

The Crowd Teaser

He's recreated the Battle of Orgreave and invented the world's most expensive cocktail. Will Jeremy Deller win the Turner Prize?

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At the end of September 2004, Jeremy Deller walked for 10 minutes from his small workroom in Highbury, north London, to an editing suite in Islington, there to meet with the woman who had the most difficult job in show business. A film director called Linda Zuck had the task of making a five-minute movie that would encapsulate a decade of Deller's work, a challenge one might compare with squeezing a zoo into a horse box.

At 38, Deller is the youngest person on this year's Turner Prize shortlist, and the favourite at William Hill. He is slightly elfin in appearance, with a chiseled face and a black slick of hair, and his favoured look - white jeans, bold-stripe T-shirt, silk patterned scarf - is raffish Seventies Chelsea bohemian.

The film he was about to see, which will be shown on Channel 4 and on a continuous loop at Tate Britain, describes an artist who does 'social interventions' - sometimes playful, occasionally challenging, mostly unexpected. It opens with his most famous work, a reconstruction three years ago of the Battle of Orgreave, and then hurtles back to his idea of asking a brass band to play acid-house tunes. From there it's but a sprint through his cocktail project with Peter Stringfellow and his street parade in Spain and his interview with a coffee-shop manager who serves George Bush in Texas.

Deller settled down to watch the film in a slightly damp room in a converted mews house, and he soon saw himself explaining that he had spent \$2,000 on five acres of desert near Death Valley. He said he could have spent this money framing eight photographs, but at least now he owned a little piece of America. When the film ended, he paused for a moment and said: 'Fine. It's fine. But the thing about that Stringfellow's stuff is that it's done with someone else, so I wonder whether we could credit him.'

He worried a little about some of the captions describing his work, and argued that 'it's good not explaining everything. I'd rather have some mystery.' He then watched the film again, trying to identify an acid-brass song for copyright clearance, changing the commentary accompanying the Spanish street parade ('It wasn't really a commission,' he said. 'I forgot to ask for any money. I don't suppose I could ask for it retrospectively?') and then he wondered how best to avoid sounding like a prat when he talked about his American land grab. 'It just makes me sound like any old conceptual artist who bought some land and did nothing with it. But it's part of a whole guidebook I made about California, and it was really the end of a treasure hunt, and I made an album of this man playing

banjo music on it.'

It may not come as a shock to learn that Deller was not a very good conventional art student at school. He could neither draw nor paint, and his teacher advised against art school at all costs. He grew up fairly happy and very middle-class in Dulwich, his father employed by the local council, his mother by the NHS. He attended Dulwich College and then went to the Courtauld Institute to study the history of art. When he gives a talk about his work now, he often surprises people by beginning with slides of Caravaggio.

His real influences were a little more contemporary. 'When I was 20 I was at an art opening for the Warhol self-portrait show in London and I was introduced to him,' Deller tells me when we meet at a cafe in Hampstead two days after the film screening. 'Then I went to New York with a friend and hung out for two weeks at the Factory, which turned my mind inside out. When you're a certain age, Warhol is everything. I thought: "This is what it's all about as an artist - you can do anything you like!"'

He completed his art-history course, but failed to get the expected job in an auction house or museum; he thinks people could tell his heart wasn't in it. He then did a lot of not working. 'I lived at home until I was 31. My parents were very understanding, though not terribly sure what was going on.'

Deller's entry into the art world was an installation at home in his mid-twenties. His parents went on holiday for a fortnight, and in their absence Deller removed their pictures from the walls and replaced them with creations of his own. 'You treat this place like a hotel' one piece read. The exhibition was called Open Bedroom, and a few friends came round to admire the tributes to Keith Moon and the scattered song lyrics ('Every day I look at the world from my window...'). The work was removed shortly before his parents' return, and the first they knew of it was four years ago, when Deller published some photographs of the event in a book.

This book, *Life Is To Blame For Everything* (£12, salon3), is a wonderful document, a collection of seven years of subversive Deller diversions. I looked at it and one name sprung to mind: Joe Orton. Deller is not one to cut up and deface library books - too polite an upbringing, too respectful of public property - but the will is there. There are posters of exhibitions he would have liked to have visited (Stephen Patrick Morrissey: *A Life in Words*, at the British Museum) and signs on student noticeboards he would have liked to have walked by (*Video Cameras and Car Radios Stolen to Order*, Ring Kev). One piece consists of a long streaming transcript of tout talk he recorded at some personal risk outside concert venues: 'I'll buy or sell, I'll buy or sell anybody want tickets I'll buy or sell, tickets tonight buy or sell. I'll buy or sell for Anthrax. Buy or sell tickets anyone spare tickets I'll buy or sell for Anthrax tickets for Anthrax...' Occasionally Deller plays this tape back outside his own shows.

His first successful commercial work involved T-shirts. He liked the fact they were cheap to produce and moved about on their owners, providing the opportunity for hundreds of people to see his work each day. Some of his creations had messages ('My Drug Shame', 'My Booze Hell'), some played with mod imagery (Keith Moon again) and some suggested his favoured reading material. He has a photograph of Richey Edwards, once of the Manic Street

Preachers, wearing one of his creations with the first few lines of Philip Larkin's 'This Be The Verse'.

Deller used to sell the shirts himself when he worked in the Covent Garden shop Sign of the Times, one of many jobs which paid for his small public defiances. He placed a Smiths lyric between the bunnykins and the mouses on the Guardian's Valentines pages: 'I am human and I need to be loved, just like everybody else does'. He ran an 'In Memoriam' notice in the Daily Telegraph for one of his heroes: 'Epstein, Brian Samuel, 27 Aug 1967. Remembered this day and every day. J'.

He placed a nightclub mirrorball in the vilest alley in Liverpool. He wrote of these works: 'Whereas "official" public art tends to be monumental and embarrassed by its surroundings, an intervention is often ephemeral and celebratory of its environment, even if it is of illicit urban pleasures.' So he put a sticker on the bumper of a police car which read 'I (TM) Joyriding'.

Is the bumper sticker art? Or the bumper sticker on the police car? Or the photograph commemorating its placement? Deller is not overly concerned with these things, justifying his work in terms of the pleasure it brings and the discussion it provokes. I asked him whether his work was rooted in any type of manifesto. He said, 'I'm too all over the place for that. My thought process is ... well, one of my favourite quotes is by Lenin: "Everything is connected to everything else." I'm more into the social relationships, rather than the political.' On another occasion he said: 'My work is quite slight, but in a good way.'

His most hedonistic venture occurred at Stringfellow's nightclub in Leicester Square in 1996. Deller worked with his friend Alan Kane and Peter Stringfellow to create the Butterfly Ball, the world's most expensive cocktail, a large silver bowl of fruit, mixers and spirits that cost £250 and was enjoyed by many people in unison sucking on straws to the soundtrack of Carmina Burana.

'We weren't into taking the piss,' Deller claims. 'We were really into Peter. He knows there's a ridiculousness about his life. He said, "I'm an artist, too", performing in this world that isn't real.' During the evening, guests at the club were also given cards suggesting a possible chat-up line: 'Didn't I used to go out with you?' 'I think you have been looking for me.' 'Could you buy me a drink?' Some guests got Peter Stringfellow's own favourite: 'Would you like to see my Jacuzzi?'

Deller says he takes great care not to exploit those he works with, and he tries not to bring a London arthouse sensibility to his projects. For The Battle of Orgreave, which was filmed by Mike Figgis, he spent much time winning the confidence of the miners involved in the original clash, to the point where they were willing to play policemen in his restaging. He told them he had watched the 1984 battle on television and thought it resembled a civil war or medieval slaughter - people being charged by horses and cut down in a field.

He had suggested the idea to the public-art facilitators Artangel, along with three other projects: a crazy-golf course in Bexhill-on-Sea to be designed by local people, a book of the trial transcript of a man who murdered three drug dealers in Essex, and the installation of recording studios in old people's homes to record them telling stories. Orgreave was the only one Artangel chose, and it became a triumph. There was some surprise when he wasn't nominated for the Turner

Prize that year.

His forthcoming show at Tate Britain will display predominantly serious but disparate themes. There will be a wall of photographs of memorials Deller has erected to people he feels passionate about. There are two plaques commemorating dead miners, a tribute to a cyclist knocked down near his home on Holloway Road, a bench placed near where Brian Epstein lived in Belgravia, and a woven banner made by Ed Hall to mark the docking at Tilbury of the Empire Windrush in 1948. During the show, specialists on each of the events commemorated will be present to answer questions and talk of their experiences. His Tate room will also include a large flow chart indicating the links between brass bands and acid house (incorporating Ibiza, summers of love, Clapham Common, the M25, media hysteria and advanced capitalism), a tape of his Spanish street parade filmed by children, and his film *Memory Bucket*, for which he was shortlisted for the Turner Prize and which features Deller touring Texas to talk to a survivor of the Waco slaughter, the woman who manages the coffee shop in Crawford where George Bush sometimes calls in for a hamburger with onion rings, and a long and stunning sequence in which thousands of bats escape a cave at dusk. I told Deller that, presented as a bald list in this manner, it does all come over a bit Pseuds' Corner. He said, 'Maybe at the beginning of the list you can deflate it in some way.'

He considered his reputation. 'I'm definitely part of the art world, and I know a lot of people in it, but I get my inspiration from outside. It's only when you go back to the art world that you find that everything is closed down and everyone's very conservative and people are saying, "No you can't possibly do that, you must be mad." People in London were horrified I was doing *The Battle of Orgreave*.' Michael Morris, co-director of Artangel, told me that he has rarely met an artist with as much patience as Deller, or someone so skilled in forging productive relationships. 'He's a very generous man, almost totally lacking in ego. His collaborations work so well because he hasn't got a manipulative bone in his body.'

Deller says that it can be frustrating for the business people he works with that he has very little to sell. 'I'll do a massive thing, and maybe there will be two photographs to show for it. That means that compared to most people in the art world, I'm right at the bottom in terms of earnings.'

Inevitably this is beginning to change. Since his nomination, he has found that he receives more respect and more offers of work. 'People are fishing around, perhaps thinking their stock may rise if they buy now.' But there's still not much to buy: next year he will collaborate on a touring show of British folk art, a vernacular parade of spray-painted cars, flower arrangements, gurning competitions, crop circles and images of mad sporting activities - an exhibition by people who don't normally get exhibited, curated by an artist who believes there may be nothing more important. In other hands, the very concept of such a show would be thought patronising. But Deller's devotion to his subjects is both genuine and unshakeable.

I asked what difference winning the Turner Prize could make to his life. 'Difficult to answer. More attention, although I don't think it will change what I do. But it's fantastic having the show - you enter the consciousness.' He talked of this

interview as his 'Sunday-supplement moment', something he has witnessed happening to his friends. 'You become part of that strange world,' he observed, 'even if it's just for a weekend.'

That moment is now almost over, but while it lasted, Jeremy Deller has had another 1,000 crowd-pleasing ideas.

Postscript: A few weeks later, Deller won the Turner Prize.