

The collaborator

Artist Jeremy Deller doesn't sell much work, and was embarrassed by the Turner prize. He tells Charlotte Higgins about meeting Warhol and his plan to build a house for bats

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Jeremy Deller, the artist who won the Turner Prize two years ago, has gone bats. That is, he is organising a project in which the general public and professionals will be invited to enter an architectural competition to design a house for these splendid airborne mammals, and the winning entry will be constructed for the London Wetland Centre.

Deller has a thing about bats. One of pieces in the Turner prize exhibition was a film called Memory Bucket, and it ended with a beautiful shot of millions of them swooping out of a cave in Texas to feast on moths in the gloaming. He's fascinated partly because "they are beautiful creatures", and also because their habits present a fragile analogy (or contrast) to human urban existence, since they are capable of "living in great numbers together in relative peace".

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At the same time, he is also working on a walking tour of Liverpool based on the early haunts of Beatles manager Brian Epstein, a collaboration with artist Paul Ryan, who made Deller's portrait to accompany this article. So what is a Jeremy Deller work? What draws his eclectic artistic life together - given that, as he points out, "I don't have any natural talent for making or drawing or painting"? In the end, what everything has in common, he says, "is me and my interests. That's the lucky thing about being an artist. Your interests and obsessions become your work."

Deller-sceptics, however, are fond of questioning the right the 40-year-old has to even call himself an artist. The fact that his latest project involves organising a bat-house competition will, one suspects, utterly fail to quell the critics who believe he is a bit of a fraud. He cites a reaction to his Folk Art Archive exhibition at the Barbican in London last year, in which he and his collaborator, Alan Kane, documented and celebrated popular, "amateur" art, from anti Iraq war banners to flower arranging.

"One reviewer said to me, 'What will you say to the artists who now won't be able to show at the Barbican for the next three months?' She was absolutely serious and she was shaking with anger. Like we'd taken away an opportunity for 'proper' artists."

The general public, he thinks, is way ahead of that kind of thinking, demonstrated by the reaction to his Turner prize exhibition. "People were really interested in it. They weren't laughing at it. I felt really touched that people took so much care to look at my work, and that's my overwhelming memory. I was very very happy."

The positive reactions he gets from the public are shared by those non-professional makers or artists with whom he often collaborates. When he asked the Women's Institute to create flower arrangements for Tate Britain in 2000, the WI ladies simply took the whole thing in their stride and got on with it; if anyone, it was the Tate that was a little anxious about the whole thing, he says.

We meet where Deller works, in a room in the flat he shares with his girlfriend in north London. It is the antithesis to the general notion of an artist's studio, the platonic form of which might be Lucian Freud's mildly satanic, paint-encrusted cave. This room, by contrast, is light and airy, has neat shelves, a worktop, a computer. It could be anyone's home office, despite the Patrick Caulfield print on the wall.

Brightly coloured Post-it notes are dotted around bearing more or less arcane legends: BATS MATTER; STEEL PAN; DEPECHE REMIX; SEEDS POSTERS. Also stuck to the wall is a Guardian centre-spread photo of the funeral of the murdered Russian journalist, Anna Politkovskaya, with whom, he says, he had been in touch before she died, hoping to work with her on a walking tour of underground Moscow that would have marked the sites of some of the darker events of recent Russian history.

Into this ordered environment the faintly dandyish figure of Deller neatly fits. He wasn't always going to be an artist. He studied art history at the Courtauld Institute, specialising in the Baroque. "When I give talks about my work now I often talk about the Baroque for a few minutes, and make some sort of comparison with what I do. The link is the need to communicate an idea in the Counter-Reformation; the way artists were reaching out to a public that hadn't been thought about before. In a way that's what I do; I try to make the viewer a part of the work."

He was happy at the Courtauld, "but afterwards the fact I couldn't get a job made me realise I was probably in the wrong place". Like a lot of people leaving higher education in the mid-80s, he went on the dole. "There were about five years of not doing very much. I was living at home, in Dulwich [in south London], so that was not perfect. I was just prattling around really." His first show, of photographs, was in his parents' house, when they were away on holiday. He says everything has happened for him, in terms of career, in the past six or so years.

His conviction that he could become an artist was fuelled by an encounter with Andy Warhol. "I met him at an opening at Anthony D'Offay in about 1986. There were a couple of hundred people there and he was signing stuff. I had a baseball cap and a Wham bag, which he signed, and he thought that was really funny. Then I got chatting to one of his entourage and they said, 'Come to the Ritz tomorrow night: room 321.' And I went with a friend and we had a funny evening messing round drinking whisky and chatting. He was watching Benny Hill with the sound down."

Later Deller went to see Warhol in New York. "I saw the freedom that he had and how he had created a world around himself. It was very inspiring, a major moment." He adds, "It's not something I've talked about until very recently because I felt it was quite private. Now I've talked to a journalist about it so it's not private. It's the sort of thing you could capitalise on if you wanted to. But I don't need to capitalise on anything any more."

The Turner prize has changed things for the better; made his life much more secure. "It was 95% unequivocally good. It was a fantastic thing. And very enjoyable to do," he says. And the bad 5%? "I was in the Guardian five times in a week. I was embarrassed; I'm talking to you now so it's a bit hypocritical of me, but it was overkill, really."

Another result of the prize - apart from £25,000 and a great deal of recognition - is "you start meeting these people that you wouldn't otherwise have met: the club-class lounge people. The people who collect art and have museums. Not that they collect my work." He reckons there is someone in the US who has a couple of pieces of his; ditto someone in Italy. It's another thing that marks him out from his peers - he doesn't sell very much work. He makes a living, he says, from commissions and fees from projects, and maybe selling the odd photograph or still from one of his films.

This year, he says he made only one piece of work to sell - a poster that was available at Frieze art fair in London this October, which simply said, "What would Neil Young do?" But wasn't that in fact free for punters, I ask? "Yes, But someone's bought that stack to reproduce it - you can buy that and remake it and have it in your museum. Do you see what I mean?" I don't really, so he explains, "You sell them the PDF which they can make into the stack of posters. Then they have to give them away."

Isn't it a little distracting to be watching your mates get rich as the art market goes crazy, while you are making free posters for a modest fee? "You go to

art fairs and you see artists who are just pumping it out," he says. "They are making art for art fairs, which is very tempting to do ... That was one of the problems with Frieze art fair, the fact that the Art Newspaper was printing everyone's prices every day, what they'd sold. I didn't like that. I got those feelings that I last had at school 20 years ago, that feeling I can't even describe, of anxiousness about how people are doing.

"I try not to get distracted," he says. "Because I do very well for myself considering. I think that's the way of looking at it - considering what I do it's a miracle I can survive and have what I would regard as a comfortable life."

- Details of the bat house competition can be found at bathouseproject.org.
- Centre of the Creative Universe: Liverpool and the Avant-Garde is at Tate Liverpool from February 20 until September 9, 2007.