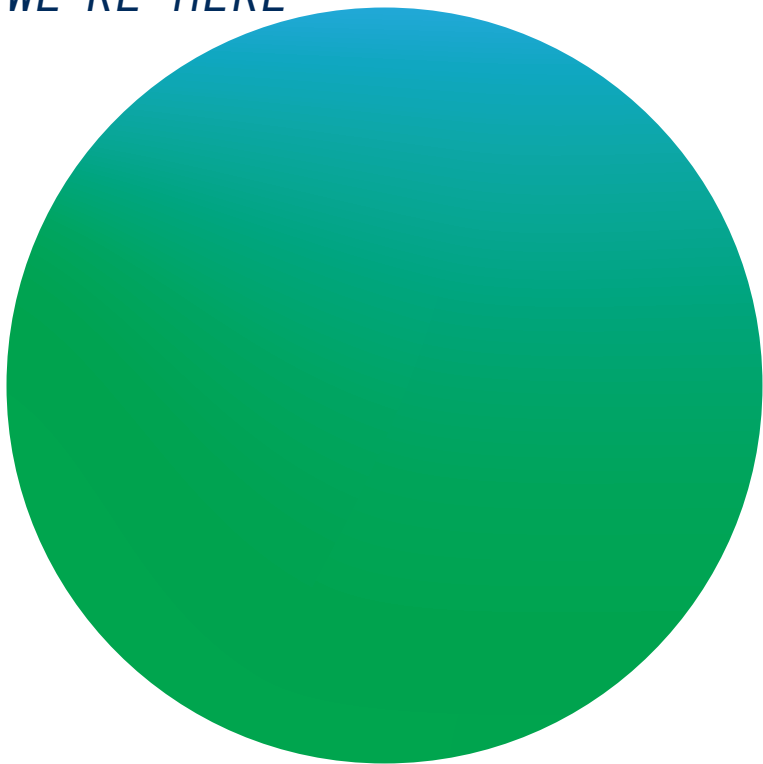


MAKING JEREMY  
DELLER'S *WE'RE*  
*HERE BECAUSE*  
*WE'RE HERE*



KATE  
TYNDALL

London & UK

## Making Jeremy Deller's *We're here because we're here*

Text by Kate Tyndall

On 1st July 2016, early in the morning, over 1,400 volunteers dressed in First World War uniforms began to appear on the streets, slip roads and landscapes of mainland and island Britain. Each represented a soldier who had died on the first day of the Battle of the Somme, exactly 100 years before, and wore an individual authentic uniform. In towns and cities, on mountain ranges and island ferry crossings, railway concourses and roundabouts, in underpasses and shopping centres they marched in silence, gathered, waited and moved on, breaking only to sing elliptical bursts of *We're Here Because We're Here* – which was sung to the tune of *Auld Lang Syne* in the First World War trenches. Following close to 80 routes in more than 50 locations in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, unannounced and unexplained, they handed out cards in silence to members of the public stating the name, rank and regiment of the soldier they represented and, where known, his age on the day he died.

Two million people witnessed the soldiers. Some were indifferent, others watched from a distance. But from the earliest moments, more than anyone had anticipated, people drew forward, looked on quietly, asked what they were doing, took a card, and found themselves experiencing a powerful response. Moved by the physical presence of these men, and realising what it was they were being asked to consider, people were tearful, silent, wanting to know more, grateful, stirred up, reflective. Quickly people began to reach for their phones, using the hashtag *#wearehere* on the soldiers' cards to share images, thoughts and emotions and to ask if others had experienced an encounter, the posts travelling fast to those who had not seen the soldiers, who in turn re-posted, asked, wondered.

An anonymous website, [www.becausewearehere.co.uk](http://www.becausewearehere.co.uk), began to stream posts live across social media platforms, and a national landscape of encounter, emotion, reflection and response came into view.

By 7pm, when the soldiers left the streets, *#wearehere*, which had been trending on Twitter from early till late (for some 14 hours) had generated 221 million impressions. In the days that followed, this rose to 340 million impressions, 60 million of which were from outside of the UK. There were over 100,000 separate social media posts. Throughout the day there had been no explanation. Then at 7pm, broadcast, online and print media announced the project as *We're Here Because We're Here* – a modern memorial to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, commissioned by 14-18 NOW<sup>1</sup>, conceived and created by Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, director of the National Theatre, and produced by Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the National Theatre, with nine lead theatre partners around the UK, plus 14 other theatre partners and nearly 2,000 performing and production volunteers. Coverage in the days that followed – including online nationwide footage from the BBC, from the beginning inducted as a partner into the project's secret preparation – generated a secondary audience, reckoned to total around 30 million.

Those who had made this ground-breaking artwork together – working in secrecy, some for more than 18 months – had found it impossible to know what kind of public reactions to expect. Many feared that the soldiers might predominantly be ignored. But from the earliest moments, all around the UK both through personal encounters and online, the project found its alchemy. As a result, it has been widely acknowledged as a 'masterstroke of commemoration' as one commentator put it<sup>2</sup>, and celebrated across the visual art, theatre, public art, digital media, creative industry and heritage contexts for its audience impact, modes of engagement, geographical reach, and the new forms of collaboration required.

The making of *We're Here Because We're Here* was a game-changing achievement. It is a testament to the power of what an artist



Photography by Eoin Carey

can envision in response to moments of public meaning – in this instance concerned with conflict, memory, trauma and loss – and an emphatic fulfilment of 14-18 NOW's vision to work with leading contemporary artists to offer new perspectives in response to the past. It was the fruit of deep and generous collaboration from all involved – whether institution or individual, professional or non-professional – who together realised the artistic language, scale and unprecedented secrecy desired. And it was its own tribute to 14-18 NOW's vision and boldness as a commissioner, and then to the committed and skilful producing required from the many partners involved.

Discussions began in early 2015 when, having contributed to 14-18 NOW's 2014 opening season with *Lights Out*, a free digital artwork of four short films that marked the moment when the First World War began, Deller started to consider with Jenny Waldman, director of 14-18 NOW, one of the programme's most challenging questions: how do you commemorate

the centenary of the Battle of the Somme? How do you mark a catastrophe whose first day remains the bloodiest single day in UK military history? According to Deller the idea took shape, pretty much in its final form, a few days later, on his bike. He has since described the work as “the memorial that I would want to see”.

Deller felt the work had to be visible in the context of everyday life in Britain, moving around the UK with an unpredictability in which the participants, by their actions, took the memorial uninvited and unexplained to the public. In a society where no-one has direct experience of the First World War and where traditional forms of commemoration now hold less meaning for many, the work needed to pass through the ordinary landscapes of everyday life, rather than the historic, commemorative, or controlled environment of the gallery or concert hall. It ought to be free, open and available to a lot of people in a lot of places, and free of interpretation, too: no contextual information or suggestion of what to think, just each soldier's card. The visual and human impact of a live encounter with the soldiers, underscored by the authenticity of each uniform and the way their presence would be framed and staged, would then also lead people – Deller hoped – to share the unexplained encounter through social media, documenting and distributing the work more widely. At all times and in all ways, the task was to avoid sentimentality. It therefore required complete confidentiality – however demanding this might be to achieve – so that the public could encounter the soldiers without preparation or explanation, allowing a spontaneous, unmediated response.

After a fast-moving exchange of emails and discussions – as Deller comments, commissioning doesn't often happen like this – Waldman, her team, and the 14-18 NOW trustees quickly understood how brilliantly this idea could engage the general public in ways different from anything else that they would be able to receive in response to this devastating anniversary. Despite the fact that the work's ambition would entail demanding challenges and risks – not least the difficulty of making such a large, nationally distributed work in conditions of complete secrecy, and the impossibility of knowing in advance what the public response

to the soldiers would be – 14-18 NOW committed itself fully to taking responsibility for the project's commission and realisation.

The fundamental task was to work out the best way to produce this work. The performance language required and the ways that the soldiers would be present on the streets also needed to be developed further. Early on, an exploration of film production methods gave way to an emerging artistic dialogue with Rufus Norris, to whom Jenny Waldman had introduced Deller to help explore these performative dimensions. Out of this, a fuller artistic collaboration to establish the performance language that would best serve Deller's vision emerged. This in turn led to an institutional collaboration, with the National Theatre and then the Birmingham Rep committing themselves as co-producers, and helping to secure the wider network of nine other producing theatres across the UK to give the project the geographic reach it required. These included the national theatres in Scotland and Wales, who in turn recruited a further 14 theatre partners in their nations and regions. The requirement for secrecy limited the scope for fundraising, and so 14-18 NOW – in collaboration with Birmingham Rep who secured a major Arts Council England grant towards the project – committed upfront to meet the project's substantial costs across the UK through its core support from Heritage Lottery Fund, Arts Council England and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport.

These theatres have standout expertise in community engagement and participatory practice. It now became possible to introduce a further layer of intention to the project, relevant to 14-18 NOW's remit as a commissioner: to recruit volunteer participants to represent the soldiers, offering them a meaningful engagement with the wider context of the First World War, the Somme, and the deaths of the soldiers they represented, and an artistic experience with lasting value and impact for those involved.

The project demanded a scale and form of collaboration never previously seen, in order to enable the simultaneous and artistically consistent presence of more than 1,400 soldiers around the UK through the 12 hours of the event. 14-18 NOW set about devising a project structure

that could achieve this. A radial structure of hub and sub-hub theatres was coordinated by a lead team, which combined 14-18 NOW team members with individuals largely seconded from the National Theatre and Birmingham Rep. Individuals in this lead team were responsible for devising and disseminating the performance language, researching and procuring the individually specified costumes, devising artistic guidelines and contextual resources for hubs to use, devising and overseeing the approach to stage management and risk management on the day, and leading on the overarching communications strategy. In turn, the theatres committed to recruit and train the volunteers in their locality, and to deliver the project artistically and logistically on the day.

At the heart of this structure lay the artistic collaboration between Deller and Norris, who began work to understand more about the performance language to be used by the soldiers. It was decided early that they would remain silent throughout, apart from singing the song, and the search began, through discussions, workshops, and ultimately through three test days in the streets of Birmingham, Salisbury and London, to identify the dynamics, patterns, manoeuvres and nuanced details of performance – achievable by non-professional, volunteer performers – that would generate the street presence and audience impact desired. Deller spoke about the frequently reported sightings, during and after the First World War, of dead soldiers by their loved ones, affected by trauma and loss. Working also with Emily Lim – senior artistic associate at the NT and an expert in working artistically with non-professionals – a language emerged that sought both reticence and undeniable presence, a sense of endless inactivity and bursts of driven activity, an ability to both connect but ultimately withhold from the public, and a silent mix of formal patterns of movement with apparently random yet coordinated changes of state. The language was identified down to the smallest details: taking and holding the gaze of a member of the public, and the difference between looking away sideways to break the gaze, rather than looking down; or the nature and speed of their walking, suggestive of looped purpose and command, but beyond clear meaning.

In parallel, costume designers undertook historical research to identify soldiers who died on the first day of the Somme from regiments local to the hubs and sub-hubs. They then researched the individual uniforms each soldier would have been wearing that day, specific to regiment and rank in braids, buttons and overall design. Historical identities and uniforms were allotted to participants, and costume measurements taken. The resulting order to the military uniform supplier contracted in Poland for uniforms, webbing, boots, helmets and sacks was the largest non-military order they had ever received.

Stage management at each hub began the process of planning carefully timed walking routes for their soldiers, drawing on local knowledge to meet Deller's vision about how they might pass through each locality: whether the shop floor of Wolverhampton Ikea, the slopes of Mount Snowdon, the ring roads of Salisbury or Milton Keynes, the platforms of Preston station, the shopping streets of Newcastle, or the ferry from Lerwick. Deller remained involved in the detail of this throughout.

Lim and Deller worked in depth with the project's associate director at each hub to communicate the vision and performance language of the piece, while also supporting them to find their own way to prepare, rehearse and empower the local volunteers to realise the work during their long day alone on the streets. At visits midway through rehearsals, Deller communicated his vision and intention for the piece directly to participants, and together he and Lim were able to react further to the quality of the performance language emerging in the groups. Details of tone and dynamic continued to emerge in response through to the late stages of rehearsal.

The hubs and sub-hubs had led on the recruitment of participants. The brief was for males aged 16-45, with short hair or a willingness to have it cut, with no beard, visible tattoos or piercings, and a physique and fitness that would correspond to soldiers at the time. This went against the fully inclusive ethos of participatory theatre practice, and generated considered discussion amongst partners, who decided to work with this requirement as an authentic aspect of the project's vision.



Recruitment was much harder than all partners had anticipated, with few participants of this demographic already in their networks, placing great demands on the teams delivering the project in each locality, who pursued every possible avenue to draw participants into the project. Many established new relationships with local groups and individuals as a result – whether sheep farmers, lawyers, shop assistants, social workers, doctors, flight attendants, portrait artists, postal workers or GCSE students – but it proved impossible around the country to achieve the targets initially identified. These targets had been a guess, identified without knowing what would be required to achieve the level of impact desired. In fact, the impact of the 1,400 plus soldiers on the day far outstripped initial expectations.

The requirement for complete secrecy of course made recruitment harder, because it was not possible to explain much about the project as a way of encouraging involvement. A strict and demanding code of confidentiality was devised, and the full nature, reach and extent of the project were only explained to volunteers in the last day or two before the event itself. Once they had joined the project, the ownership of the need for secrecy amongst participants was extraordinary, in turn becoming fierce protectors and respecters of its confidentiality.

While the costume effort, route planning and work with volunteers continued, 14-18 NOW set about building what was to prove a phenomenally successful communications strategy for the project overall. Known only by the code name 'Project Octagon' right through to the reveal announcement of the project at 7pm on the day itself, the communications brief turned the normal goals of arts communications campaigns on their heads: complete secrecy and anonymity until the conclusion of the live event itself, then a coordinated media announcement and maximum awareness from that point on. To this end, the team set about building digital expertise in order to live stream social media posts from other platforms onto the unbranded [www.becausewearehere.co.uk](http://www.becausewearehere.co.uk) as they came in on the day itself. Hubs and sub-hubs were invited to cover the communications ground required in their local contexts, a group of online influencers were recruited in advance to fan the flames of social media,



Photography by Paul Riddell



Photography by Andrew Fox, Location: High Street Birmingham

and a major partnership was formed with the BBC. The BBC's director of arts mobilised support across TV, radio, and online, together with national, regional and local platforms, and a short film made by Deller was broadcast on the 6.30pm regional news, alongside footage captured throughout the day. This was then made available on the BBC website for several weeks afterwards. At 7pm, the BBC and The Guardian revealed the project, with live coverage, online content, and an exclusive written piece in The Guardian about its making and impact that day. It had been a challenging context for media coverage, as the EU referendum result had been announced just seven days earlier. But in fact, coverage proved extensive locally, nationally and even internationally.

As well as presenting a challenge in media terms, the referendum result also turned out to strengthen the response experienced by the public. Social media provided a window onto this. Posts described the welcome way in which an encounter with the soldiers became a powerfully emotional experience shared amongst strangers, at a time when the referendum had brought feelings of division so recently to life. Others commented on the sacrifice made by First World War soldiers in contrast to the behaviour of politicians in the days following the referendum. Some explicitly drew connections between the ambition to unite Europe – through the formation of the European Community and the EU – and the soldiers as a reminder of one of the continent's greatest conflicts.

As the day played out, a control room at the National Theatre brought together the 14-18 NOW producing and communication teams and the project's lead team to monitor reports on progress and reactions around the country, respond to any unexpected situations, manage social media streams, and ensure anonymity until the reveal that evening. There had been extensive scenario-planning to manage and respond to risks on the day, but none of this needed to be activated. Similarly, the volunteers had prepared in depth for more complex responses from the public: how they might respond, and how to stay safe in all eventualities. None of this was necessary. Instead, the questions from participants as they rested over lunch, out of view of the public, became: "What are we supposed to do when they hug us? When they cry?". No-one had prepared for this.

As the reactions took shape, it was clear that the public were claiming social media as a landscape of response: a truly public realm. Just as Deller had envisaged – though on a much greater scale than he or anyone else had hoped – people reached for social media to bear witness and to share experiences of encountering the soldiers, to seek out others, and to reflect on the meaning of what they had seen. Posts travelled to others much further afield, live and online experiences merged, and people started to grasp that something of wider cultural importance had happened, which was then also talked about, understood, imagined or taken in from afar. In parks, stations, buses, on platforms, beaches, concourses, in shopping centres, streets and underpasses, and then also online: strangers meeting, indeed.

#### *We're Here Because We're Here*

Commissioned by 14-18 NOW, the UK's arts programme for the First World War centenary.

Conceived and created by Turner Prize-winning artist Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, director of the National Theatre.

Produced by Birmingham Repertory Theatre and the National Theatre with Lyric Theatre Belfast, Manchester Royal Exchange, National Theatre of Scotland, National Theatre Wales, Northern Stage, Playhouse Derry-Londonderry, Salisbury Playhouse, Sheffield Theatres and Theatre Royal Plymouth.

The project was supported by Aberystwyth Arts Centre, the Belgrade Theatre, Bolton Octagon, Bristol Old Vic, Storyhouse, Left Coast, Leicester Curve, Nuffield Theatre, Oldham Coliseum, Pontio, Shetland Arts, Sutton Coldfield College BMet, the Artrix Bromsgrove, the Lichfield Garrick and Volcano.

Media partner: BBC

We're Here Because We're Here was made possible by an Ambition for Excellence Award from Arts Council England and by the Heritage Lottery Fund, with additional support from Paul Hamlyn Foundation, Creative Scotland and Art Fund. 14-18 NOW is principally funded by the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England, and by the Department of Culture, Media and Sport.

#### Lead team

Artist – Jeremy Deller

Director – Rufus Norris

14-18 NOW Director – Jenny Waldman

Senior Associate Director – Emily Lim

Producer – Jennifer Crook

Producer – Emma Dunton

Senior Producer – Pádraig Cusack

Costume Supervisors – Anna Lewis and Helen Johnson

Lead Company Manager – Ruth Morgan

Lead Participation Programme – Steve Ball

Communications Director – Claire Eva

Marketing and Communications – The Cogency and Bolton & Quinn

Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> A major five-year arts programme to mark the centenary of the First World War in the UK, working with arts and heritage partners across the UK to commission new artworks from leading contemporary artists, musicians, designers and performers, in response to the period 1914-18.
- <sup>2</sup> Maria Balshaw, *The Art Newspaper* 17 January 2017



## Kate Tyndall

Kate Tyndall is an independent arts consultant. She was invited by 14-18 NOW to follow the making of *We're Here Because We're Here* through in-depth interviews with 35 of the professionals involved.



## Claire Doherty (Editor)

Claire Doherty is an arts director, producer and writer. Previously, she was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations, an international arts producing company. For full details on the 15-year period of projects and for access to publications and resources, visit [www.situations.org.uk](http://www.situations.org.uk).

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An international collection of essays on arts in the public realm.

The urbanist Richard Sennett has written that ‘the public realm can simply be defined as a place where strangers meet’. As the number of us living in cities rises, the pressures on the shared spaces of a city will increase; the places in which our future relationships to one another are negotiated. This is particularly resonant for the British Council, an international organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents through arts, education, science and the English language. Building on its multifocal work in cities, the British Council commissioned a collection of essays to explore different perspectives on how artistic and cultural experiences affect individual and collective participation and action in the public realm.

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