

Jeremy Deller's 'It Is What It Is' at the New Museum

Real talking Iraqis undermine a particularly gooey art-ideology

By [Ben Davis](#) Wednesday, Mar 18 2009



Details

**Jeremy Deller: 'It Is What It Is:
Conversations About Iraq'**
The New Museum of Contemporary Art
235 Bowery, 212-219-1222
Through March 22

Call it the artwork-as-teach-in. For his current New Museum show, British artist [Jeremy Deller](#) has organized a daily program of experts on the [Iraq](#) War to take shifts around a coffee table and speak with the public. Depending on when you come, you'll find people like Donny George Youkhanna, former head of [Baghdad](#)'s National Museum, or [Amelia Templeton](#), an expert on Iraqi refugees. When I visited, it was [Nour Al-Khal](#), an Iraqi woman, former translator, now a refugee herself living in New York.

Yet here's the crazy thing: Deller strenuously asserts that this isn't a political project—to which you might well ask, "What could be more political than selecting which voices will represent Iraq to

an information-hungry public?"

In the art world, such projects are dubbed "relational aesthetics"—art focused on direct human interaction. [Rirkrit Tiravanija](#)'s gesture of serving free Thai food to gallery-goers stands as the canonical example. This gooey art-ideology has always been somewhat suspect—it assumes a public so alienated that any basic act of community takes on righteous utopian import. Here, it allows Deller to pretend that the merit of his piece isn't any particular "opinion," but the chance for the viewer to "experience" actual people connected with Iraq, as if his selections themselves didn't make a statement.

In the end, this simply means that the "opinion" the project presents is a conflicted one. Some of Deller's guest experts, like [Anthony Arnove](#) or [Arun Gupta](#), are writers who have penned important critiques of U.S. policy. But at the same time, in the second stage of the project (starting March 25), the artist will take a road trip through Middle America with two figures: [Esam Pasha](#), an Iraqi artist who worked for the Coalition, and [Jonathan Harvey](#), who served—no joke—as an Army propaganda officer. Their writings for the project make it unclear what an encounter with them will add that's different from the embedded voices we mainly already get.

During my visit, I asked Al-Khal about her perceptions of the show's audience. "I feel that they don't trust the media," she replied. For the chance to meet Al-Khal and hear her personal account of violence and displacement, I have to be grateful. But it's too bad that in presenting his project, Deller falls into the same trap that so many journalists did in the lead-up to the Iraq mess: pursuing political balance rather than searching hard for truth.