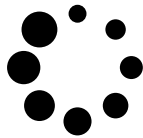


AN-ICON



History and Stories  
through Jeremy

# Deller's Performances

by Roberto Pinto

Jeremy Deller

Public art

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We're here because we're here

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# History and Stories through Jeremy Deller's Performances



ROBERTO PINTO, Università di Bologna – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1559-5759>  
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## Abstract

“I wanted to make a memorial that was alive, not an object or set of objects to make a pilgrimage to; a memorial that would come to you, that would appear in your city, town or shopping centre, intervening in your daily life.” With these words, Jeremy Deller introduces us to his *We're Here Because We're Here*, created as part of the events commemorating the First World War. With the help of Rufus Norris, director of the National Theatre, Deller organised a gigantic mass performance in which some 2,000 volunteers disguised as World War I soldiers wandered around the main cities of the United Kingdom without anyone having warned the citizens of their presence. Through this work by Deller (and by comparing it with other artistic experiences), the text intends to investigate how some contemporary artistic interventions seek to exploit the mechanisms of performance in order to reconstruct historical events not only by relying on the strategies of re-enactment, but also by resorting to an immersive relationship linked to the unexpected capable of producing extreme involvement, a process that solicits the emotional states to which, in the harshest moments of war, the community is subjected.

## Keywords

[Jeremy Deller](#)

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A memorial that would come to you, that would appear in your city, town or shopping centre, intervening in your daily life<sup>1</sup>

The topic (and issue) of monuments and the commemoration of historical events has been at the centre of debate in recent decades. There have been many discussions – in public, within more academic contexts and in art institutions – on the question: can statues or, more generally, artistic events still be – and how – valuable tools for activating processes of remembrance and re-elaboration of collective mourning or past tragic events?

There have also been many striking and spectacular interventions/performances questioning the value of these objects inherited from a past often marked by more than one dark side. We could sum the matter up with these questions: just because they are part of our tradition, are they still able to represent us? Do they have the right to continue to be considered as common symbols to be shared? Or should they be transformed into artistic artefacts that need to be historically contextualised and become part of museum heritage? (On the grounds that museums are better suited to preserving such artefacts and providing accurate descriptions of the context from which they come.) Among the many recent episodes, I believe everyone still has in mind the demolition of the monument to Edward Colston, “benefactor” and slave trader, on 7 June 2020 in Bristol, an event that took place in the emotional aftershock of the killing of George Floyd in the United States and the Black Lives Matter movement.

In today’s climate, there is no shortage of harsh criticism of institutions when they struggle to adapt to the demands of groups and communities who do not feel represented at all and, arguably, express an expectation that some of the fundamental rights of all people should be

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1 J. Deller, R. Norris, *We’re here because we’re here* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2017): 61.

respected. This is all the more so when dealing with symbols in shared and important places, such as statues and monuments. In this context, the initiative by British institutions to create a complex and cohesive project to mark the centenary of the First World War in an attempt to experiment with new ways of sharing seems to me a fascinating case study. It is clear that, whichever way one reads this historical event, one cannot ignore the fact that it was, in every respect, a long and devastating war. The initiative was a harsh testing ground for artists and institutions, given the risk of falling into the rhetoric of patriotic ideals and the celebration of the courage and daring of the participants, which had until now been indispensable prerequisites for celebrations of historical events such as this.

The UK Arts Programme was the promoter of *14-18 NOW*, a genuinely diverse and cohesive programme that saw the creation of 107 projects, the involvement of 420 artists<sup>2</sup> using different media (theatre, cinema, visual arts, poetry, music) which, in most cases, were hybrid forms. It is also worth emphasising the very high level of the artists involved; they included Gillian Wearing, John Akomfrah, Raqs Media Collective, Tobias Rehberger, Yinka Shonibare, Suzanne Lacy, Rachel Whiteread, Mark Wallinger, Ryoji Ikeda, and William Kentridge.<sup>3</sup> Many had already dealt with contemporary history and the related political problems on their journey. It should therefore be seen as an act of courage on the part of the promoting body – and of recognising the issues underlying an anniversary that could lend itself to controversy and misunderstanding – that they identified artists sensitive to cultural and political commitment who were well aware of the nature and extent of the dangers inherent in a project commemorating a war. One of the

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<sup>2</sup> According to its official website the project commissioned works from 420 artists, and engaged 35 million people. “About 14-18 Now,” 14-18 Now, <https://www.1418now.org.uk/about/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> For the full list see <https://www.1418now.org.uk/artists/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

aims of this event was, therefore, to try to change the narrative that has been made of the history told by European nations mainly through the arts, which have reconstructed and told it exclusively from the point of view of their specific national identities.<sup>4</sup>

Within this experimentation, I would like to place as a case study *We're here because we're here* by Jeremy Deller – created in collaboration with Rufus Norris – because, perhaps more than any other, it seems to me symbolic of the ability to put forward attractive solutions that directly address the role the public takes on in commemorations and make the experience as multi-sensorial and engaging as possible. Elements that are the leitmotif of *Immersed in the Work. From the Environment to Virtual Reality*. In doing so, I would at least like to point out the projects *Across and In-Between* by Suzanne Lacy<sup>5</sup> and *Pages of the Sea* by Danny Boyle,<sup>6</sup> which adopt an approach in many ways similar to the work of the London-based artist.

Throughout his career, Jeremy Deller has often chosen subjects related to history and politics and has always used a collaborative and participatory approach right from the design phase. His artistic practices have

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4 In order to clarify the position of the planners, the words of Margaret MacMillan, who, in the introduction to the volume collecting information on *14-18 Now*, explains “Governments often want to tidy up the past and impose a single unified version of what happened back then - at Waterloo, say, or the Battle of the Somme. But there can be no one view. Women, men, diverse ethnic groups, religions or social classes, start from different viewpoints, and what they see in the past may be guided by that. So marking the 100th anniversary of the First World War, that vast and destructive struggle from 1914 to 1918, was never going to be easy. We can agree that it was a catastrophe that destroyed the old confident Europe and left a strangely and irrevocably altered world. Beyond that there are, and always have been, profound differences over how we remember and commemorate that war. We still cannot agree on how it started or why it went on for so long, and we still debate its meaning and its legacy a century later.” J. Waldman, M. MacMillan, eds., *14-18 Now: Contemporary Arts Commissions for the First World War Centenary* (Profile: London, 2019). See also within the same volume the essay by David Olusoga. Cfr D. Olusoga, “Art as a lens: Re-Globalising the First War,” *ibid.*: 12-13.

5 Suzanne Lacy’s work, made between 18 and 23 October 2018, on the occasion of the centenary of Ireland’s Declaration of Independence (and the subsequent border that has since divided Northern Ireland from Éire) aims to investigate borders and the influence they have had on our lives. See: <https://www.1418now.org.uk/commissions/across-and-in-between/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

6 Boyle’s work, *Pages of the Sea*, took place on 11 November 2018 and was intended to celebrate the centenary of the Armistice. See “On 11 November 2018,” *Pages of The Sea*, <https://www.pagesofthesea.org.uk>, accessed December 15, 2022.

contributed to redefining the boundaries of contemporary art also because, in creating his works, he has had to try his hand as an art producer, director, event organiser, archivist as well as photographer, performer and installation creator, the latter roles being more standard within contemporary art.

The project commissioned by the WW1 Centenary Art Commission from Deller was related to celebrating the Battle of the Somme, one of the bloodiest battles in military history. Over 141 days, more than a million casualties were recorded. On the first day alone, the British Army suffered 57,470 casualties. Jeremy Deller's idea was to create a mobile and temporary memorial<sup>7</sup> that would dialogue with the present day and attempt to overturn the need to create a specific place dedicated to the memory of people and events by conceiving, instead, "a memorial that would come to you, that would appear in your city, town or shopping centre, intervening in your daily life. [...] It was as much about today as it was about 1916."<sup>8</sup> To meet this need, with the help of Rufus Norris – the theatre and film director who has been Artistic Director of the National Theatre since 2015 – he staged a massive performance in which more than 1,400 volunteers, dressed in the uniforms of World War I soldiers, with no public announcement of their presence, appeared in more than 40 cities<sup>9</sup> on 1 July 2016, making contact with UK citizens going about their daily business, and moving from one part of a city to another.

Deller had deliberately excluded the actors/ participants from meeting in all those places that had,

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7 "I wanted to make a contemporary memorial to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, one that moved around the UK with an unpredictability in which the participants, by their actions, took the memorial to the public."

Deller in <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-about/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

8 J. Deller, R. Norris, *We're here because we're here*: 61.

9 To access the map of the event see <https://becausewearehere.co.uk/we-are-here-map/>, accessed December 15, 2022.

even remotely, a relation to celebrations and rituals – so no churches, public buildings, cemeteries, or locations of historical significance. In their place, train or metro stations, busy squares and streets, shopping malls or meeting places.

Often in rather thickly crowded groups, these anachronistic soldiers had to present themselves in central areas and busy places to interact with citizens, returning their gaze and smiling at them, although they were not expected to engage in conversations or stimulate verbal exchanges. They had to limit themselves, occasionally and chorally, to singing a song to the tune of “Auld Lang Syne” with the words “We’re here because we’re here because we’re here,” hence the title of the work. British soldiers<sup>10</sup> also often used this line as a hymn wishing for the war’s end.

The idea of remaining silent was Norris’s suggestion,<sup>11</sup> and, in a way, silence became a real communicative strategy for Deller to construct his sort of re-enactment:<sup>12</sup> the silence before the event, which was completely concealed from the public until the day the performers appeared in the cities, and the substantial silence of the participants interrupted by the chants that occasionally accompanied the soldiers in their wanderings through the

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10 Deller explained: “When I read about this song, I realised I not only had an activity for the men but also a title for the piece. It explains nothing, it’s pointless and repetitive, a little like the fate of a foot soldier or even the nature of man’s addiction to conflict.” J. Deller, R. Norris, *We’re here because we’re here*: 61.

11 C. Higgins, “#Wearehere: Somme tribute revealed as Jeremy Deller work,” *The Guardian* (July 1, 2016), <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2016/jul/01/wearehere-battle-somme-tribute-acted-out-across-britain>, accessed December 15, 2022.

12 Although, as we shall see, Deller has constructed genuine re-enactments, on this occasion this work cannot be properly considered as such, even though, often, this term is used as a hypernym. On this subject see S. Mudu, “Under the sign of Reenactment,” in C. Baldacci, S. Franco, eds., *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* (Turin: Accademia University Press, 2022).

cities. During the weeks of training<sup>13</sup> in the run-up to 1 July, Norris and Deller had explicitly requested of all participants that interaction with the spectators should stop there, at silence, at a simple exchange of glances, and that the possible explanation/interpretation of the event unfolding before the mostly astonished eyes of the spectators should be left to the calling card – a choice dictated by both purely technical and symbolic issues. The performative action – given the vastness of the intervention and the mass of people involved – had to remain as simple as possible so as not to force the performers to improvise in the face of the incalculable variables imposed in an open dialogue with the casual passer-by. The conversation, therefore, would have been entirely uncontrollable and (also given that none of the participants had any professional acting training) the quality standards would probably have suffered.

In addition, although I am not aware that this was made explicit, it would also have posed a problem of a symbolic nature: each participant in the performance was the apparition or “ghost” of a dead person, and therefore, silence was the most suitable form to evoke the victims. The actual interaction with the audience, then, took place only through a common calling card which established a dialogue of glances in the explanation of the work – I represent someone, a specific person with a name, regiment, or rank, who died a hundred years ago, even if I am not him – and which at the same time also became the tombstone, the

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13 An interesting insight into the training period for the performers in this project can be found in a conversation between Deller and Emily Lim. Cfr. E. Lim, J. Deller, “Relaxed, open, alive, kind, engaged,” in R. Norris, J. Deller, *We’re Here Because We’re Here*: 104-113. Here, we also find a document with the “Five Golden Words: Relaxed, open, alive, kind, engaged” and the “Four Golden Rules: 1. Stay Alive – Keep it natural, be comfortable, don’t ever be a statue! 2. Seek Eye Contact – be interested in the public but don’t *intimidate* them, it’s not a staring competition! 3. Be Kind to the public, don’t ever be rude! 4. Each Card is a *Gift* – make eye contact when you give it, watch the public’s reaction to it.” *Ibid.*: 104.



remnant of the monument.<sup>14</sup> In a video filmed by the BBC on this project, Deller said that he owed the idea of making the soldiers who died in that battle appear as ghosts to something he had read during the research period before the work, in which he had found interesting information

about phenomena in Britain during the war – of women mainly – seeing dead loved ones in the street, just catching a glimpse of someone on a bus or through a shop window thinking it was their husband or their brother or their son. It became quite a big thing, all these sightings, these apparitions of the dead. So it was as if the project had already happened during the war. People had already seen the dead in the streets.<sup>15</sup>

Compared to a monument or a more traditional re-enactment of a historical event, which asks us to respect the hero's sacrifice and celebrate it, Deller shifts the focus to the individual persons, or rather, to the void they left behind, filling it through the concretisation of the ghost of the missing person, thus giving shape to the void created around each of the people who disappeared in the war. This shift also reflects the artist's desire to avoid any sentimentality in the representation: "Avoid Sentimentality" was the instruction written on one of his reproduced sheets of notes. The artist explicitly speaks of the goal of giving the audience a "jolt,"<sup>16</sup> and a jolt, after all, is at the opposite extreme of storytelling and words of condolence with which

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14 "We also equipped each man with a set of 'calling cards' which bore the name, regiment and rank of a soldier who died on 1 July. He was representing that person, not pretending to be him. The card was effectively a gravestone, and if a member of the public paid attention to a soldier in any way he or she was given one," J. Deller, R. Norris, *We're here because we're here*: 61.

15 W. Yu (@weiyu970), "Jeremy Deller – We're Here Because We're Here," YouTube video (November 26, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXnr3w74TJs&t=158s>, accessed December 15, 2022.

16 J. Deller in J. Deller, R. Norris, *We're here because we're here*: 61.

to remember the many qualities of those who have left us – usual procedures in a commemoration of historical events.

Nevertheless, the heart of this work is absolutely emotional; in fact, the people who found themselves passing through the cities engaged with the performance were sucked into the event, not only because they felt surrounded by it but, above all, because the absence of rhetoric made them feel exempt from any pressing request to take sides, to accept being part of a community, as any ritual (even a secular one) imposes. The request was only to participate. And perhaps it is precisely in this form of engagement that the diversity lies, compared to others, of Deller’s fascinating offering. It appropriates with this immense “delegated performance”<sup>17</sup> the principles of spectacularity; it is the child of cinema and a digital and social media culture,<sup>18</sup> but, at the same time, does not create artificial distances between spectator and performer, given that the extreme proximity of the encounter with the soldiers made the experience somehow simultaneously unique and intimate.

However, this was not the first time that Deller had used these modes of immersive engagement to recreate the feeling at least of an episode from the past and bring back to life a part of history that we have forgotten or repressed. This had already happened with *It Is What It Is: Conversation about Iraq*, from 2009, a collaborative work with Creative Time and the New Museum in New York, in which he had taken a car destroyed by explosives found in Iraq on a tour of 14 US museums to serve as a “backdrop”

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17 I refer to the category used by Claire Bishop in C. Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).

18 See C. Eva, “Reaching the Public” in J. Deller, R. Norris, *We’re here because we’re here: 115-116*, which begins with the statement: “In many ways *We’re here because we’re here* is an artwork for the age of social media.”

to a conversation space in which Iraqi citizens and American military personnel, among others, were invited.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the work that, in terms of organisational strategy and spectator involvement, serves as the premise for *We're here because we're here* is undoubtedly *The Battle of Orgreave*, from 2001, in which Deller attempted to recreate live – again, as a gigantic participatory performance – the clashes between police and striking miners at the Orgreave Coking Plant in Yorkshire on 18 June 1984. This episode, one of the harshest and most divisive for Britain in the 1980s and the Thatcher era, had affected Deller as a teenager at the time:

I wanted to find out what exactly happened on that day with a view to re-enacting or commemorating it in some way. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the strike, like a civil war, had a traumatically divisive effect at all levels of life in the UK. Families were torn apart because of divided loyalties, the union movement was split on its willingness to support the National Union of Mineworkers, the print media especially contributed to the polarisation of the arguments to the point where there appeared to be little space for a middle ground. So in all but name it became an ideological and industrial battle between the two sections of British society.<sup>20</sup>

Commissioned and produced by Artangel, *The Battle of Orgreave* was a reconstruction involving about

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19 On his website Deller explains: “This project started as the idea to create a mobile museum of the war in Iraq that would tour the US. Finding material for the museum proved difficult, until we were offered a car that had been used in previous exhibitions. From this car, used as a centrepiece, we constructed a room in the museum where the public could meet and talk to people involved in the conflict in some way. The idea was then taken on the road; we towed the car from New York to LA, stopping off in 14 towns and cities on the way – a classic American road trip route – accompanied by an Iraqi citizen and an enlisted American soldier. It was presented in as neutral a way as possible, which puzzled a lot of people. But it meant that the public were more likely to talk to us, because they weren’t scared of being dragged into some sort of political arena. Sometimes these conversations went on for hours. The car was subsequently donated to the Imperial War Museum in London”  
<https://www.jeremydeller.org/ItsWhatIts/ItsWhatIts.php> accessed December 15, 2022.

20 J. Deller, *The English Civil War / Part II* (London: Artangel, 2002): 7.

a thousand people<sup>21</sup> – around 800 who had taken part in historical re-enactments, approximately 200 former miners and an unknown number of people who were part of the police force at the time. It was also, in parallel, a massive piece of research with information, photos and videos in addition to, as already described in *We're here because we're here*, a long collective preparation work in which the former miners, above all, also had the role of helping in the reconstruction of events. And as with *The Battle of Orgreave*, one cannot fail to be struck by the enormous organisational effort that displays all of Deller's ability to rely on a network of knowledge and professional expertise, even with associations involved in battle re-enactments and costumed historical events.<sup>22</sup>

Here, too, we find the artist's interest in the processes of collective memory and its loss, but *The Battle of Orgreave* was also an attempt to reconstruct the very idea of society that Thatcher had denied – one of her slogans was “There is no such thing as Society” – precisely through the concept of delegation and collaboration with others to achieve a common interest. As far as possible, Deller relied on the memories of the miners and police officers to recreate the battle scene, putting the many newspaper articles in the background; in essence, allowing the many personal memories to direct the course of the re-enactment.

It is a reconstruction process not to be considered definitively concluded since Deller presents it again in the form of a film (shot by Mike Figgs), an archive (in the

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21 Ibid.; See also A. Correia, “Interpreting Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave*,” *Visual Culture in Britain*, no.7 (2006): 93-112.

22 On this subject, numerous articles and volumes have come out on both the artistic and the more purely theatrical side. In addition to the texts already mentioned, I would add: R. Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (Routledge: London, 2011); M. Franko, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); V. Agnew., J. Lamb, J. Tomann, eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2020); C. Baldacci, C. Nicastro, A. Sforzini, eds., *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory* (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022); C. Baldacci, S. Franco, eds., *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* (Accademia University Press: Turin, 2022).

Tate Modern collection), and a catalogue (*The English Civil War / Part II*), and it nevertheless remains present in the minds of the many participants and spectators (a distinction whose legitimacy is to be verified) who took part in the reconstruction of the events on 17 June 2001.

As Amelia Jones explains well,

crucially, *The Battle of Orgreave* itself is continually changing— and is never presented as a “final” or fully coherent work or object, even though it consists of documents, objects, and other material traces of prior re-enactments. Notably, too, while many of the other re-enactments tellingly substitute the re-enactor as new “author” of a unique and ultimately static (documented) work, Deller himself does not feature in a noticeable way either as part of the re-enactment or the public relations materials circulating around the film, its most visible “documentation”—the work in its infinite permutations does not tend to devolve back to a singular body, though it does only have coherence in relation to the author-name Jeremy Deller.<sup>23</sup>

Deller is fascinated by history, but instead of seeking its element of order, repetition, and the possibility of foreseeing things, he strives to make room for the complexity that is necessarily chaos and confusion. As art critic Teresa Macrì points out in her *Politics/poetics*,<sup>24</sup> it is disorder that fascinates the artist, and often this confusion is identified with mass movements, collective participation, and the public dimension of his work.

From a historical point of view, these projects can be juxtaposed with Jochen Gerz’s *Counter-Monument*,<sup>25</sup> but I believe that Deller’s works are more a continuation

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23 A. Jones, “‘The Artist is Present.’ Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,” *TDR. The Drama Review* 55, no. 1 (2021): 16-45, 24.

24 T. Macrì, *Politics/Poetics* (Milano: Postmedia, 2014).

25 J.E. Young, “The Counter-Monument: Memory against Itself in Germany Today,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 2 (1992): 267-296.

of the actions of political art collectives in the 1970s and 1980s, and I am thinking above all of Group Material – which disbanded in 1996<sup>26</sup> – or the previously mentioned art activist Suzanne Lacy. As in their work, in the operations of the British artist there is no truth to be sought with an ideological attitude, rather the aim is to try to share ideas and above all to try to listen to the many dissonant voices and counter-narratives that have not been given sufficient space in the dominant discourse. At the same time, he perhaps distances himself from them precisely because of the popular/spectacular dimension that his works take on, because of the attention he dedicates to the spectator – a role that is always possible and never wholly absent in his works, which goes hand in hand with that of participant/performer.

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26 “It’s hard not to feel that Group Material broke significant ground but missed the party. The year they broke up, 1996, coincides with a proliferation of new forms of social practice lately successful in museum exhibitions and biennials, whether in the work of Francis Alÿs or Jeremy Deller.” A. Green, “Citizen Artists: Group Material,” *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry*, no. 26 (2011): 17-25.

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UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI DI MILANO  
DIPARTIMENTO DI FILOSOFIA  
"PIERO MARTINETTI"



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