008 that started working in 2013 is based on sharing the international revenue and the costs of operating routes between France and Spain. SNCF had operations Barcelona-Paris, while RENFE had Madrid-Marseille and Barcelona-Lyon. The French company argues that the deal is not affordable anymore as the traffic on the France-Spain line has dropped 72% in 2020 and 59% in 2021<sup>6</sup>". There is no viable train service between cities on the Mediterranean coast between Barcelona and Marseille. SNCF is able to operate its cut-price OUIGO service to Madrid, but it would appear RENFE is completely cut out of operating across the border. This profit-based disparity is not the European

---

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short\\_news/sncf-breaks-agreement-with-renfe-for-railway-between-spain-and-france/](https://www.euractiv.com/section/politics/short_news/sncf-breaks-agreement-with-renfe-for-railway-between-spain-and-france/)

transport vision as I would understand it and only benefits airline companies and car manufacturers. As we know from my country of birth, the UK, in the 1950's at the time of the Beeching Report<sup>7</sup> which dramatically cut railway lines in favour of the car and highway building, if you gradually deliberately reduce a train service so it then loses passengers, in time, then the argument can be officially made to close the line completely.

Also, the Thalys is great, but it's a complete monopoly, like Eurostar, which means you cannot get a walk-on service between Brussels and Paris any longer, even on stopping regional trains. Reservations are mandatory, making the train more like an airline. In fact last year Thalys and Eurostar merged and I understand all the services will be renamed Eurostar<sup>8</sup>. The passenger we interviewed above was right, we need European trains to be like a metro system, where you are free to buy your ticket and step on regardless of the train time. Deutsch Bahn, where reservations are not required but possible, get this right.

There is also a conflict over cross-border night trains between France and Spain. In an article titled "French and Spanish 'Railway War' is Blocking Night Trains" an unusual proposal by campaigners has been announced: "A new Cerbère-Portbou donkey service to extend the night train to Portbou. Since July 1 2022, the Paris-Portbou night train can no longer enter the latter station of Portbou (Spain), and ends its route in the previous station of Cerbère (France), with no possibility to cross the border. Mobilised on July 2, the Perpignan-Portbou Train Users Association (UTPP) valiantly proposed a new inter-border donkey service to carry passengers' luggage across the mountain to Portbou station, which is barely 1km away as the crow flies<sup>9</sup>". Amusing as this idea may be, the ironic reference to the traditional utilisation of the donkey for transport in Europe for millennia really highlights how it

---

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beeching\\_cuts](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Beeching_cuts)

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.sncf.com/en/sncf-voyageurs/thalys-rebrands-as-eurostar>

<sup>9</sup> <https://back-on-track.eu/french-and-spanish-railways-war-is-blocking-night-trains/>



is contingent on railway companies in a modern Europe to harmonise transport links across borders, not hamper them.

I live in France and enjoy using SNCF a lot, so maybe it is more natural to be more critical of my home train company, but I find it hard to understand why a company so heavily subsidised by the government only concentrates on profitable flagship routes like Paris-Marseille, Lyon and Bordeaux in terms of frequency. There are only seven direct trains a day between Paris and Toulouse, as opposed to thirty flights (twenty-five Air France, five Easyjet, excluding other companies). SNCF have finally announced the building of a long-awaited high speed track between Bordeaux and Toulouse, which means in about five to six years the situation will improve but until then short-haul planes will keep whizzing between Toulouse and Paris every half hour. It only takes four and a half hours for the fastest train on the route, but Toulouse boasts of being the 'World Capital of Aeronautics'<sup>10</sup> and have massively enlarged the airport so there is a strong political impetus to keep flying there despite the effect on the climate. Hopefully some of the new private ventures,

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.toulouse-visit.com/why-toulouse-world-capital-aeronautics>

such as the proposed cross-country service from Bordeaux to Lyon could help break this deadlock.

Moving back to our journey, we were fortunate to encounter some people working in the cultural sector in Seville and Barcelona, to add to our soundscape. The creative industries are an important business, so in widening our project we won't want to exclude them. Here's an art curator on emphasising personal and emotional reasons to travelling at all rather than have a video call: "For me day by day I'm trying not to take more flights, no more trains. But when you need to have a good relationship between countries, you have to not be there for culture - only to make love with a person is the only reason to go there. All the rest business, lectures, connections we can make by internet. But when you need to be very close to a person, you have to take a train, a car or a flight. I prefer a train because you have more time to know where you want to go. To travel, to move my body, my body and my flesh is because I need to be with other people. Not with one screen, but almost all my relations are only possible by screen. It's enough when I make a lecture, when I make a political meeting but when I have to trust in people to be together, to have a drink, to say I love you or to kiss I have to move my body".

On our final journeys by train, this time going straight to Barcelona from Seville via Madrid, we got some interesting responses, which bear out the problematic emphasis by train companies on the flagship high speed routes. The way business travellers are most concerned about time as well as the experience: "Yes, I guess we are all quite conscious now about climate change. So I guess I would be all for traveling on the train if it were easier, because I live in Barcelona, but I know some people live in regions where it's not that easy to access a high speed train. So for me, the conscience as a whole, as a society, is to reduce the carbon footprint and then the better service of the train". We also heard evidence about the way business travellers are most concerned about time as well as the experience: "Well, it depends on my personal motives. Because if I have time, I can relax, I can

see the landscape, the view, the nature. I prefer train, but nowadays we live, like, in a very fast world, and we want to get to our destination just in an hour. So we don't have time to appreciate what we should do. That's good. I prefer the plane. Yes, because you can go away more. Far away". Lola Perrin commented when hearing this: "It seems that many of these travellers see time as a currency, because business success is measured by the stock market and growth. We need a different approach to measuring business success, as we are running out of time for human and other species' survival on this planet".

On arrival in Barcelona we had the opportunity to record responses of another artist and curator. The curator on the challenges of changing travel habits with funding in the art world: "Yeah, the problem is, of course, the pressure is economic because it's how many days you spend outside and you spend outside of the office. That's the problem that I have in my work. I think they need time. I mean, the main reason to use airplanes is time. And then I think it's easy to make some encouragement. I mean, for instance, we are working in European projects, for instance, and I think that's good politics, where they cover trains, but they do not cover flights. So, for instance, I've been part of a project in Brussels where they say, okay, we pay for the train ticket, we invite you, and we pay for the plane for the train ticket, but you can come by plane, but then you pay for it. That's good politics. I like that".

When I started to apply a no-fly policy to my professional work in 2018 I found a number of difficulties that affected my career as a freelance curator. I turned down invitations to Korea and New York and a few other places, as they would involve flying. On the up-side when the Finnish Institute in London offered me the cost of a flight to Helsinki to discuss a funding application, I told the director they would have to pay three times as much for me to go by rail and sea. To my amazement they agreed. This meant I had already worked out the logistics of the journey when I was offered an artists residency at the Saari Residency in Turku, the following year, when I made my five three-day journeys, which led to the commissioning of the



article on slow travel. That residency has just put out a new call, as I write, which states their new policy: "We encourage those coming to the residence from outside Finland to apply for a grant for ecological travel to cover their travel expenses. Those arriving from Global South can apply for flight support and visa fees (processing and possible travel). Otherwise, we do not fund flying or other unsustainable means of transportation<sup>11</sup>". This did not exist when I was there, so we can actually see a positive policy change.

The interview with the artist from Slovenia shows that there is more work to be done in other regions, not so well served by high speed trains. "My limit is kind of twelve hours. But then it's always this kind of question of privileged areas of being in the train or being able to do that. Because originally I'm coming from the Balkans and traveling there by train is a bit more harder and a bigger investment because they are slower, less connected and not working. It always it depends on geolocation, I would say. For me it's like this - if I'm alone, it's harder to be in the night trains for me because they're not secure. There are lots of reasons and situations that can be very uncomfortable, especially for female travellers. So the security should be taking better ways how to navigate that. And the second thing is also as I mentioned before, the geolocation is very important to have in mind when we speak about this kind of sustainable traveling. Because, yes, you can do this in the areas where the cities, villages or places are very well connected and where this is not happening. Then sometimes the travelling with plane, buses or cars can give you the security, the timing and comfortable way of traveling. Also because, yes, we all know the planet is first, but sometimes we should not forget also ourselves. I'm not saying we have to do it only for our own comfort, but I think that it's very important to keep in mind both situations". Both Lola Perrin and I have experienced those less than perfect trains in the Balkans, her travelling from London to Belgrade and back for a concert and me as part of an artists group

---

<sup>11</sup> <https://koneensaatio.fi/en/saari-residence/ecologically-sustainable-residency-programme/#slow-travel>

travelling from Linz to Istanbul. It would be interesting to take the project further afield in Europe in the future, such as the overland rail journey to Greece.

The written responses to the Travel Smart newsletter questionnaire also address the lack of joined-up thinking by the train companies: "If train network/timetable was more joined-up. For example it is very hard to make links to Lille for London, as trains from nearby that stop at Lille are too rare. also too many fragments and changes needed. It makes it impossible. Also, I would be keen to use ferries rather than planes, but instead of growing the rail network, SNCF is cutting links - eg there is now no train to Roscoff (to get to Plymouth)". Time and quality of experience was also an issue: "It is mainly psychological: group pressure helps but also the notion that travel by train has many charms of really seeing a lot, having plenty of time to work or being away from it all". Difficulties in getting the workplace to accept the financial aspects of rail travel: "If my workplace would make it easier when registering receipts and if there were clearer guidelines about sustainable journeys through Europe. It is often very complicated as I have to combine different tickets. I also need to guarantee a alternative option if something goes wrong during the train journey (missed connection, delay...). For train trips through Europe that require two-three travel days, I need to have the possibility to overnight at a hotel and that the costs are covered by my company as a part of the travel expenses". And finally, from Ireland, a suggestion for the future: "I work in the academic sector. An useful incentive would be to encourage sustainable travels as part of the research project. This could be a parameter when deciding to provide grants for a research project. Some fundings in the project could be allocated to sustainable journeys when meetings and workshops are organised. We often change in location. We are an island nation (Ireland), it is not possible to travel to mainland Europe by train".

In preparing for this project, Lola Perrin and I undertook the somewhat labyrinthine process of making the many reservations that were needed to be added to our Interrail passes. To negotiate this, at times tortuous process, we are highly grateful

to The Man In Seat 61<sup>12</sup>, our guide to the underworld of Interrail and train company websites. A very helpful ticket office staff member for RENFE, who did all our reservations for us, himself ruefully admitted that he himself could see no sense in the way you have to make reservations in person in Spain, rather than online. Many thanks to all the welcoming rail company staff like him who made this project possible.



Rob La Frenais. March 2023.

Photos by Lola Perrin and Rob La Frenais, except the one of donkeys, from the Euractive website

---

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.seat61.com/>

