

Number of people killed in car bomb attacks in Baghdad on a single day last month



"The project's stated aims are shrewdly simple: it just sets out to enable Americans to meet people who actually come from (or have been to) the place that their country has invaded." Nathan Keay / MCA, Chicago

Conversation piece

Benjamin Tiven considers Jeremy Deller's moving installation about the Iraq war, *It Is What It Is*

On March 5, 2007, a suicide bomber exploded an automobile in the middle of al Mutanabbi Street, the historic centre of Baghdad's book trade, killing 38 people and wounding hundreds of others. Last month the rusted, twisting steel husk of that car went on display in an otherwise sparse gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. News photographs of the chaotic street scene that ensued were hung on an adjacent wall, next to maps and explanatory texts.

In the centre of the room, plush couches were arranged as if in a living room, with a carpet and a small table, at which a few museum visitors talked quietly, sipping black tea and snacking on sesame cookies – a jarring combination of the domestically welcoming and the violently deprived. Most people, upon entering the gallery, were magnetically drawn to the car; a few wound their way over to the couches, sat down, and joined the ongoing conversation.

Esam Pasha, an Iraqi painter who had worked as a translator for the coalition forces, jovially shared memories of growing up in Baghdad and described the first months after the American invasion. Sitting nearby, Dr Donny George Youkhanna, the former director of the Iraqi National Museum, regaled visitors with sad, sometimes bleakly funny stories of the global black market in antiquities.

This room – its calm and inviting furniture, automobile corpse, talkative Iraqi experts, and the conversations engendered by the combination of all these – was the last iteration of a sprawling work by the British artist Jeremy Deller called *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*. During its three different museum installations, in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, a group of invited specialists – scholars, journalists, exiles, soldiers and artists; mostly Iraqis, with some Americans – came on a rotating schedule to sit on the couches and talk to anyone who showed up.

Holding to a neutral and factual register, the piece makes concrete what the American consciousness

has persistently abstracted: the victims, consequences, causes and goals of the war, as well as the history and culture of Iraq itself. In a statement that accompanies the piece, Deller expressed its purpose like so: "Firsthand accounts [of Iraq] are few and far between. I have read a ton of books and articles about the war, but short of going to Iraq itself, there is no substitute for meeting someone who has actually lived there, or been there, hence the core part of this project."

Youkhanna, the former Iraqi museum director, also participated in the exhibition's first installation, in March at the New Museum in New York. "I found it amazing," he said, as a museum attendant in Chicago poured him some more tea. "It's an extraordinary exhibition. The idea is that when you walk in here you don't see that much. But then, little by little, you feel the exhibition. This is something different, based on dialogue between people. It's a live exhibition, where you give and take. I believe this is something unique."



Between the exhibitions in New York and Los Angeles, Deller took the show on the road. He put the bombed-out car on a trailer with a sign that said "This car was destroyed by a bomb in a Baghdad marketplace on March 5, 2007", hitched the trailer to the back of an RV, and drove across the southern United States for three weeks, along with Pasha (the Iraqi painter), a former US Army platoon sergeant named Jonathan Harvey (who served in 2007 in northwest Baghdad), and the curator Nato Thompson.

This iteration of the project stopped in various towns, cities, college campuses and rural locales between the coasts: the group would park in a prominent spot, set up some tables with literature, and attempt to engage whomever they could in an open discourse about the war, using the burnt-out car as a provocative conversation-starter. Pasha and Harvey did most of the talking, as they were the relevant experts; Deller and Thompson usually stayed quiet, or tried to.

"We presented this in a very bland way," Deller said after the trip. "We didn't make it an anti-war piece, and we certainly didn't make it a pro-war piece, and because of that a lot of people in the anti-war movement got annoyed with us, because they expected something a lot more polemical. But I realised, and Nato realised, that that would just shut down any discussion and scare people off."

The trip was documented on the project's website, and the video clips presented there reveal the astonishing diversity of opinions and ideas across a full spectrum of American society, from the parents and relatives of soldiers to veterans themselves, Iraqi immigrants to college students, farmers to tattoo artists. Some played precisely to stereotype, clinging to ill-informed conceptions of the war shaped by popular media or religious belief (that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, or was using them to threaten Israel). Others upended

any preconceptions, revealing a more complex relationship between America and the Arab world – like the blonde cheerleader in Houston who explains that her family, which is in the oil business, has expanded to include various Muslim aunts and uncles by marriage.

Talking about the war in Iraq proved every bit the elaborate rabbit hole Deller had imagined. The simple act of conversing about Iraq, it turns out, revealed fraught relationships, galvanised politics and some fuzzy historical logic – as well as a great deal of suffering and some genuine empathy for the suffering of others. Thompson often warned people: "Listen, just so you know, this project is going to look like its boring. But if you go and listen to what's happening, it's actually totally crazy and amazing. Because conversation doesn't look like that much on film."

It is hard to draw any specific conclusions from the sum of these conversations, but what is clear is the vast disjunct in the popular consciousness between the clarity of the war as a violent disaster and the cloudiness of its moral, ethical and legal underpinnings. Everyone can agree that war is horrible; no one can agree on exactly why or whether we needed to start one, or how it ought to end. In some sense, the elliptical nature of the piece reflects the nature of the war itself, and all the logical cul-de-sacs that explain its origins and justify its perpetuation.

At a schoolyard in Memphis, Pasha was stumped by a child's innocent question: "How did the war start?" "I don't know," he laughed, and explained that one day the tanks and planes just showed up. "It's like living inside a video game, except you can actually smell the smoke." He tried his best to smile for the kids.

Deller took his title – "It is what it is" – from Sergeant Harvey, who once explained to him the exasperated conclusion, common among his Army colleagues, that some greater, unmovable inevitability must be at work in situations so bereft of moral or political clarity. And though the oblique neutrality of the title was a

key position to maintain (and Deller has elsewhere noted that it was way too late in the conflict for a gesture of protest anyway), one can't help but see some rueful criticism reflected in its absurd tautology. How can things really just "be" what they "are" in a war zone?

▶▶▶ Many of Deller's projects deal with politicised historical events, and almost all of them involve the participation of others. He has exhibited a survey of British folk art, hired a traditional English brass band to play Acid House compositions, and most famously, produced a full-scale reenactment of the Battle of Orgreave, a key clash in the British miners' strike of 1984. That work included the participation of numerous former miners who had been in the original conflict, essentially recast as their younger selves.

But whereas his earlier works reenacted historical incidents or cultural memories, *It Is What It Is* is an enactment: it attempts to render the abstraction of a current, unresolved violence, and of a foreign culture, into something present and real. The subject here isn't the war itself, but its continuing unknowability, the way that it has eluded our attempts to apprehend and describe it.

Because his work is usually ephemeral and participatory, and because he rarely produces material objects, Deller has sometimes been criticised by those who say that what he does is "not really art". Complaints of this sort overlook the long genealogy of participatory work from which Deller emerges, but they may also miss the point. Tricia Van Eck, the curator at the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art, sees the "situation" Deller has created in the gallery, the possibility for conversations to occur, as the art, though she concedes that Deller himself might describe it differently. For his part, the mildly laconic artist has said, "I try to make art about things I'm interested in, in a way that I think is relevant."

In any case, the project's stated

aims are shrewdly simple: it just sets out to enable Americans to meet people who actually come from (or have been to) the place that their country has invaded. It focuses on a vacuum in the public discourse, but it also acts on that vacuum by providing material that can fill it.

Of course, the limits of the work are defined by its participants: if the invited guests are ill-informed or poor conversationalists, then on that day the work suffers, just as it does on days when few visitors show up or engage the guests. Most of the people who came into the gallery when I saw the piece in Chicago walked first to the car, took photographs, and then stood around, awkwardly, listening to the conversation – perhaps not realising that they were supposed to sit down, join in and help to shape it. That's the gamble of Deller's strategy: if you invest in the conversation, you can reap profound rewards of understanding. But if not, the whole project might very simply pass you by.

At the museum in Chicago, I asked Youkhanna if he saw any historical precedents for an art project like this one. His answer began with memories of contemporary Baghdad. "I tell you one thing," he said. "I was always fascinated by Shar al Mutanabbi. The street was a special street: I would call it a kind of temple for every educated man or woman in Baghdad. Most of the time I would have in mind one book to go and find there, but I ended up with loads of 10 or 20 books every time!"

Even before he got to explaining the civic function of ancient cuneiform tablets, he had revealed the depth of *It Is What It Is*. As I listened to Youkhanna describe the lost centre of intellectual life in Baghdad, I was struck by the fact that the rusting, wrecked car at the back of the gallery, which destroyed the bookstalls on al Mutanabbi Street, had now become an instrument to rekindle, very far away, a new version of the open, unmediated exchange of knowledge that once flourished there.

Benjamin Tiven is an artist living in New York.