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A curiously unengaging victor

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IT HAS not been a vintage year for the Turner Prize. It has served up neither controversy to excite the populists nor quality to please the purists and has provided only the barest aesthetic nourishment. Even the result was predictable. Jeremy Deller was the bookie's favourite from the start, with the right characteristics for victory, being perceived as young, funky and above all accessible. Within the context of the weak shortlist - which reached a new nadir in Kutlug Ataman's home videos of Turkish peasants reminiscing about their former lives - Deller's triumph deserves qualified acceptance. He is part of a new breed who do not make traditional works of art but instead aim to bring people together in the making and experiencing of the work, creating a genre dubbed "relational aesthetics". Previously Deller has joined with filmmaker Mike Figgis to recreate the Battle of Orgreave, the key confrontation in the 1984 miners' strike. Also in the gallery is an eclectic library of books to peruse, including the Butler and Hutton reports. It sounds good in theory but in reality people drift by what they regard merely as curiosities. Langlands and Bell, whose elegant work questions power structures, would have been worthy winners, but presumably it was deemed too oblique for such a public prize. However, even their contribution could not disguise the aesthetic and intellectual poverty of the exercise. Indeed the most exciting moment had nothing to do with the work, but came when Tate director Sir Nicholas Serota lambasted the British press for celebrating the recent Momart fire in which much art was lost. In a pathetic exaggeration he likened the response to the Nazi book burnings of the Thirties. In a society where artists are free, as they should be, to make work that shocks and appals some, it behoves the director of our national contemporary art gallery to cherish freedom of speech. Or, if he prefers, he could move to a totalitarian state where the press is more likely to be "on message".

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