

## Jeremy Deller (b. 1966)

### 'It Is What It Is: Conversations about Iraq' 2009



#### Key facts:

- **Size:** Life-size car
- **Medium:** metal/steel
- **Series** This car is the centrepiece of a mobile museum project about the war in Iraq.
- **Location:** Imperial War, Museum, London

<https://exploringartinthecity.files.wordpress.com/2012/05/jeremy-deller.jpg>

British Turner Prize winner, Jeremy Deller is an artist and a documentary maker. Like an ethnographer, he documents without obvious judgement and presents work, very often as a consciously collaborative enterprise. The simple presentation of 'It is what it is: Conversations about Iraq' enables visitors to confront the war in their own way following conversations with Iraqi people who knew their country first hand. It is intended to be a participatory experience. The work shows us what we have done, what we are capable of doing to one another. The work began as a proposed fourth plinth, Trafalgar Square, sculpture for public display - an intentionally shocking object to be placed in such a high-profile tourist location. The commission was put to public vote, and Deller lost out to Antony Gormley and Yinka Shonibare.

#### 1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject matter: Primarily, *It is what it is* is a car that was blown up in a book market in Bagdad, Iraq, in 2007. Thirty-five people were killed and hundreds injured in the attack.

The car cannot be interpreted as anything, it does not represent something. It is not an abstracted form or meaningful in relation to anything beyond itself – *it is what it is* – it represents itself. It is a **Readymade**, a **Found Object**, it is a real and destroyed car following a suicide bomber's detonation of explosives nearby; 'its primary meaning is itself' (Deller, vimeo.com). The car was not where the bomb was hidden, it was a nearby casualty of the explosion. In relation to the places affected by war, Deller's work forces us to consider that Iraqis suffered at the hands of Iraqis in a location perceived via the western media in terms of 'us and them'.

The idea of 'place' is key: this Iraqi car travelled across the US from New York to California. Conversations around the car were encouraged at various stop-off points along the way. Sergeant Jonathan Harvey, an American veteran of the Iraq War, and Esam Pasha, an Iraqi citizen, accompanied Deller aboard a recreational vehicle (RV). The journey was documented, and the documentary forms part of the work.

In the 'Santa Fe Plaza' documentary video clip, one member of the public said 'It reminds me of Vietnam', '... they shouldn't show th[e] kind of destruction that happen[s] somewhere else [other] than America, we have our own places of destruction'; '...we have to accept what they're doing for this country, and participate in defending it'; '... you always have to defend your area'.

When the car was exhibited, Deller invited a diverse range of people who had first-hand experience of Iraq to interact with visitors and in this sense brought the two places – Iraq and America – together. Deller chose representatives to include Iraq war veterans, journalists and academics. The car was simply a stimulus to conversation – the conversations were the point of the show. Deller described the car and all of the other artefacts in the exhibition as 'supporting material' to begin important conversations about the war between Iraqis and museum visitors from all over the globe. Deller brings people together that may otherwise remain ignorant of one another's culture, and participation key in this distinctly collaborative project. The strategy is characteristic of Deller's oeuvre.

Space and depth: The car becomes a large sculptural form in the context of the gallery or museum environment. It is an interesting object aesthetically with its interplay of mass and void. We feel compelled to walk around the car and view it in the round. To investigate the full extent of the trauma for ourselves. It dominated the exhibition spaces where it was shown.

Composition: the strong folds of the metal create a crumpled effect reminiscent of paper thrown in the bin. We are drawn in to its imploded form.

Line: Line reminds us of the force of an explosion to destroy the original form. Line creates a jagged effect that repels our touch.

Colour: The natural rust colour of burnt-out metal seems multi-tonal, as though flames have provided a sort of patina. The car's monochromatic colour unifies the work and focuses our attention on its battered and fried form. The car, an orangey artefact of war juxtaposes starkly with pristine environment of the exhibition spaces it came to rest in after its tour of the US.

## 2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

The Iraqi war (2003-2011) began with the invasion of Iraq by a United States-led coalition that toppled the government of Saddam Hussein. Insurgency and civil war continue today. Deller has chosen to create a show about a war that occurred during his own lifetime. He has chosen to examine the international conflict through an objective lens. He has provided the stimulus to understand how an international war become increasingly complicated and media moral panics and stereotypes may easily have prevented some audiences from understanding that the Iraq war evolved into a parallel civil war through insurgency. How Iraqi suicide bombers claimed martyrdom in killing their fellow citizens. As the war continued, Iraqi insurgents shifted their focus away from attacking coalition forces and began to target the Iraqi population using suicide bombers and vehicles carrying Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The killing of innocent civilians was intended to expose the weakness of the coalition-Iraqi security forces.

First-hand experience leads to a greater understanding about the casualties of war. During the war, America and Iraq were symbiotically linked, and yet the West was largely disconnected from Iraqi peoples and culture; most Americans had never met an Iraqi citizen. *It is what it is* allowed average citizens to discover something of Iraq for themselves – knowledge would come as a result of a two-way dialogue.

Deller says, "In America, the car is such a sacred object," (The Guardian). American car culture began in the 1900s when only the rich and famous could afford one. It was Henry Ford who made the car accessible and affordable to the middle classes. It was the beginning of a long love affair, with the automobile. Iconic films have been made about them, and 'drive-ins' constructed to disseminate them.

The work's title – *It is what it is* – is interesting because it implies flippancy, a sort of abdication of responsibility on the level of human agency. According to members of the armed forces, the phrase was used frequently during armed combat.

This car is art insofar as art is life – Deller is interested in life – a straightforward exchange between people – it is what it is.

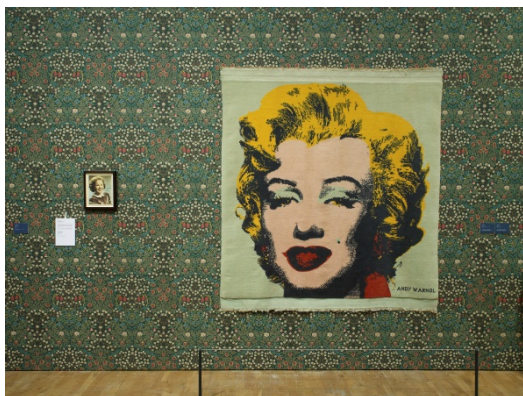
## 3. DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The readymade nature of this car is incredibly meaningful. The artist has had very little intervention – It is what it is. It's what we have done. A suicide bomber caused the nearby explosion, the external force from which caused the car to implode, collapsing in on itself. The car's harsh angularity is as a result of violent inward forces, and serves as a reminder of the power of the IED which rendered this form, and claimed it as another casualty of the war. We are reminded of the man-made destruction of a man-made object. An object characteristically revered in the US, a geographical location where Deller chose to travel with the car.

#### 4. WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED BY PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Deller has created a sort of mobile memorial to the impact of war on civilians. It has power because *It is what it is*. It's an unambiguous reminder of what we can do to one another. On display at The Imperial War Museum in London, the car projects a clear message, especially given the installation's surrounding military objects; however, it was a negotiated reading when it was toured through the US, and it is this negotiated exchange between people that allows the work to function as the artist intended it to – the public are the medium, their conversations the purpose.

- Deller met Andy Warhol in 1986 and describes Warhol as a 'hero'. Like Warhol, Deller creates art using a multitude of media and consciously defies artistic category.
- Deller curated an exhibition *Love is Enough*, Modern Art, Oxford. The exhibition was based upon two of Deller's 'greatest influence's, William Morris, Founder of The Arts and Craft Movement and early British socialist, and, American conceptual artist, Andy Warhol. Deller examines Morris and Warhol in terms of their respective social commentary and their interest in art's role in society.
- Despite Deller's obvious interest in the 'what is art?' idea, he has eschewed Duchamp as an influence. Duchamp found success with his readymades "I was interested in ideas—not merely in visual products." Did Duchamp pave the way for the conceptual artists like Deller, or, did, as Deller states, the question pre-date its coinage?



Deller from 'Love is Enough, MoMA, Oxford



'English Magic' Venice Biennale 2013

#### Further Reading and Links

- <http://creativetime.org/programs/archive/2009/deller/description.php>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/apr/14/jeremy-deller-iraq-war-us>
- 'It is what it is: Conversations about Iraq' November, 2009: <https://vimeo.com/7207286>
- Hammer Museum Show: 'It is what it is: Conversations about Iraq'. For a full list of Iraqi guests, and images from Deller's handwritten journal of the types of Iraqi people he wanted to involve: [www.conversationsaboutiraq.org](http://www.conversationsaboutiraq.org)
- (You Tube: Jeremy Deller influenced by Andy Warhol explains his art on Hardtalk).
- Deller's influences: <http://www.jeremydeller.org/LoveIsEnough/Love.php>