

Dazzle Ship London

Dazzle Ship London on *HMS President 1918* is the result of a number of converging factors and opportunities that came about in an innovative cultural alliance that resulted in the commissioning of the Frankfurt based artist Tobias Rehberger.



Tobias Rehberger 2014. Photo: David Kew

HMS President 1918 is moored permanently on the north shore of the River Thames in central London on the Victoria Embankment where it now operates as a multi purpose venue and is the home to a number of small specialist businesses. It is one of only three remaining World War One ships in the UK. It served as a Q Ship in the war under its original name of *HMS Saxifrage*. During its wartime activity it was, like so many vessels, dazzled as a means of confusing U-boats. One of its distinctive features is its reinforced bow which was intended to be used to ram surfacing U-boats after they had presumed that the ship was not in fact a warship but unarmed. Another feature of the ship was its hidden guns, which would fire at the U-boat once it had surfaced. It was also equipped with additional powerful propulsion that meant it could turn quickly, and travel at great speed to ram the unsuspecting U-boat before it had time to dive back underwater.

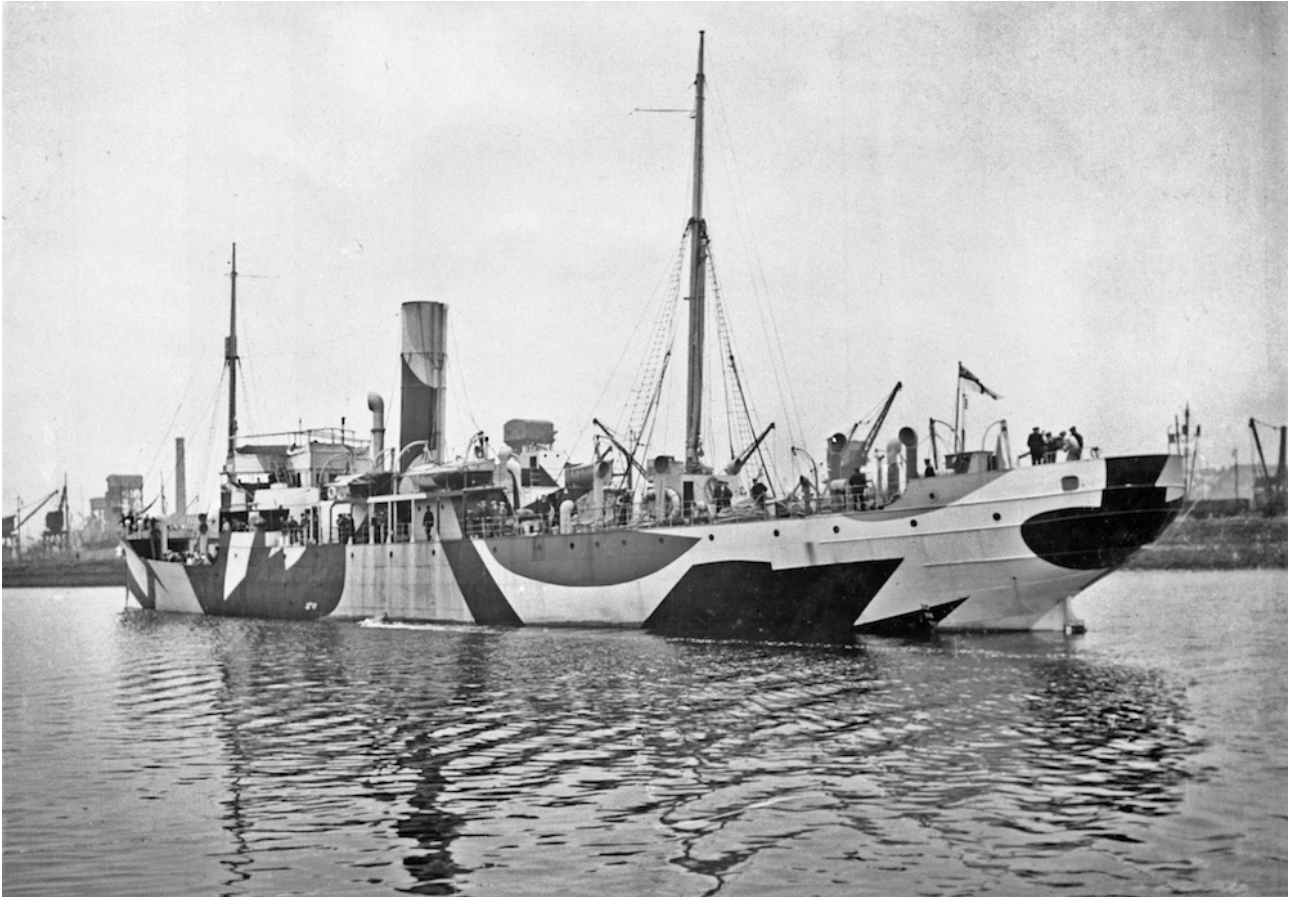


Photo credit: Imperial War Museum

Around the time of the planning for the World War One commemorations I was approached by the management of *HMS President 1918* to explore the possibility of embarking on a series of dazzle events that would culminate in the original dazzle pattern being reinstated for the ship's one hundredth anniversary in 2018. As a long term river resident (I live on a converted Medway Coaster on the Thames close to *HMS President 1918*), and work at Chelsea College of Arts on the riverside at Millbank, next to Tate Britain. The prospect of being able to bring together a number of resources, varied knowledge and specialist expertise seemed the perfect starting point for a high profile art commission. The subsequent interest and support from 14-18 NOW and Liverpool Biennial resulted in the commissioning of Tobias Rehberger – a process that unfolded fairly rapidly in 2014.

Tobias Rehberger has a long-standing interest in dazzle camouflage. He also has the capacity to undertake large scale public works, in fairly challenging environments where the work often competes for attention with the site itself. He works across a variety of media, and often in collaboration with other people: this was essential given the challenging nature of the site and the necessity to involve a wide range of specialists. The decision to commission Tobias was underlined by some of his more recent works in the public domain such as the cafeteria at the 53rd Venice Biennale for which he was awarded the Golden Lion. In this commission, he collaborated closely with the furniture designers Artek, using customised furniture in an ingenious way: creating a complex scheme of geometric forms with contrasting colors, a visually disorienting environment that drew from a specific example of razzle dazzle or dazzle painting used on ships during the First World War.

His continued interest in creating spaces that can be occupied and directly engaged with was also a key feature of his proposal for *HMS President 1918*. The ship is active, hosting many visitors and events,

and it is seen by thousands of people every day.

Rehberger's proposal, titled *Dazzle Ship London*, brought together references from art history such as Claes Oldenberg and Coosje Van Bruggens 'Knot' sculptures, with traditional dazzle camouflage. Rehberger responded to the shape and scale of the ship, playing with ideas of visibility and invisibility. Aspects of the dazzle design give the impression that the 'skin' of the ship has been removed to reveal an amplified series of pipes, wires, ducting, voids and passageways that lie below the surface. It reveals the ship's complex structure and history: relating to the way in which, during its wartime role, it kept its real purpose camouflaged.



Tobias Rehberger, *Dazzle Ship London*, 2014. Photo: Chris Wainwright

Unlike the original dazzle designs which were painted directly onto the ship's steel, Tobias created his design from computer based drawings and complex 3D modelling. These were then translated into large vinyl panels moulded and adhered to the surface of the ship in over 90 unique sections. The installation of the artwork was extremely challenging and required a large specialist team of marine project managers, workboats, safety craft, artists, printers and large scale environmental installers. The surface of the ship was very complex, with curves, overhangs, windows and portholes, and a myriad of surface-mounted parts - all of which had to be covered as part of the overall design. Teams had to work at great heights, often suspended on safety lines over a fast flowing tidal river with all of its traffic. One of the contractors told me that it was a bit like trying to erect something on the hard shoulder of the M6.



Tobias Rehberger, *Dazzle Ship London*, 2014. Photo: Chris Wainwright

As commissioners, we wanted to see an interpretation of dazzle camouflage that was both aware of the origins and purpose of dazzle: to confuse, to create a radical façade in such a way that it somehow denied or masked the presence of the ship itself. An almost irreconcilable proposition for something so large and with such a commanding presence in the context of being moored on the Thames in peacetime.



Tobias Rehberger, *Dazzle Ship London*, 2014. Photo: Chris Wainwright

The final design certainly does disguise the ship, and reinforces its function as a landmark both in central London and in the history of the First World War as one of the few remaining floating warships from that period. It gives dazzle a new context and confirms the role that artists have played in providing innovative solutions, even in the context of conflict.

Chris Wainwright