**Keynote Session: Jeremy Deller and Mary Beard in conversation**

ANDREW: Good evening, I am Andrew Ellis, Director of Art UK. Before I introduce Mary and Jeremy, I would like to welcome all our guests who are joining us tonight, we've got a very large group of guests joining us from around the world. Indeed, we have guests from 14 countries around the world as well as across the UK. Really wonderful to have you all joining us tonight. As you can see, we are using Zoom webinar. That means you can pour another glass of wine, open a noisy, crunchy munchy packet of Mini Cheddars and no‑one will hear you. The conversation will last around 35 to 40 minutes. You can pose questions on the Q&A as we proceed. Those will accumulate and I will then pose those questions to Jeremy and Mary at the end of the event. We aim to finish at around 7.00. If you would like to use the captions, there's a CC button at the bottom of the screen, so please just click on that. I suspect everyone on this call is familiar with Art UK. In short, work revolves around democratising access to the nation's art collection. But here I just want to dwell for a few minutes on the sculpture project. Because this two‑day conference of which this event is part, marks the culmination this year of an extraordinary project. Indeed, it's interesting that it was just a few feet from here in my kitchen that in 2012 a number of my colleagues and I came together for dinner to talk about what would follow the big oil painting digitisation project we were just about to finish, which had taken us ten years or so. Would we move on to do water colours, would it be prints and as it happened we decided in the end it would be sculpture, sculpture of the last thousand years. Little did we know in 2012 it would take us over four years to fund that project. The project started in 2017 and it finishes this year. So over the next few months over 50,000 sculptures from within public collections from museums and other public institutions will join the site and by the autumn of this year some 15,000 public sculptures outdoors, the subject of tonight's conversation, they will also join the Art UK website. Given the intense interest in public sculpture at the moment, the timing could not be better. This will have been the biggest sculpture cataloguing exercise ever undertaken in the UK. It will have immeasurable impact on the studying and awareness of sculpture and hopefully also the enjoyment of sculpture. Telling the stories behind those objects is already something we're starting to do on UK which will bel focus for us over the next few years as will imbedding our sculpture into our learning resources building on the extraordinary learning engagement activities that have been part of this project. Including making films with young people about sculpture, taking great sculptures into schools through our masterpieces in schools programme. This has been a very significant undertaking. In total, some 100 members of staff and freelancers have been involved. Some 500 volunteers have been involved, many taking photographs of the outdoor sculptures. But it's also a project that has involved working with partners, including the PMSA, the BBC, the Royal Society of sculptors, the Royal Photographic Society, VocalEyes, Culture Street and the Factum Foundation. In addition we have worked with hundreds of collections up and down the country and with thousands of artists working with them to receive their copyright consent to reproduce their works. Of course, none of this would have been possible without our funders, so in total we need today raise £3.8 million. The National Lottery gave us £2.8 million and once that funding was agreed, I have to say they have been the most brilliant partners, absolutely fantastic, to work with and I think we owe them a debt of gratitude because it was very much their thinking to make engagement and learning a key part of this project before the funding was agreed. I think that has been so very important. In addition we had to raise another £1 million of matched funding. That came from Arts Council, from Scottish government, Henry Moore foundation and others, and the Garfield Weston foundation. In total over 90 institutions and members of the public contributed to that fundraising, many of whom are on this call tonight. So a massive thank you to you. As I have indicated, this has involved so many colleagues who have worked so brilliantly on this. But I would like to draw attention to one particular colleague tonight, Katey Goodwin, our Deputy Director. Katey led the fundraising, she has led the project and she's arranged this conference. She's managed an extraordinarily complex with aplomb, assured professionalism, calmness and great charm. So to you Katey, an enormous thank you from all of us, for everything that you have done on this. Without further ado, let's move on to tonight's conversation between Mary Beard and Jeremy Deller, who are going to share their thoughts about the role of art and sculpture in public places at this time of great interest in public sculpture across the UK. Let me start with Jeremy. One of our best known artists described recently on a Front Row interview with Jeremy as an alchemist of unexpected combinations. He won the Turner Prize in 2004, was behind the remarkable We're Here Because We're Here in 2016, and I think we should of course add was in the winning team in the Christmas University Challenge. Very, very warm welcome to you Jeremy. And of course, Mary Beard, country's best known classicist. Professor at the University of Cambridge. Mary is an author and broadcaster and most importantly for us tonight she is our patron this year. So over to you Mary and you are going to start off the conversation.

MARY: I hope we are all properly unmuted. Jeremy and I last came face‑to‑face in the summer at Stonehenge, rather bizarrely, so this virtual meeting is a bitter‑sweet memory of when you could travel the country previously and we hope we will do again. I wanted to kick this discussion off by being completely honest and saying that public sculpture came very much into the popular arena with what happened to the sculpture of Colston in Bristol, and when I watched the toppling of Colston, I have to say that I felt quite excited, I felt something was happening, somebody was taking notice of something. I thought it was in a funny way a good moment. Even though I occasionally masquerade as an art historian I wondered what Jeremy thought about watching that footage?

JEREMY: We are both historians. I agree with you, sculpture itself, the statue, it wasn't necessarily even an artwork, that's something we might want to talk about but the way it was taken down and put into the dock was actually a very poetic gesture, or act. I'm quite interested to see how it will be displayed in the museum later, if they will keep all the marks from that, or try and restore it in some way. I hope they don't. Because that's part of the ongoing story about that statue really. So I thought it was quite satisfied in a way. You are right, maybe we shouldn't be saying that, but I thought it made sense.

MARY: I have been told it will keep its marks and be displayed lying down and not standing up. But we will see. What I felt more gloomy about though was not that moment, which for me was very exciting, it was a real moment about a work of art, however you want to call it in the public domain. I felt that the discussions about statues that have followed that moment have been much less uplifting, have been rather crude and have come down to I think very disappointing polarisations between the statue upholders, the statuephiles and the enemies of statues in a way that's got us almost nowhere really in thinking about this.

JEREMY: I think you are right, it became politicised. Even though it was a political act in itself, but it did become very quickly politicised probably because the Government took a very quick and definite position on it. I actually went to one of the protect the sculptures, protect the statues events in Parliament Square, which was a very strange event, because it was about 3,000 men mainly standing around waiting for something to happen, which didn't. It was quite an ugly atmosphere. There was a photograph. Can you put up our Gandhi, please. Michael is doing our images. It was a strange event, because nothing really was happening, but what was happening, what did happen was that Gandhi and Nelson Mandela were covered up for a protect the statues event because I think they felt they were going to be attacked by the people. It was a very strange atmosphere, what really ended up, it was just a lot of people went there to fight the police. That's what it became. It was quite an ugly atmosphere. But yes it very quickly became part of the ongoing culture war.

MARY: In some ways, without some kind of basic ground rules being established. I mean, it does seem to me that apart from a very, very, very few people who are probably are borderline pathology state, there isn't anybody who wants all statues to stay up forever. There's very few people who think great, this lovely statue of Hitler was put up in my local square in 1939 and it would be a real shame to get rid of it because it would be destroying history. So we're arguing not about whether public sculpture is in violet, we are arguing about where you draw the line and where on the spectrum offence happens or things should be moved, and that's what we're disagreeing with. It isn't a kind of ‑ we're not Trumpian here, I don't think.

JEREMY: Yes, what is the shelf life of a statue, where is the law that once a statue goes up it cannot be touched? If you think about the public realm in Britain, buildings get knocked down all the time and buildings are places where people live and have their lives and love buildings and statues, why is it that statues should be treated in such a special way. Maybe it is what they represent or there is a fear of iconoclasm in Britain. But some statues run out of their life really, don't they. Because they are meaningless after a while. The point has been made. We have forgotten who they were, because the statue is meant to be reminding you who these people are. Let's go back to our screen.

MARY: The kind of the big question that simply seems to me to get in most of the discussion - not in the kind of discussion that the people in Art UK are having, but in most of the public discussion about this, is that nobody really raises the question of what on earth we think these statues or other bits of public sculpture, not necessarily figurative statues, what they're actually for, you know? And there is a kind of - there is a sort of blanket assumption that we put up things to admire in the public realm and I'm not sure we do, honestly, or should.

JEREMY: I have a few theories, actually. One I think is anxiety, either of forgetting about people or forgetting about moments in history, and I think we're just about to come up to a massive moment of anxiety when the last surviving soldier from World War II dies, and I think that whole Captain Tom thing, the whole of that was contained within it, actually, and so you have to put up images of Keith Park and Bomber Harris in case we forget these people, that is one element, I think. Not that we will because every night on TV there is something about the Second World War, you would think it had finished last week the way it is incessantly recycled on television. And the Confederate statues were put up in the early 1920s and the civil rights era when people felt threatened so this is a sign of threat. Another on the opposite end of the spectrum for me is statues should bring happiness and joy into the public realm and some of my favourite statues are on comedians and what's interesting is the comedian statue - there is one of Ken Dodd in Liverpool, up when he was alive, there is Eric Morecambe, and they are always on the ground level so you can have your photo taken with them and they are there to animate the space around and make you feel happy and maybe we need a bit more joy in our public statues, rather than these figures on plinths looking down upon us.

MARY: But I - they challenge me, and I think productively. I'm in a privileged position here, right? And you know, I am not a person of colour looking at a slave trader, and I totally see where the difference is, but I walk through those stuffed-shirt statues or military statues in the West End in London, most of whom I haven't - whose names mean nothing to me, and they remind me of all kinds of things about where I've come from and where I am. You know, I go past and I want to put two fingers up at them and say, you know, "You didn't think I should have the vote, did you? Well, sorry, got it"! No, but they're part of a way in which I interact with the parts of history that I might choose not to remember. Now, as I say, it's easy for me to say that, it's easy for me to say that I can say 'up yours' to these stuffed shirts because I'm relatively in a position of power - I won, you know? They lost, I won. But I think that the complexity of public memory can't come down to just - I mean, you know, I like the idea of seeing people that make us laugh, but it can't come down just to seeing people we approve of...

JEREMY: No.

MARY: .in our public realm?

JEREMY: But I think then you look at how these statues are contextualised in the public space, even - what the context is, what surrounds them and how they are spoken of in the text. So you could totally change the meaning of a statue by having a text underneath that's critical of that person or questioning of their deeds and what they got up to and I think for a lot of those statues they probably need that. I know the Mayor at the moment in London has a group of people looking at statues and trying to work out what to do with them - not to take them down but how to maybe adapt and contextualise them. There are some amazing pictures from Wilmington, Virginia.

MARY: Let's see these, I think these are very good.

JEREMY: This is an amazing reaction to something, this is Robert E Lee in Wilmington, Virginia, and it was defaced, effectively, or appropriated, you could say, so his strength became his weakness, so you have these projections and there is graffiti all around him and placards and I don't know what it is like now and I don't even know if he has left, as it were, he's gone, but in the short-term, at least, I felt that was a brilliant solution. There's another image as well which you could probably show if that's all right, Michael? A kind of close-up of it - more performative. There we go - there is this performative element to it, these two ballet dancers and I just felt that was a really interesting use. And those clarification - the higher the plinth, the more contentious the person often, I think, and it's put high up so it is difficult to topple.

MARY: And the further to fall. I think plinths are extremely interesting because I think if you look at what the British Museum have done with Hans Sloane, he was on a plinth, he was on a plinth in the Enlightenment gallery and he was never looked at, because, you know, in the British Museum, column plinths are ten-a-penny and he was in the background, and the consequence of moving him and contextualising him is that he has come into a case but is now noticeable, but he is noticeable within the context of the slave trade.

JEREMY: Presumably with a text that explains this, I imagine?

MARY: With a lot of text and a lot of other images with the plans of the slave ships.

JEREMY: Yes. You see, that display - that's why museums are so brilliant, is that you can have difficult objects and difficult conversations in a relatively neutral setting. I mean obviously there's difficulty with museums now with some of the exhibits and some of the artefacts they have but museums are brilliant places to put these figures, really. We don't call it putting them on a pedestal for nothing, do we? We have that phrase, put it on a pedestal, so we take it off the pedestal and that is the reverse.

MARY: But also, the higher they go, the further they come down! But I sort of worry about that. I mean I think that museums have an important role to play here and, you know, I'm biased because I'm part of the trustees of the British Museum, and I think what they've done is excellent in recontextualising Sloane. I do get more worried, though, when I hear people say, "What should happen to him"? Right? Referring to some guy we no longer want to see, and we said, "Put him in a museum" as if a museum was going to be our 'get out of jail free' card for not destroying these guys but putting them out of sight and somehow, I mean it is a bit like your Wilmington statue - I mean I think there are many different ways forward here but one of the things that we need to be working on is surely how they can be recontextualised in public, because you know, if I think of - and this is a totally sort of mythical invented example, but let's say we put the slave trader in the Museum of Slavery and, you know, I don't imagine that most white supremacists decide of an afternoon on Sunday, you know, "Come on, darling, let's go and see the Museum of slavery, shall we"? So there is a kind of preaching to the converted that happens when, if they stayed out there, we might have a debate involving more people and more shades of opinion.

JEREMY: To have that debate, you need to literally have that statue have a debate with another statue, I would argue - you have to surround it with maybe something contemporary, some other imagery, other sculptures of some description. It might not just be text, it might have to be something else entirely that surrounds the person, the statue, let's say, whoever it is or whatever it is, to change the meaning of it and I think - I think art can help with that. I think artists actually are very helpful in this context.

MARY: Have you got any plans or even fantasies about what you would like to do? Go on, Jeremy!

JEREMY: Not necessarily with this. I'm thinking about what happens after COVID, if there is an after COVID, but that is slightly different, that is not necessarily going to be statues because that is a collective effort of the nation in a way - there are individuals, but I think it is the collective effort and how do you mark that? I've said this before but I do actually believe that the greatest war memorial for the Second World War was the NHS, so if we can think of an equivalent of that, not that I think it's going to happen, unfortunately, that was a thing rather than a person on a plinth, that would be more suitable or appropriate, really, so I'm thinking about the future, as I'm sure we all are, and what life will be like after. But I would be quite interested in that sort of thing. I'm not fishing around for work here, because I know there's a lot of people here who work in museums and stuff! But I think artists would enjoy the challenge of that recontextualisation.

MARY: It seems to me that statues and sculpture are a tremendously kind of good material for that, because of the sort of physical embodiment. I mean, nobody has got much worked up about the painting of the death of Colston in Bristol and that's partly because - I mean it's partly because he is dying, but it's partly because it's a painting, you know, and there is something about the physicality, the three-dimensionality, the kind of the idea of the body of the past kind of erupting into the public sphere which makes sculpture much more pressing for us.

JEREMY: Well, it almost makes the person immortal, doesn't it, because there they are, made of this very tough material that could last forever, presumably, even though it's not the case, they're there and they're higher up than us, they're looking over us. The text - and I'm sure - and I think they changed the text at some point but the whole situation of it was - yeah, it's the kind of hierarchy in a way, isn't it, literally and metaphorically, I mean I'm interested to see what happened in Roman times with emperors when they became unpopular - were they toppled?

MARY: I'm glad you asked that, Jeremy! Because I think this isn't our problem. I think we're terrible presentists about this, and what you do with statues you don't want now has been a cultural issue for, you know, hundreds and thousands of years, so we haven't just discovered there's a problem here, and I think it really is worth having a quick look at what other cultures did, and the Romans are only just one of them. But what you see on the screen now is a sculpture, a portrait sculpture, of the Emperor Vespasian who came to power at the end of 70 CE after a civil war that had replaced Nero, so Nero is forced to suicide at the end of 68 and there are a few short-lived emperors in between, and then Vespasian comes and here is a statue of him from the British Museum, and if we could all look around and get around it carefully, it wouldn't take us long to see that this sculpture of Vespasian has had a longer history than it looks and he has been, it seems, re-tooled and re-chiselled from being a statue of Nero. So you start with a statue of Nero, Nero falls, the new guy on the block, after a slight intermezzo is Vespasian and you change the statue into a statue of Vespasian, and I think there's all kinds of reasons for doing that and I think simple cash is one of those reasons, you know, you've just invested a large amount of money in a marble portrait of Nero and you don't want it to go to waste so you change it to Vespasian but I think in some ways it is a Colston manoeuvre, you know, it is actually - it's the - the obliteration. You can change this guy, you can actually say, "I don't want Nero now, I want Vespasian," and you can have it. I mean, more cynically, it is an indication if you are a Roman that one Emperor is much like another and all you have to do is get your chisel out and a morning's work and you can easily change one Emperor into the next, but they're facing at some level our problem of what you do with an apparently time-expired public sculpture. We're not the first.

JEREMY: There were reports of sculptures coming down when there's new emperor, or another coming up, like a turnover basically.
MARY: Sometimes they pull them down and throw them in the river, there is the Colston. Other times they get the chisel out and say I'm going to turn him into a Vespasian instead of a Nero.
JEREMY: Similar to an image, I wish I could find it. I was in India, at a museum in Calcutta and walking around the back of the museum and there was a line of basically imperial monuments that had been taken down and were just lined up and a few of Queen Victoria with her face smashed in, which has happened at some point, I don't know when. But it reminded me of that, with the nose off. They had taken them down because they had been attacked at some point but kept them.
MARY: I do think that more generally that we imagine that we're the first generation to face this and in fact every generation has, I'm sure there are people listening that will want to comment later, on putting people up in the public sphere is a controversial manoeuvre, whatever. There's a time problem. There's a political problem, it isn't self‑evidence, who are the goodies and who are the baddies.
JEREMY: It's risky and it's like if you are performing, once you are powerful, but you are very vulnerable at the same time. So you are opening yourself up to all sorts of problems potentially in the future, which obviously has happened. But I was wondering if there are any other examples from the ancient world, you had another image, I was wondering what that was?
MARY: Shall we have the bronze one. I think this is just a kind of real irony actually, an irony of the politics of public statuary and a head in the British Museum and it was found in Sudan in excavations in the early 20th century. It was it's a statue of Emperor Augustus, once the head of a full-length bronze statue we assume, which had been captured from Roman Egypt by a successful raid by the kingdom of Kush and taken off. They had chopped the head off, took it to the Kushite city of Meroe and buried it as a trophy underneath the steps of their temple. And ironically the only reason that this is one of the finest statues of the emperor Augustus to survive anywhere in the world. The only reason it survives is actually it was buried, and they were protesting the imperial regime that this guy represented, the irony is, excavated and taken back originally to Liverpool by an absolutely classic team of imperialist British archaeologists, who find the relics of the Roman Empire underneath the steps of the temple, take it back to the UK and I think he's a very nice story of the sort of long‑term complexities of damage, of preservation, but also of politics that you see. Which we'll see in Colston in fact.
JEREMY: It's not a straightforward journey for a lot of these statues. This might not have happened but let's say there's a statue of an emperor in the far‑flung part of the Roman Empire and a new emperor, would they put the name of the new emperor under the old one.
MARY: You just put a new label, nobody knows what they look like. You just put a new label, simple, isn't it. I think in a way we are a bit too hung up about statues' identity. That people in the ancient world, certainly in part, they are very happy with changing heads, not just re-sculpting, but actually kind of seeing, this is where I think you are very interesting and I want to ask you about this, they are seeing albeit in marble and bronze, they are seeing portrait sculpture as a work in progress. We have got this idea that somehow it's fixed and there forever, but what you do, including real people is actually animate and change that.
JEREMY: Yes, can we have the image that says We're Here, it's the first one. In 2014 I was asked to think about the Somme and how to commemorate the Somme and what I didn't want to do is create a sculpture that people went to or a traditional war memorial. So I just thought the idea of, because so many people died that day, the idea of human bodies was very important. It was a kinetic artwork unannounced but travelled through Britain using people. They didn't look like statues, but they were still some of the time but they were moving as well. It was just a way to get around the traditional war memorial basically which is a place you go to, you feel sad and you leave. This was a place that would intervene in your life, you didn't have to go to it because it would come to you effectively. That's obviously a still from it. Also, as a way to intervene into everyday life in the way that a lot of statues do. They don't, the surroundings change for statues and they go up 200 years ago and it's unrecognisable where they are. Where here these men are unrecognisable in modern Britain. It's not a modern Britain anyone in 1916 would have understood at all. It's a totally alien environment to them. So there's that kind of visual jolt, I would call it. But that is only there for one day, wasn't going to be a permanent memorial, even though it cost as much as a permanent memorial to do! It was just for a day. It's a memorial on people's Facebook pages and Twitter and Instagram. It's part of the national memory basically. But it doesn't exist anymore. Physically.
MARY: When you see the still, you do the double take between what might be an inanimate statue and what is a living, human body, so it plays with the reality of the statue I think quite effectively.
JEREMY: We know how good a lot of First World War memorials are in terms of their depiction of the soldiers. They are quite realistic. They are retired men, there's one in Paddington station, called The Letter Home or something. So I definitely had those statues, those memorials in mind but I wanted to make it kinetic, I wanted it to travel like a virus around Britain.
MARY: Do you think that we're actually, if you think of the relatively traditional framework of a full-length human‑sized, or bigger than human‑sized figure in bronze or marble in a public place, do you think how good are we at doing that now? We can all think of some truly ghastly examples of this.
JEREMY: We both talked about St Pancras station. National scandal. I think the bigger, the higher the plinth and the more outsized the figure is, shows a lack of confidence. It shows a lack of confidence in the subject and what you are doing. So the Keith Park one, Boris wanted that on the fourth plinth forever and it didn't go up, but it did go up for six months and that is round the corner and he's one‑and‑a‑half times life‑size I think. So it's bad. There's a very good one in Birmingham outside the library, Gillian Wearing, a typical family, they are just walking, ground level. There are some examples. I will go back to the once of the comedians that you do like, you didn't seem that interested in, but I do like some of those and even some of the popstar ones. There's something about them. But there's a kitsch element so it can go wrong. There are good examples of artists working, it's very difficult though, mark walling injury did a good piece but the life‑size ones are the best really. I think they are the most touching.
MARY: Do you think the fourth plinth has been a really successful innovation then?
JEREMY: I have to admit I'm on one of the committees for the fourth plinth.
MARY: You've got to say yes!
JEREMY: I think it's amazing. You don't always get your way on the panel because there's so many people on the panel that you can easily not get your way, which is very irritating. Rhyme' sure some people here are on the fourth plinth panel watching this. But I have to say what I loved about the one at the moment, the ice‑cream with the cherry and stuff, it's in the background of all these demos about anti‑vaxxers demos, all these conspiracy theories. These conspiracy theories in the background, this giant ice‑cream, I'm sure people are looking at those thinking what is going on there, what does that ice cream have v to do with these theories. I like that one at the moment. There's a drone on it as well. But I think the fourth plinth because it's revolving, you know if you don't like it, it will be gone in six months or a year.
MARY: It's also a justification of art in public rather than even in a museum or gallery, because you find people commenting and discussing the stuff on the fourth plinth, actually in Trafalgar Square as they pass or in the newspaper, in a way that if they went into a gallery they would say "that's a load of rubbish", but it's somehow because it's outside, because it's part of us, you can respond to it without falling into the stereotypes of how I am now going to respond to a work of art. It really justifies being in the open air I think.

JEREMY: It justifies the idea that not all sculpture should be permanent and also sometimes when sculptures are permanent they sometimes being invisible. I couldn't tell you who else is in Trafalgar Square. It's men on horses mainly I think. But I have no idea who they are. But you always remember the fourth plinth works. It's actually a very good model I think for this. And it gets the conversation going. I think it's been pretty successful. Weirdly though there have been very few of late, very few depictions of humans as in statues. They are mostly other things.

MARY: Yes, different kinds of installation. Can I just finish by asking you to do a bit of forward prediction about where you think we're going with this, whether the statue wars will fade because they'll burn out. Or whether there's going to be a change in what we see in public?

JEREMY: I hope the statue wars burn out. I hope the discussion around statues doesn't burn out. I hope it's still an energetic discussion, but not a nasty, divisive one. Because I think public space post‑COVID, whenever that is, is going to be so important for people to come and heal themselves almost, that they need public spaces just to be in and to be around other people, other kinds of people even, but I hope that it is the discussion itself can be very healthy and it's been great for museums and it's great for visual culture, that statues and art and memorials are really being thought about and discussed. So I am trying to be hopeful, but with the current government, it's difficult sometimes, I have to say.

MARY: Thank you Jeremy, on that tactful note, we will hand back to Andy.

ANDREW: Mary and Jeremy, that was absolutely brilliant. You need to imagine a very loud applause around the country. Thank you so much.

MARY: We're trying!

ANDREW: Let's move on to some questions. We've had quite a few questions. I have to say a number of these are comments. You talked about shelf life of public monuments and sculptures. The question is who decides on the shelf life of a public sculpture?

MARY: Well, we saw one answer to that in Colston, didn't we? And we saw in the background to that a local governmental community that had failed to decide. After there had been lots of initiatives, lots of discussions about how you might change the information, et cetera, nothing had happened and it was - you know, part of the reason that it was exciting, I think, is it did appear from the outside at least to be people saying, "We've had enough of this," and, "You've had your chance, we're deciding".

JEREMY: Yes, because there was a process going on, wasn't there, and I suspect the Mayor of Bristol was actually quite happy it happened, even though he couldn't have said that, because they had basically done what they wanted. Who decides about other statues? I mean, yes, that's the public deciding but I don't know, it's just when you think of something better to go in that place or someone more apt to go in that place - when there's a replacement maybe. Maybe there should be a curator of public statues like there are in museums, because no paintings in museums stay up forever, even though we think they might do, I'm sure they've all been rotated in their times and they become very popular and then very unpopular for some reason, so there might have to be some sort of curator - another curator! - doing this.

MARY: Also I'm thinking about where they - I mean, people tend to talk about it in terms of the polarity in terms of either being in the place he has always been - and it's usually he - or in the museum. But you were mentioning, Jeremy, the idea of putting them into new configurations - putting somebody different next to somebody else and then they start talking to each other in an entirely new way. I think there are all kinds of shades in between 'tear him down' and 'leave him up'.

JEREMY: There is a problem of money as well, we know these things cost money and we know that councils are going to be very, very strapped for cash, so unfortunately I don't know if these things are going to happen, but yes, I think there's creative solutions to these knotty problems.

ANDREW: And related to that is a question around, is the weighting there on the local people or the general public at large across the UK or, indeed, committees?

JEREMY: It depends. I think each statue, each sculpture, has its own constituency and has people - that was very personal to the people of Bristol, very personal, because so much is named after him and he is such a big personality, if I can call it that, a big historical figure in the town, and I think Bristol took that one very personally in terms of him being there. But there's national figures and local figures and I think every statue has its own problems, potentially, and its own audiences - local, national, international.

MARY: I felt that very much about the good war memorial in Cambridge, which was a few years ago moved from the middle of the road to a kind of little constructed park at the side of the road, about which I felt rather sad. The council said that the war memorial - it was a soldier looking up towards the station, - that he was holding up the traffic and I thought, that's the point! That is the bloody point! We are going to remember these people who died because they hold up the traffic, you know! The idea of saying, oh, we don't mind having him somewhere near but not really getting in the way, I thought was another interesting version of who decides and what your priorities are.

ANDREW: There's an interest I think from our guests in how, in the future, sculpture commemorates the present rather than the past, and I was wondering whether, you know, given this intense interest in public sculpture at the moment, whether this will spawn a sort of golden age in terms of the creation of public sculpture in the years to come - do you think they're connected?

JEREMY: You would hope so, wouldn't you? You can always be hopeful. I mean it's quite interesting, we haven't talked about blue plaques.

MARY: Yes, I was going to mention that, that's exactly...

JEREMY: I love that system but they often wait until 20 years or 25 years after someone's death just to make sure there's no skeletons in cupboards and so on so they can be sure about the person they are commemorating, but that is a different issue, but I would like to think that because there has been so much discussion and because contemporary art in Britain is part of the national conversation - quite amazingly I think, on the whole, people know about it and talk about it and are aware of it, I'd like to think there would be good commemorations of this moment in some way. But like I said, councils are so poor at the moment and they are just going to get poorer and poorer, I think - I don't know how they're going to do it.

MARY: I think that there's much more public desire for it than you would imagine if you read a certain section of the British press, you know, who are wanting to tell you that it is all far too expensive and it's just, you know, icing on the cake. I think you can see that from, you know, whatever you think of her, the Angel of the North did something to that landscape and to people's engagement with a figure in the landscape. We're very bad at talking about those - kind of those interventions in the public sphere, artistic interventions, that have really bedded down successfully. We talk about the ones that we don't like, or appear to be disruptive. I think there's a lot more public desire for public art than you would guess from reading the tabloids.

JEREMY: Yes, even if the public maybe don't see it as art necessarily, but as good landscaping or a children's playground or something that an artist has made or has artistic intent, but has within it, is loved by the public. I mean statues are different because almost you have to - the whole country - well, a lot of people have to agree upon this person, whoever this person is. I can think of a few that there will be statues to, but I don't even want to think about certain people dying in our public life and then having statues. I mean there is a Margaret Thatcher statue going up in Grantham, which is kind of interesting that she has sort of been rehabilitated but it is super-local, isn't it? I wonder if there would be a time where you could have a Margaret Thatcher statue in London or in Parliament Square?

MARY: Well, only if you break the assumption that they're celebratory and not commemorative.

JEREMY: Which is very difficult.

MARY: Yes.

JEREMY: Very difficult.

MARY: I've been working recently on modern statues of Roman Emperors and there's thousands and thousands and thousands of them and they were not put on display because people thought they were nice guys, you know, everybody knew they were murderous psychopaths!

JEREMY: It would go well, wouldn't it?!

MARY: What those statues were doing in the field of vision was more complicated than saying they're people we want to admire.

JEREMY: Yes, I think - because there, they didn't make documentaries about these people, they didn't have social media or newspapers, so that was the only way to know about someone was through a statue maybe, and for the public to be warned about someone through a statue, whereas we have other means to communicate someone's life.

MARY: Yes, yes.

JEREMY: So now statues, their meaning has become reduced, if I'm correct in thinking what you are saying, to the point where they are basically to praise someone, more or less, not as a warning.

MARY: No. I like the kind of bifocality of it that they might praise, they might warn, or they might be somewhere in between, you know? They might be warnings of some things but celebrations of others.

JEREMY: I don't know if it would be possible to have that currently, if we're talking about, let's say, for example, Margaret Thatcher. I think it's very difficult for the public to get - or the press, at least, to get their heads around the subtly of that in a public sculpture, a statue of someone.

ANDREW: There are a few questions on commissioning public sculpture and we've talked already about public sector cuts and likely public sector austerity in the future, so the dependence on private funders for public sculptures will grow - is that something that concerns you?

JEREMY: Well it depends who they are, doesn't it, really?! Who the people are. I think Keith Park, going back to Keith Park, I think he was probably private money. I suspect Margaret Thatcher might have been. That's how it was in the past, though, isn't it, that is why a fourth plinth is empty in Trafalgar Square, because not enough money was raised for a king - I forget who it was, one of the Georges, I think - so it is a traditional route but it doesn't mean that certain people can throw their money around and demand something, a statue of whoever, Ann Rand, for example, or someone like that, because they have the money, and they can put the money up. I would rather it was crowdfunded and everyone gave ten quid as opposed to three people giving £100,000 or something. There is a question over that sort of model.

ANDREW: Are we concerned about figurative statues dedicated to someone or would an abstract statue also be problematic?

JEREMY: Mary?!

MARY: Well, look at Maggi Hambling and Mary on the Green, recently, which is another work of art which has caused a huge amount of controversy.

ANDREW: Indeed, we've had a number of questions about that to you both.

MARY: I mean I think that - I mean, you know, Jeremy is in the business and I'm just in the business of looking at this kind of stuff, but I feel terribly strongly that I want statues to shake me up a bit, you know? I want to walk past something and feel challenged by it. I think it's very easy to assume that all these, you know, guys in their military uniform, you know, put up in the 1880s or whenever were never challenging - well, I bet some of them bloody well were, you know? But we've simply kind of lost the resonance, so that we think of them as just a load of dead white European males. And I think, you know, Jeremy - and I quite agree, you know, saying it would be nice for the public sphere to be more fun and for there to be more humour and more fun in it and I would like there to be kind of a bit more frisson, a bit more excitement, a bit more, "Oh my God" in it, and I don't mind really whether that's figurative or abstract, I don't care. And I particularly dislike our assumption - this is going back to what I said before, I guess, that somehow we're the first people to realise that these sculptures might be difficult, they've always been damn difficult, whether it is a choice of whom, whether it's public subscription, you know, or whatever.

JEREMY: I like the idea of frisson and fun! Not necessarily in the same thing but a bit of fun and frisson, that sounds good! The problem with the Mary on the Green, the Mary Wollstonecraft sculpture, the main problem for me and we've talked about it today is there's nothing on who she was, there is no text, there might be a quote on her but there is no text, so you are seeing this strange sculpture and let's face it, is it a statue, is it a sculpture, it is quite an interesting sculpture in a way but people have interacted with it by putting clothes on her, which I quite like, but there's nothing about who she was and what she achieved in her life and why she is there, really, and that to me seems a massive error really because there's plenty of space on that plinth to write or explain it and if it was explained better, or at all, I think people might have a different view on it, but it is quite an odd intervention in that space, I have to say.

MARY: Yeah, yes.

ANDREW: There is one final question, which is, if in 20 years' time, we were having this conversation, how different would it be then than it is today? (LAUGHTER).

MARY: Um! If I was going to go for an honest prediction, I think that the basic co-ordinates of the discussion would be the same, because I think the basic co-ordinates of the discussion about who is allowed to do what in public with what kind of intervention about whom are the basic questions, and they've been the basic questions for hundreds of years, and the modality of the answer changes slightly, but you can't get away from the fact that who you decide to put up, or what you decide to put up in your central city space - you know, we might be dealing with a world in which central city space means something very different post-COVID, but as we can still reasonably foresee, the bottom line of the question is going to be the same. We might be better at answering it.

JEREMY: I agree. I think we will still be discussing certain people that should or shouldn't go up and the nature of public space - I don't think things are going to change, and who has been rehabilitated and who hasn't been. But I hope it is a mature discussion at least. But we'll see, won't we?

MARY: And one that doesn't simply divide people into heroes and villains. You know, we're trying to get rid of that in the school curriculum, you know, Francis Drake was both a great explorer and a criminal pirate at the same time. We want some of the sophistication of the discussions we're trying to have about in the literary realm, we want that to be - to be something we can do with visual arts, constructively and directly and with graffiti and pots of paint or whatever, I'm all fine with that, it's just kind of sanctimonious self-righteousness I don't like.

JEREMY: I think complexity is fine, it's all good, but we are not particularly well served with by social media and the press in Britain when it comes to these discussions and I think they create more crude, frankly, and that doesn't help because I'm sure if you had the artist or historian speaking about the person it would make things a lot easier but unfortunately it gets filtered through other means.

MARY: Yes, yes.

ANDREW: Wonderful. It has just gone 7:00. From all of my colleagues at Art UK and all of our guests, around the world, an enormous thank you to Jeremy Deller, to Mary Beard, it has been an enormous pleasure, thank you so much indeed.

JEREMY: Thank you very much.

MARY: Thank you very much.

ANDREW: See you, bye-bye. A big thank you, also, to my colleagues, who have arranged this two-day conference and who have been behind the scenes working tonight on making this go smoothly - thank you very much to them. The conference continues tomorrow, with a number of fascinating sessions, in the morning on recent sculptural search and discoveries, sculptures in the colonial world and a big focus on learning activities around sculpture in the afternoon. Finally, a few years ago, we surveyed the uses of Art UK and discovered that only half of them knew that we were a charity. When we did that a few months ago we discovered that two-thirds of them knew that we were a charity. I think everyone on this call knows that we are a charity, so if I can remind you, if you would like to support us, please come to our site or make a donation or become an Art UK citizen - it would be wonderful if you would do that. So thank you very much for joining us tonight and goodnight to you from all of us at Art UK.

(End of event)