



David Garratt with some replies

A signature piece from David

LAST year 900 British celebrities received a signed photo and handwritten letter from someone they had never heard of, requesting them to send their own back in return.

Now on view at Persistence Works is a collection of more than 200 replies received by David Garratt, who is an artist based at the studio complex, forming an exhibition entitled *Oh, Isn't Celebrity a Terrible Thing, Thank God*.

In an age when seemingly anyone can become a celebrity the project aimed at taking a light-hearted look at the relationship between the fan and the celebrity. In sending his own photo he aimed to blur the boundaries between the fan and celebrity.

Many replies reveal the absurdity of celebrities' maintenance of their public image, although handwritten letters from the likes of Rolf Harris and gifts such as a cookbook from Antony Worrall-Thompson show that some at least have not lost the human touch.

At the other end of the spectrum an aide of Germaine Greer's sent a note: "On police advice Professor Greer no longer provides autographs by post," someone from the Royal Household declared that the Queen only did this sort of thing for people "known personally to her" and JK Rowling and Cliff

Richard were other notable refuseniks.

Garratt says that he did not reveal that there was an artistic purpose behind the letters. "If I had, I'm not sure whether I would have got more or fewer responses," he says. You do feel, however, that a moment's thought might have revealed that it wasn't entirely serious.

"I think the comedians mostly got it and appreciated the joke right away and probably most of the newsreaders," he reports.

The replies fell into three categories, he says. First were those who hadn't read his letter and just sent their own photo, others who didn't get the joke but were humouring him and those who entered into the spirit.

"I think in some ways it was a generation thing. I have had a lot better response from older people, such as Brian Blessed, Judi Dench and Rolf Harris, who have taken the trouble to write a letter and put Dear David on it.

"Alain de Botton doesn't have a photo of himself and I got a letter saying Ray Mears didn't want to be seen as a celebrity but as a bushcraft expert. On the other hand you have Timmy Mallet on his website positively inviting people to send for his photograph.

"Surprisingly I have not had many replies from reality TV people. I rather expected the

trashier kind would be the keenest to send back."

Also on show is *The Gospel According to Jeremy Kyle*, watercolours that showcase slogans and advice from daytime TV's cult figure. "I think Jeremy Kyle is a prime example of someone whose celebrity has gone to their head," reckons Garratt. "You can see this by how he has changed in the way he presents himself to the audience on TV."

Some people might ask in what way this constitutes art. "I have always admitted the fact that I am not a skilled craftsman and during my training I did a lot of mail art and collecting," he explains. "I am here as an entertainer but there is a creative side to it in how I planned the letter. You could say that creating an idea in the letter I have written in the same way as creating a sculpture. I have written letters instead of sculpting metal."

From the 900 letters, he has so far had 239 back. "But I am getting replies every day and I expect it to be around 260 by the time the exhibition finishes," he says.

He is inviting visitors to the exhibition to suggest 100 people they think he has missed out and has the stamps ready.

The exhibition opens at Persistence Works tonight and runs until January 25.