

arts

What is the City but the People?



Arthur Smith, left, and Jeremy Deller take the Tube. Drivers on the Piccadilly Line have been given Deller's passport-sized book of quotations, *What is the City but the People*, by Sean O'Grady

This is your driver speaking ...

Why have Seneca and Goethe replaced announcements of delays on the Piccadilly Line? Arthur Smith finds out

The train, already half an hour late, had come to a halt somewhere outside Doncaster on an April day that was colder than April days are meant to be. In common with my fellow travellers, I was feeling chilly, cramped and thoroughly glum. Would I make it to Edinburgh before I died of frustration or lack of oxygen? Would spring ever come?

"Good afternoon everyone, this is your driver speaking. Apologies for the delay but there are signal problems ahead and we will be held here for another ten minutes or so." Oh no. Sighs, groans and tuts ran along the compartment. Outside it began to snow. "Sorry about this," the voice continued. "Life, it's rubbish sometimes, isn't it?" At his heartfelt remark there were a few exchanged looks and I released an unexpected snigger. Then he added: "My wife tells me it's 28 degrees in Barbados. We can but dream." Everyone in the carriage now smiled and several of us laughed out loud. The natural invisible barriers between passengers disappeared and we were united briefly in a communal pleasure at the driver's bold wit. My terminable journey seemed less oppressive and warmer as a little closer. It was a transformative moment, like one you might experience in a theatre or an art gallery.

Later I turned this incident into a stand up comedy routine in which the driver proceeds to reminisce about his life, reveals the trouble that he is having with his wife ("25 happy years — and then we met each other") and ends by singing an impassioned version of *Delilah*. While no one would want a driver who is auditioning for *Britain's Got Talent*, there is no doubt that a human moment among the regular barrage of instructions we all hear on public transport is something to be cherished. It is the opposite of the train mantra of our age — "If you see anything suspicious please report it to a member of staff". Various friends, I discovered, had a story similar to mine and all of them had found the occasion to be memorable.

So I was pleased to join the artist Jeremy Deller's recent project — an experiment to be conducted on the Piccadilly Line of the London Underground. His original suggestion — a day with no announcements at all — was vetoed by Tube bosses. "So I came up with the idea to give staff a collection of quotes and the idea grew from there." Deller's little Piccadilly-blue booklet takes its title from Shakespeare — *What is the City but the People?* — and contains a range of proverbs and quotations from lofty *biens pensants* such as Goethe, Camus, Seneca and William Burroughs.

Tube drivers have been invited — though not required — to read out over the intercom any of these bons mots

that take their fancy. The aim is to create the kind of happy ripples that I and others had experienced on that slow train to Edinburgh, to create a rare connection between driver and passenger, to make the sometimes dehumanising business of commuting a little less alienating. Maybe people might be moved or enlightened by the quotes. Some drivers, no doubt, felt reticent about departing from their usual diet of "change here for the Circle and District line" type announcements — we are, total, thank goodness, show-offs and stand up comedians — so, in my capacity as an "expert communicator" (he said, I am on Radio 4 sometimes), I was tasked to offer tips and encouragement.

In order to give me an idea of what it was like to be a Tube worker and to try delivering a few sayings myself, I spent an afternoon lurking around backstage in the control rooms and offices of Transport for London — and then I drove a train from Acton Town to Leicester Square! Wow! When I was in short trousers every boy's second choice for a job (after playing professional football) was to be a train driver. I was mightily excited as I climbed into the thin chamber at the front of the train, released the dead man's handle, put the control handle to motoring position and set off towards Chiswick Park.

Oh all right, I didn't drive it myself, but only because I had no idea and because it would have been illegal. As ▶

“One woman banged on the Tube driver's cab door and said, 'Thank you for making my day!'”



Ken Russell

◀ we gathered speed Richard, the urbane driver whose cab I had invaded, taught me some Tube jargon, including the necessity that "all cocks are up". As we whizzed past Turnham Green and Stamford Brook towards Hammersmith, I learnt that the Piccadilly Line is known to insiders as "the Pic", the Hammersmith and City is "the Hot and Cold" and, most pleasingly, the Bakerloo Line is "the Boog-a-loo". Meanwhile, the automated female voice that announces the names of stations is nicknamed "Sonya" because she "get Sonya" nerves.

It was time for me to try the intercom. Barging Sonya aside, I started with a regular announcement spoken by Pic drivers several times a day about changing lines and eastbound tracks. I fluffed it badly and felt like an actor who has dried on his first night. Richard smiled kindly. As the train left Baron's Court it descended into the "pipe" that does not emerge back into daylight until Bounds Green 40 minutes later. I launched my first quotation — from André Gide: "Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again. Please remember to take all your possessions when leaving the train." I found I was unable to resist adding comic flourishes at the end of the quotes. "As the Native American proverb has it," I intoned, "Never criticise a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins." The coda belongs to Billy Connelly: "...and then, who cares? Because you're a mile away and you've got his moccasins."

What did my unseen, unheard audience make of this? I had no idea. Perhaps they were chuckling at the novelty, or maybe moved by the profundity of my wise words. Quite possibly they were infuriated by another invasion of their thoughts and wished they could ram an Oyster card up my fundament. Reactions, I was told, have so far been favourable. I heard that in a couple of trial runs passengers had passed the driver, smiling and giving the thumbs up. One woman had banged on the door and said: "Thank you for making my day!"

So I was thrilled when a chap tapped at the window in Leicester Square station. He ignored me and spoke sharply to Richard. "Driver, there is a man in the third carriage down drinking from a bottle in a brown bag — I think it may be alcohol." He turned and marched off towards the exit, which prompted Richard to remark that passengers only ever complain when they are leaving the train. Presumably the man was expecting Richard to call the Transport Police and have the suspicious man exposed and then arrested — not a course of action calculated to please the passengers stuck at the platform or those in the trains queuing up behind, any more than the (alleged) secret tippler. Perhaps the officious man should have heeded the German proverb in the booklet: "He who digs a pit for another will fall into it himself." And, having delivered this, I decided, it was appropriate to add the classic: "Mind the gap."

One of the reasons that Deller's project appealed to Art on the Underground (who have given us, among other things "Poems on the Underground") was that it provides a chance for the drivers to have some contact with the people in their care and for the passengers to remember that the train is not driven by a robot. It can be lonely, monotonous work being a Tube driver, isolated in a quiet little world at the front, ploughing back and forth endlessly between Heathrow and Cockfosters. Although the job is mostly routine, drivers always have to be alert in a way that most of us do not. If I make a mistake in my job it's embarrassing, but no one is going to get hurt. Richard did not take his eyes off the track ahead as the black walls flowed by towards the light at the end of every tunnel.

Is this art? Well, it is certainly in the mould of fashionable public events such as Antony Gormley's fourth plinth caper and Deller's own recent procession in Manchester. It is work that Gormley describes as "at the interface of life and art". Civic art once meant an heroic statue of a general on a horse in the town square, but these days we are all becoming involved. It is art's answer to reality TV. At present the scheme is only on the Piccadilly Line, but maybe it will spread to the rest of the Tube and eventually the rail network. Then, next time you are holed up in a stationary carriage, seething with despair, you may be comforted by some driver-philosopher referencing Mahatma Gandhi: "There is more to life than increasing its speed."

Well, we are approaching the last sentence in this paragraph where this article will terminate. Thank you for travelling with me and let me leave you with this final aperçu: "Two things are infinite," said Albert Einstein, "the Universe and human stupidity" — and I'm not sure about the Universe." Have a nice day.

Further information at: www.tfl.gov.uk/art

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No home should be without these seductive fusions of art and design



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baroque taste of decadence and opulence. The Scary Room ("Heaven and Hell") has some poignant works, most notably the bas-relief chaise longue and lamp, where one reclines midway between Dante's *Inferno* and *Paradiso*. But the taxidermy art gives me the shudders.

Contemporary design in *Telling Tales* that no home should be without:

Proust Chair by Mendini — a pointillist abstract turned into a plush, comfy throne of mosaic colours, looking like candied sunlight, prism-ing from dawn to sunset.

Fig Leaf Wardrobe by Boontje (pictured left) — resembling big green angel wings of 616 cascading copper leaves, opening out to an inner stage where *Waiting for Godot*'s solitary naked tree waits against a blue silk Magritte sky. Who could bear to hang clothing on that beauty?

Sculpt Wardrobe by Maarten Baas — as when you put on wet glasses to look at a hand-crafted walnut wardrobe, and it melts into a gorgeously wonky shape. Want it, want it, want it.

Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend by Crasset — wouldn't be out of place in old Hollywood. This suspended art deco-like lantern is a cut diamond pendant within which dangles a smaller diamond. Marilyn Monroe would've loved it.

Aluminium Table by Fredrikson Stallard — a big red puzzle-piece shape, red lacquered steel, turning an enlarged Rorschach inkblot from a psychological test into a seemingly levitating table.

Sensory Deprivation Skull by Joep van Lieshout — a giant white fibreglass skull with a doorway for entry, lined in luxuriant fur, big enough for two. New possibilities for any sequel of my film *Altered States*.

Mushroom Cloud, Nevada 57, red stuffed toy by Dunne & Raby with Anastassiades — every grown-up child should have one. Cosy up to the possibility of nuclear disaster.

Robber Baron cabinet by Studio Jobs — though a revision of a 1700s armoire, it reminds me of a gorgeous brass and tortoiseshell bank vault, with a hole blown through its door for easy access. Made entirely of gilded bronze.

Cinderella Table by Verhoeven — Brad Pitt bought one. I prefer the plywood map version, its cut layers like a topographical map, folded around space into a gorgeous table.

Honeycomb Vase by Liberty — who placed wire in a hive and actually tricked bees into building a vase-shaped honeycomb around it. Fragile, imprecise and butterscotch-luminous, it's a life cycle of flowers serving bees serving flowers.

This exhibition will give you disturbing nightmares — those gold maggots in the ear of the fox — but the most beautiful dreams, too. Like any good dream, you can analyse each art piece for meta-meanings, but hugging the image close without conclusion is the better medicine. To drift through the hologram deck of this fairytale exhibit is my idea of good sex.

Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design at the V&A Museum (020-7942 2000; vam.ac.uk) Until Oct 18.

What's the deal here? I'm beginning to think that contemporary

designers who fuse art and design have more than their fair share of geniuses in the field. I'm kind of cross about it. For one thing, I can't afford any of it — and neither can you.

It can't hurt to look, though, can it? To look is free. At the elaborate V&A exhibit *Telling Tales: Fantasy and Fear in Contemporary Design*, you can stroll through the magical "Forest Glade", into the "Enchanted Castle" and conclude in the pretty dungeon, with its romanticised bloodletting — the room called "Heaven and Hell". Tales of innocence, experience and freefall. A sensual pilgrim's progress through modern re-imaginings of Rackham, Dore and Blake.

These are pieces of designed art with real or supposed functional value — furniture, ceramics, a bathtub, slippers — but with the pristine rarity that only European master craftsmen can give them. Each piece a limited or single edition (owing to the cost of materials and process), these sculptural hybrids are an imaginative marriage of storytelling and psychology, of fantasy and utility. This is a most seductive exhibition.

I ploughed through the curator Gareth Williams's rich book on the exhibition, sweat forming on my brow. Art criticism can be so hyper-intellectual that it makes my teeth ache. Still, I bet he'd be good

company for a cup of tea in the Garden of Eden of his exhibit, sitting on those flyaway scissor-cut chairs — perfect for a Wonderland mad tea party. We could pour from the exhibition's pig-skull teapot.

Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* is my second favourite film of all time. The candelabra with human arms, the tear that becomes a diamond — that's what this exhibit is. The near-repulsion of otherwise familiar forms reshaped as if by animal power or alchemy, combined with the delicacy of beauty untouched. One feels sad when the Beast becomes the handsome prince — something is lost, he's too ordinary. Cocteau's merger of beauty and the threat of the otherworld is where we come to feel at home by the end of the film — and by the end of the *Telling Tales* exhibit, too.

The elite designer art objects on display are narratives, each implying a story — whether a timeless fairytale, a modernist fable or a postmodern myth. The "Forest Glade" is full of pieces re-envisioning innocence, lace and woodland heavens. The "Enchanted Castle" has a Bluebeard and

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Lathe Chair VIII, by Sebastian Brajkovic