

Edinburgh International Book Festival 2023 – Jeremy Deller

Jeremy Deller isn't afraid to tell it like it is; he's been doing just that for over 30 years, making art works that challenge us all to think differently.

Now he's written a book *Art is Magic**, and he's here, (rather appropriately) in the West Court of Edinburgh College of Art, to talk about it with *The Guardian's* chief culture writer, Charlotte Higgins.

'Did you learn anything from writing your book?'

'No! Only that I hate writing. It was like I was dying and my innards were splashing onto the desk. Writing is very, very, difficult.'

Born in London and educated at Dulwich College, the Courtauld Institute and Sussex University, Deller attributes his interest in art and culture at least partly to childhood visits to museums. After an Art History degree he was, he says, 'virtually unemployable', and drifted into a few jobs before he started making art. He's since won the Turner Prize and has represented Britain at the Venice Biennale.

In 1986, as a first year undergraduate, he managed to get an invitation to the opening night of an exhibition of new work by one of his then idols, Andy Warhol. A friend of Warhol's invited Deller and his friend to meet the group at the Ritz, and when one of the party suggested that the two of them should fly to New York that summer to help at The Factory, Deller knew they had to go. The experience changed his life, showing him that as an artist you could do whatever you wanted to do. He never looked back.

One of his first art works was *Open Bedroom* – and that's what it was, his own bedroom, hijacked for the exhibition while his unsuspecting parents were away on holiday.

Many projects have followed, most of them political in nature; the most famous may be *We're Here Because We're Here* and *The Battle of Orgreave*, both of which involved large-scale public participation, but he's also investigated music and the culture that surrounds it, from brass bands to Acid House raves.



Deller's art, says Higgins, often has a sense of puckishness and joy about it, a 'glorious mischief', and the book brings all of that together. There's no 'academic art speak' in it, it feels like it's been written to a friend. Deller agrees; he was trying to make it read as if he and his readers were sitting next to one another in a pub or café. It needed to be accessible to the public

'I wanted it to be friendly and approachable; I had in mind a slightly depressed 15 year old.'

He's not coy about the commercial aspect either – if a book is easy to read people are more likely to buy it. They have, he says, printed a lot of copies; they need to sell them somehow.

Fan culture, Higgins observes, is very evident in *Art is Magic*

'It's like a scrapbook full of stuff squirreled away by a 15

year old'

Deller finds fandom of any kind fascinating. He's been one himself, and thinks fans make bands perform better – but it's not only bands who have them; English Civil War re-enactors such as The Sealed Knot are fans of history, and Deller finds them just as interesting. At Beyoncé's recent concert he enjoyed watching the audience as much as hearing the music

'And it's the same in an art gallery; after half an hour you're looking at the other people, not the art.'

In projects such as *The Battle of Orgreave* and *We're Here Because We're Here*, both of which are based around conflict, Deller says that once the action has started he needs to keep a distance, 'otherwise I'd have a heart attack or a stroke!'

He and his team will have done all the preparatory work, but once things are set in motion they have to relinquish control and let it happen. *The Battle of Orgreave* is famously based on the 1984 violent confrontation between pickets and police during the miners' strike. Deller recreated it with one thousand people, half of whom were ex-miners, the rest battle re-enactors. About 300 of the miners had taken part in the original battle; he had to convince them to revisit history by sharing his plans with them. The re-enactors, however, were told far less, he wanted them to confront the miners, to re-enact an industrial – and political – class civil war.

Once the miners were back with their friends they started enjoying themselves; Deller noted their camaraderie and also the vibe of male power around them.

'The re-enactors were terrified of them; we had to mix them up in the end because the re-enactors themselves threatened to go on strike – which was ironic, as most of them are quite right-wing!'

(He tested this latter theory by buying a wide range of Sunday papers and seeing which ones each group chose. He was right.)

Deller hated history at school, with all its kings, queens and dates; it's social history that interests him.

'I'm glad you're not an historian' says Higgins, 'because you make history so much more interesting.'



Jeremy Deller at EIBF: (c) Robin Mair

Deller has also addressed connections between industrial decline and rave culture. In 1997 he collaborated with the Stockport-based Fairley Brass Band and Rodney Newton in *Acid Brass*, a project that fused traditional brass band music with Acid House anthems and Detroit techno. He sees all of these genres as folk art rooted in specific communities; he even drew a flow chart (*A History of the World*, [1997]) to show how they all intertwined.

The first public appearance of the work took place in Liverpool and was recorded as Acid Brass's first album.

They're still performing it now.

Twenty years later Deller was asked to make a film about the club scene in London in the 1980s; he thought that would be boring. Instead he wanted to make one about the relationship between politics and culture. In particular he wanted to show that Acid House was central to the huge social changes affecting the whole of the UK at that time

'(It was) a ritualistic dance on the ruins of our culture.'

He spent a day with pupils in a North London school. By chance none of these young people had parents who had been born in the UK, so they had no idea about life here in the 80s. He showed them archive film of both the miners' strike and various raves. The film became *Everybody in the Place: An Incomplete History of Britain 1984-1992* (2018.) The pupils were amazed. Deller took shots of their reactions. *The Battle of Orgreave* was incomprehensible to them – one asked if the men were striking because of climate change.

To illustrate rave culture he showed footage of people trying to get to Stonehenge and being handcuffed by police. He also included the reactions of some passers-by, and says he was as surprised as the pupils to find that older people, far from being outraged at the ravers, were disgusted by the police

'They'd been in the war and they'd seen authoritarian regimes. An older man in a regimental tie defended the young people. A woman in her thirties abused them. Of course she's now a Brexit voter.'

The war in Iraq is another conflict that Deller has addressed. In 2008 he was asked, along with several other prominent artists, to submit a proposal for the 4th plinth in Trafalgar Square. Deller's submission was the remains of a civilian car that had been bombed in Baghdad, which he planned to let rot

for 18 months as evidence of an ongoing war in which he felt we were all implicated, but which didn't directly affect most people in the UK.

When his proposal was rejected he instead toured the car around the USA in the company of an Iraqi citizen and an American soldier

'We weren't overtly political, I didn't want to make propaganda; we just talked to people'

They handed out flyers explaining what had happened to the car, which Deller had been told had been blown up in the cultural heart of Baghdad. The explosion had killed over a hundred people. The reactions they received were perhaps surprising; the people who were crossset about it all were the anti-war factions, who felt it wasn't sufficiently extreme. But most people were polite, though Deller says they couldn't do the tour now

'Obama had just been elected, it was a calmer time...the US has changed.'

As with many of his projects, Deller does not consider the car itself to be the art work

'When it went into a gallery that drained the meaning out of it. The car is a carcass.'

It's now in the Imperial War Museum, where he feels it at least fits with the IWM's modern focus on the victims of war rather than the perpetrators.

Why, asks Higgins, does Deller call it 'the most irresponsible piece of art I've ever made'?

Because, he replies, he put all three of the touring party in danger; they could have been shot. The Iraqi had already been

in enough life-threatening situations, he didn't need any more. Fortunately nothing happened, even in the southern states. The point of the tour was to initiate conversations, and it did; people learned a lot, especially from the Iraqi, who had been denied any formal education under Saddam Hussein's regime and was self-taught to a high level

'He was changing people's minds, one by one.'

Large groups of men like stag parties and football fans on trains frighten Deller; why then, asks Higgins, is so much of his work centered around masculinity?

'I'm probably more at ease around men...I end up making stuff about them, they interest me.'

Higgins was one of only two journalists – and the only woman – invited to the rehearsals for Deller's *We're Here Because We're Here* project. His plan was to have men dressed as World War One soldiers to appear unannounced,

'Moving through modern Britain like a virus through the body'

He wanted them to be in high-visibility locations, on roundabouts, near motorways, at railway stations. They didn't approach people; if people came up to them they did not speak but instead handed them one of 19,000 cards with the name and details of a (regionally specific) soldier who had died on the first day of the battle. Deller spoke to every one of the participants, and gave talks about the project around the country

'You need to be straightforward with people...no one has got annoyed with us yet.'

A work Higgins says she particularly enjoyed was *Sacrilege*, a co-commission between Glasgow International Festival of Visual

Art and the Mayor of London, consisting of an inflatable version of Stonehenge for people to bounce on. It appeared in Glasgow in 2012.

'Stonehenge is an imaginative space for artists because we know so little about it; you can make work that fills in the gaps'

Deller has said that he avoids nostalgia in his art at all costs; he wants to root it in the now. How then, asks an audience member, does he achieve this when much of his work is about identities compared across generations? He replies that he knows all the 'traps of the middle-aged man'

'Vinyl records, talking about old clubs and past gigs. The minutiae of 12" singles, the packaging. It's like previous generations talking about steam trains. It's dangerous.'

But Jeremy Deller seems unlikely ever to wallow in the past; instead he interrogates it rigorously to uncover what it can tell us about the present and the future. In the process he creates art to ignite debate, to challenge us all to look at the world clearly, and to do so without any hint of the dreaded rose-coloured glasses.

Art is Magic by Jeremy Deller is published by Cheerio.

The Edinburgh International Book Festival continues at Edinburgh College of Art until Monday 28th August.

*He thought of a lot of titles before this one – 'What's the Point of Art?', 'Call the Midlife Crisis', 'That's Not Art' – but says he wanted something positive, *and* something that'd sell the books.



Jeremy Deller PHOTO Robin Mair