In Conversation
Matthew Higgs and Jeremy Deller

Matthew Higgs: *You trained as an art historian, initially at the Courtauld Institute in London, and then later at the University of Sussex, where your interests ranged from the Baroque to youth subcultures such as Teddy Boys. How did you come to be interested in such divergent cultural forms?*

Jeremy Deller: I think I was just following my instincts. If anything, it is possible that my interests in art and culture remain too broad. I'm sure I could never have been a Ph.D. student, as I would almost certainly have got distracted. This inability to focus, or the lack of a desire to privilege one thing over another, probably has its roots in my visiting old-fashioned institutions like the Horniman Museum in South London when I was a child, where there was so much on display that you literally didn't know where to look, and where culture seemed to be presented without any hierarchies. My early experiences at places like the Horniman might also explain my ongoing love of jumble sales, which I think of as a form of contemporary archaeology; I always saw a good jumble sale as a kind of dig through modern culture, you never know what you might find.

MH: *Did distinctions such as 'high' and 'low' hold any significance for you at that time?*

JD: I still don't make that much distinction between what might be thought of as 'high' or 'low' cultural forms – especially as artists are often just fortunate people who get acknowledged or rewarded for doing what a lot of other people are already doing outside of the context of art. It is much the same with music, as some of my most powerful musical experiences have been from buskers or amateur musicians. At the end of the day it is all just human behaviour and whether it has a monetary or cultural value is largely irrelevant.

MH: *Whilst studying art history, how did you think about, or relate to, the idea of the 'artist'? Was the idea of the 'artist' something that was discussed within the framework of your art history education?*

JD: The Courtauld Institute in the 1980s was a very traditional establishment. I specialised in southern-European Baroque and the teaching approach was mostly concerned with connoisseurship; so, for example, with an artist like Caravaggio, we would discuss how he had been influenced by his predecessors and who his patrons were and so on. There was little consideration of how his character and lifestyle, for example, affected the work. So the idea of 'the artist' wasn't a focus – much like in seventeenth-century Rome, where artists were basically seen as craftsmen or artisans, unlike the heroic figures some people see them as now.

MH: *Speaking of heroic figures, you met Andy Warhol in 1986, while you were still studying at the Courtauld, which must have had an incredible affect on you. What influence did that encounter have on your nascent identity and approach as an artist?*

JD: Meeting Andy Warhol was the most important thing that had happened to me in my life up to that point. Warhol is often the first modern artist you get to know about as a young person because he was (and remains) so contemporary, immediate and youthful in his outlook. I managed to get into the opening [of Warhol's show at Anthony d'Offay Gallery] despite not having an invitation, and it was there that I met Warhol. At the opening, a member of his entourage invited me to visit them at The Ritz hotel two nights later, which of course I took him up on. I took a friend with me, as I had no idea of what to expect in his hotel room; for all I knew there might have been a lot of nudity and drugs – two things I had next to no experience of at the time. As it was, when we went up to his suite, Warhol was there with a bunch of guys watching Benny Hill on television with the sound down whilst listening to a Roxy Music greatest hits tape – an 'installation' in itself. Christopher Makos and Andy Warhol then invited us to New York, to hang out at The Factory and to appear on Warhol's MTV programme [*Andy Warhol's Fifteen Minutes*]. The experience of being in The Factory would prove to be the art education that I'd never had – the equivalent of taking a foundation course and BFA and MFA degrees in a fortnight. What I realised very quickly at The Factory was that an artist can do whatever he or she wants. There are no limits. Warhol was a contradictory character but above all, to me at least, he was a very witty and subversive presence in the world. I think that this aspect of his character has been downplayed in favour of his production-line output and love of money. I was devastated by his death, especially as, at the time, I had imagined that I would end up working full-time at The Factory.

MH: *But you didn't end up working in The Factory, did you? When I first met you, you were working in a clothes shop selling t-shirts.*

JD: No, it didn't quite work out the way I had thought! But there was definitely a scene around this particular shop, Sign of the Times. It was a meeting place – not unlike The Factory actually. I got the job almost by accident, having gone into the Kensington Market store with a flyer for a show that I had designed. It just so happened that the owner was there, and that the image on the flyer was a photograph I'd taken of two young women wearing t-shirts from the shop. I had no idea. I then went on to photograph their parties for them and ended up working in their Covent Garden branch as a 'shop boy'. It was my entrée into a scene that previously

I had had no access to. Up until then I had been the person with my face pressed up to the window, looking in at the people having a good time, and now I was inside, actually having a good time, and spending that time with people who had their photos in magazines. It was great fun, because if you work in a shop that, even for a brief time, is the hippest place in town, all sorts of interesting people come through the doors: musicians, fashion designers – the beautiful people of the day basically. The era could be summed up as 'post-acid house meets early Britpop'. It was around the same time that the artists who would soon be associated with the term 'yBa', were starting to hustle around town. The shop sold a lot of t-shirts and I thought: 'I can do that', and I had this grand idea that I would start a t-shirt empire. I made a number of shirts with slogans on them, some taken from tabloid headlines, including 'MY BOOZE HELL' and 'MY DRUG SHAME', which Courtney Love and Robbie Williams bought and were subsequently photographed wearing. Richey Edwards from the Manic Street Preachers bought a Philip Larkin-inspired t-shirt that I had made, which seemed to make perfect sense conceptually considering his band's interests. It was interesting to see my ideas enter the public domain – to see my work circulate in a context that wasn't the art world.

MH: *Because this was, after all, the 'yBa' moment in London. How did you see your own work and ideas, which often explicitly engaged with recent British history and culture, in relation to the artists culture associated with 'yBa'?*

JD: Like the shop, that too was a scene, but, in this case, I was more of an extra with occasional speaking roles. I helped make up the numbers basically. I was there, typically on the sidelines, but my work was not included in the exhibitions. The art scene of the early 1990s was basically the twenty-or-so artists associated with 'yBa' and then about another two hundred other people, including artists, gallery owners and curators, and I was one of those. Up until around 1997 I think I saw what I was doing as being relatively unsophisticated compared to how those artists operated, who, from the outside at least, seemed to be very together and very professional. However, I ultimately found some of their work, whilst professional, to be fundamentally conservative – too easily traded – especially when compared to that of the West Coast artists I admired, artists like Mike Kelley, Paul McCarthy, Raymond Pettibon or Jim Shaw. These artists, and others like them, were using popular culture in a way that I felt I understood and aspired to. I felt that they were really 'into' what they were making art about, so it seemed natural for them to do it. I liked their take on music, even though I couldn't articulate exactly what that take was; they just seemed to operate from a position of both enthusiasm and knowledge that I found compelling. I suspected that they may have had a similar experience

to me growing up, immersing themselves in these worlds, and that gave me a sense of permission to do what I found interesting.

MH: *But your love of music was always more about pop than the avant garde, wasn't it? Certain figures appear pivotal for you at different points in your development as an artist, figures such as Keith Moon, Morrissey, Shaun Ryder or, more recently, Neil Young.*

JD: I'm a fan of these people, for different reasons, and in my work I was trying to articulate something about the nature of the relationships between a performer and their audiences, whilst simultaneously trying to work out what it was exactly about them that I found so compelling. Keith Moon was ultimately a throwback to my adolescence and the older I get, the less interesting he becomes to me. The others you mention have all made a huge contribution to twentieth-century culture and, for me, these are among the most important cultural references we have, in terms of how we define ourselves. They are among the defining characters of our time, which was why I once proposed an exhibition about the world and lyrics of Shaun Ryder (see p. 46). I felt that he was never really given his dues at the time, nor since for that matter. I was mildly obsessed with his band the Happy Mondays, and their demise upset me. There was no glory in it. So, in many ways, the work I have made about Shaun Ryder and the Happy Mondays was about me getting that out of my system. With someone like Neil Young, the older I get, the more I see him as a role model for how to age in an interesting way – how to keep surprising both yourself and your audience. At the end of the day I think it comes down to how and where you place music and popular culture in terms of its importance for twentieth-century life. I would personally put Little Richard up there with Sigmund Freud in terms of his impact on our world. Popular music is its own art form, which is not to say it is art in itself.

MH: *And then you moved from making work about music, to working with musicians collaboratively to make art, as with your pivotal work* Acid Brass *in 1997 (see pp. 66–69). How did* Acid Brass *impact on your subsequent approach? Did you think about the work as being political?*

JD: *Acid Brass* changed everything for me. It was the first time I had worked on a project with a group of people. I was so nervous about calling up the bandleader with the original idea, but his immediate enthusiasm made it clear to me that I did not actually have to make things by myself anymore – that I could collaborate with people instead, which was a relief, as my technical abilities were always limited. Through *Acid Brass* I discovered that people are, for the most part, interested in artists and even interested in working

with them. So in short it liberated me. It was a political work but not, I hope, in a hectoring way. To be called a 'political artist' is, for me, a kiss of death, as it suggests a fixed or dogmatic position like that of a politician. *Acid Brass* was a work about the UK at the end of the twentieth century, and the seismic shift that had taken place as Britain moved from an industrial to a post-industrial economy, and the role that music played in that narrative. I created a flow-chart diagram called *The History of the World (*1997, see pp. 64-65) that explored the relationships between politics and popular culture. For many people, the rise of electronic dance music was both a life- and world-changing event; it represented the end of one era and the beginning of another, not unlike how the miners' strike related to the end of Britain's industrial past. That is how the work operates on one level, but I also wanted it to be both an enjoyable, and also a faintly absurd, musical experience. *Acid Brass* possessed an ambition that my work had lacked previously; it unfolded outside of the controlled context of a gallery, it had scale and it dealt with 'big themes' head on and unapologetically, and it could also have been a disaster in so many ways.

MH: *Disaster?*

JD: Well, there is a quote by Stalin, 'you have a man, you have a problem', and, though I'm no fan of Stalin, he is making a lot of sense; people are unpredictable, which is why it's so interesting losing control of a project, by working with people, rather than canvas or bronze. For example, during the final preparation of *The Battle of Orgreave* (2001, see pp. 98-105), there was an attempted coup by the re-enactors, who were worried that the re-enactment would descend – or ascend, depending on how you look at it – into a real riot. At a dress rehearsal some had felt threatened by the former miners' enthusiasm at playing themselves, so we had to appease them by mixing up who played miners and who played the police. In a sense they were right, the emotion displayed by the former miners that day would never happen in a traditional re-enactment. But all it would have taken was for a re-enactor or former miner to get carried away and all hell could have broken loose.

MH: *Speaking of* The Battle of Orgreave, *how did you come to be so interested in the recent past, and its subsequent recuperation in your work?*

JD: With both *The Battle of Orgreave* and *Acid Brass*, I was interested in delving into unresolved recent histories and approaching them from a slightly unorthodox position. In the UK, I think we are always conscious of our past; for example, as a nation, we remain obsessed with World War II, to the extent that if you looked at the TV schedules, you could be forgiven for thinking it's still going on. The British, for the most part, love going to castles and stately

homes and so on. The Royal Family is an embodiment of a living past and tradition. Re-enactment has always interested me – as a child I was obsessed by history, so the idea of dressing up in costume remains quite attractive to me, or at least to the child in me – but also, the act of re-enacting is odd in what it says about Britain's relationship to its own history. Whilst researching for the *Orgreave* project, I went to a number of historical re-enactments, and they mostly seemed drained of the political and social narratives behind the original events. [The actors] seemed mostly interested instead in the technical or logistical aspects of the battle, the detail of the costumes and so on. I wanted instead to work with re-enactors on a wholly political re-enactment of a battle – one that had taken place within living memory, that would be re-staged in the actual place where it had happened, and involving many of the people who had been there the first time round. Most of these elements are uncommon in what I would call traditional re-enactments. I was not so much trying to recuperate the recent past as dig up a festering body and give it a proper post-mortem, however unpleasant that may sound. I was not interested in healing the wounds of the strike, as some commentators have subsequently written or speculated; rather I wanted to re-open the wounds if anything, and the miners who participated in the re-enactment knew this, as it was always a part of our discussions. Where the 'art' is situated in projects like these is everywhere and nowhere.

MH: *Is that why you moved to America directly after editing the film? Were you anticipating some sort of backlash?*

JD: After *The Battle of Orgreave* I think I just wanted to leave the UK for a while, perhaps to avoid the backlash that I felt might be heading my way. Before I had made *Orgreave*, I had discussed the idea with some people in London and there was often a look of horror on their faces, which was the opposite of the reaction I got when I explained the ideas behind the work to people in Yorkshire. I think the miners' strike is still viewed differently in the south of England; we don't see the ongoing social effects of the mines closing in London, so the prevailing attitudes about it have, consequently, not really moved on – it has become a historical question rather than a question that many people living in former mining towns and villages still grapple with on a daily basis. Also, in many ways, I felt that I had explored 'Britain' and British issues for the moment. There was an opportunity to go to the US on a residency and I eventually stayed for a year. I was based in Oakland, California, and I arrived on 9 September 2001, so needless to say, it was a fascinating and complicated time to be in that part of the world. I subsequently went back a number of times, in 2003 and 2004. I was in the country during the invasion of Iraq and the 2004 election. I was a worried observer, if you like, and the *It Is What It Is*

exhibition, and its US tour (see pp. 152–59), was the culmination of this worry and research into the war. I felt I had read every book and newspaper article, seen every documentary and so on, and yet I was no closer to what it was actually like to be there, so, like with *Orgreave*, I decided to embark on this huge project as a way of sorting it out in my head. So both projects are very personal despite being so public and open.

MH: *So much of your work is concerned with collective histories. The Hayward Gallery exhibition* Jeremy Deller: Joy in People *(2012) is the first survey of your own work; how did you approach dealing with your own past, your own histories?*

JD: It can be a quite disturbing, and even dispiriting, project, going through twenty-odd years of one's life and work. Until recently my archive wasn't organised in any way, so it was just a trail of chaos that I had left behind me. Another problem I have is that I can't remember exactly when a lot of work was made; I have very few fixed reference points between, say, 1990 and 1997. My history is a bit messy, but that is what it was like back then. Having recently put my archive in order, I can identify a sense of how the work evolved, and how early works, that I thought might never see the light of day again, actually make sense in the context of later work. I am slowly becoming more at ease with those aspects of my past, to the point where at the Hayward I will recreate my bedroom from my parents' home, and fill it with early work made between 1988 and 1993 – a cabinet of pop curiosities! This re-creation is an attempt to somehow contain – rather than contextualise – all of these early and often disparate elements, works that perhaps should have never left the bedroom in the first place. Basically, you will be able to see my false starts as an artist. I'm also taking advantage of the keenness of the Hayward's gallery assistants to animate the show, so visitors will be able to discuss and handle the works, not unlike in a National Trust property, where the ladies in tweed with their books of knowledge guide you around the objects in a specific room. This performative aspect of *Joy in People* is important. At the end of the day, the exhibition can't be a purely documentary or historical account of my work, as not only are many ideas still in flux, but I'm not dead yet after all.

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