Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art

A report for engage Scotland
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Executive Summary

Introduction

This research has been commissioned and funded by the Scottish Arts Council and undertaken by Dr. Heather Lynch for engage Scotland.

The specific context for this research is the intention of engage Scotland to undertake a series of action enquiries that will explore new ways of working in the area of ‘Interpretation and Information Exchange in Contemporary Visual Arts’. The initial piece of research, which is reported here, will inform the nature and development of the action enquiries.

This report aims to map current practices in relation to interpretation and intellectual access, across venues exhibiting contemporary art in Scotland. This scoping exercise will provide material from which the action enquiries might be developed.

The wider context for the work is the debate on the role and function of contemporary art for people living in the UK with diverse social, political and cultural experiences and values.

The main research questions were devised in consultation with the Scottish Arts Council and representatives from engage. These were as follows:

- What is the nature of interpretation practices across a range of venues?
- What are the perceived values of the range of practices employed?
- How is intellectual access considered by venues that exhibit contemporary art?
Method

This qualitative research project was undertaken primarily through interviews and focus groups. As a mapping exercise there is no attempt to weight the responses, all views are represented in the analysis.

Contributors

The sample of contributors was drawn up using Scottish Arts Council and engage databases. The criterion for selection was that the venue or organisation should exhibit contemporary art in Scotland. Thirty-five venues and organisations were identified as potential contributors. The venues differ substantially. Some are museums, which predominantly exhibit historical and social artefacts, while others exhibit only contemporary art. Some work with specific user groups whilst others are national organisations. Twenty-seven venues/organisations contributed to the questionnaire and these can be found in Appendix 2. A further thirty-six people contributed to the data collection through focus group sessions. These people encompassed a range of curators, artists, artist educators, education officers and outreach officers who responded to the open invitation to contribute to the research. Their names can be found in Appendix 3.

Key Conclusions

The key ideas in relation to the development of interpretation of resources suggested by contributors can be summarised as the following:

- There is a desire across the range of venues to develop interpretation materials which improve access to a wide range of communities allowing them to connect with contemporary art in ways which are meaningful and relevant to them. This overlapped across the areas of marketing, education and curation. Marketing materials were often named as
interpretation materials and specific education projects were described as an interactive form of interpretation. Whilst this desire was generally grounded in a belief that contemporary art can and should be accessible to all there was also an aspiration to generate resources which did not reduce the complexity or challenging nature of the artwork.

- Critical awareness of the effects of targeting was important to many who believed that whilst being a useful tool targeting could create its own set of exclusions. One of the main threads was the idea of relevance and of being aware of the needs of communities in order to connect with them.
- Awareness of space, use of multiple literacy approaches and effective partnership working were the main means suggested to overcome barriers and engage with a wide range of viewers.

**Significant Issues Affecting Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art**

**Exhibition and Audience Profile**

Information relating to exhibition and audience profile was sought in order to contextualise responses to the research questions.

The points of interest which emerged were as follows:

- All of the rural gallery spaces reported a wide audience profile which was augmented by tourists in the summer months. The point was made by some that the gallery spaces also functioned as a social space so they could not say for certain that these numbers indicated an interest in contemporary art.
- The galleries based in the central belt and in bigger towns suggested that their main, consistent audience for contemporary art were young, reasonably well educated people. That was not to say that a much wider representation of the community did not also visit but that this was the
biggest single group. This was not the case with all of the venues as there are examples of city based venues who serve a very wide population.

- A small number of venues focused on work produced by specific groups such as disabled people or people with mental health issues. These venues reported an audience which related to that particular group. While they also reported a wide audience base, their targeting was most often towards the mainstream arts audience.

Barriers to contemporary art
Contributors were invited to identify the range of barriers which may obstruct the wider public’s interest in and ability to access contemporary art. Those most frequently mentioned are as follows:

- Arts culture – Contributors described general public perceptions of contemporary art as elitist, inaccessible and irrelevant to most who are not directly involved in the arts.

- Viewer/potential viewer – A belief was expressed by a number of contributors that many viewers lacked previous experience of the arts which resulted in a lack of confidence and lack of knowledge as to how to engage with contemporary art.

- External – Much media representation of contemporary art was seen as damaging. Formal education was believed not to value the arts or visual literacy skills.

- Space – Geographical and physical accessibility were noted as spatial barriers. So too was the layout of the space and the general perception of arts spaces as uncomfortable, where people are unsure how to behave.

Targeting
Broadly speaking targeting was seen as a very useful tool, however at the same time many tensions around the practice and effects of targeting were described.
Who?
The three groups most frequently mentioned were:

- Existing audience
- Local audience
- Under-represented groups such as disabled people, minority ethnic communities, young and old people and those living in economically disadvantaged areas

Why?
The rationale for targeting these groups was described predominantly as:

- Strategic; where engagement with groups could widen the audience base
- Accessible; groups easier to target, examples given were local schools
- Financial; where groups may potentially buy work or invest in the organisation

Delivery
The staff team for the most part generated and delivered interpretation resources. Those most involved included:

- Gallery staff such as, education officers, curators and marketing officers or those people with this responsibility.
- Freelance artists were also frequently employed to deliver elements such as workshops.

The Purpose of Interpretation

Contributors described the purpose of interpretation primarily as a vehicle to overcome perceived barriers to contemporary art, as described above:

- Arts Culture
- Lack of confidence and knowledge on the part of the viewer
- Poor Media representation
Other functions mentioned here are described below.

Visibility
Many of the interpretation resources were used to widen participation and to increase the relevance of contemporary art to a diverse range of people.

Access
Most of the respondents to this process reported employing multi-modal approaches to address the barriers which are believed to exist for viewers and potential viewers.

Sustainability
A small but significant number of contributors described the importance of interpretation in generating an accessible archive through which the work could sustain continued relevance beyond the duration of an exhibition.

Intellectual Access
Although many contributors saw it as their role to make exhibited artwork accessible to audiences with a diverse range of skills and abilities, the term intellectual access was not widely used. However the desire to facilitate intellectual access was evident in the following areas:

- Artwork accessibility – There was a desire to find a language to describe and discuss contemporary art which did not reduce the potential complexity of the work but which was not laden with jargon. Many contributors spoke of entry points which permitted the viewer to make an exploration of the work.
- Gallery behaviour – Overcoming some of the elitist perceptions of how to look at art was considered important by some, who believed that galleries can be inhibiting spaces.
• Critical Engagement – This relates to an understanding of the term intellectual access, where access is about developing informed critical skills with which to engage with the artwork. This was a contested idea by some who attended focus groups, who believed that this was not a purpose for interpretation.

Interpretation Practices and Resources

Interpretation Practices
Contributors discussed a wide range of practices including:

• Text – For most this was described as ‘standard’ in the form of text panels, labels, leaflets, catalogues and artist biographies.

• Multi-literacy – technology, exhibition layout, films and resource rooms were described as resources which provided access to information without reliance on text.

• Participatory – These approaches included a range of engagements including formal workshops, interactive exhibits and informal discussions with gallery staff.

Evaluation of Interpretation Resources
Contributors were asked to describe how interpretation resources were evaluated, with examples of projects deemed successful and less successful.

How?
Of those mentioned the most often referred to were:

• Artists’ reports

• Evaluation forms

• Visual and textual documentation.

• Informal methods such as comments books and comments made to staff were also highly regarded evaluative tools.
Some of the well-resourced gallery spaces used additional methods such as; telephone surveys, interviews, focus groups and physically tracking gallery visitors to observe how they use the space.

What works?
A number of factors were reported as significant in those projects described as successful in engaging viewers, these are as follows:

- The relevance and nature of the artwork itself
- The artist or another artist’s involvement to mediate some of the complexities of the work through workshops, films and talks
- Involvement of the audience either through the production of the interpretation materials or through interaction with gallery staff and resources
- Considered layout of the space for each exhibition
- Availability of a variety of resources such as film, still images and quality writing which gave access to the process.

What didn’t work?
Some of the same categories were mentioned in this section as in the above, demonstrating the complexity of issues involved in the development of interpretation resources, those most often noted were:

- Space, where there was a lack of consideration and/or unwelcoming staff
- Artists’ involvement in areas where they lack skills, such as talks and workshops
- Over reliance on text.
Moving Forward – Areas for Further Research

This report would indicate that action enquiries could address the following areas:

- **Interactivity** – Interpretation tools which directly involve participants.
- **Audience generated artwork** – Looking to potential audiences to respond to the work and use their understandings to inform the form and language of the interpretation.
- **Space** – Pushing the boundaries of the gallery space through consideration of the layout and by making relevant connections beyond the gallery walls.
- **Language** – Exploring alternative routes to how the work is discussed, in what context and with relevance to whom in order to address some of the barriers created by language.
- **Partnership approaches** – Develop meaningful connections with both community and arts organisations to develop interpretation resources which are relevant to these groups.
1 Context

The specific context for this research is the intention of engage Scotland to undertake a series of action enquiries that will explore new ways of working in the area of ‘Interpretation and Information Exchange in Contemporary Visual Arts’. The initial piece of research, which is reported here, will inform the nature and development of the action enquiries. The research has been funded by the Scottish Arts Council. The wider context for the work is the debate on the role and function of contemporary art for people living in the UK with diverse social, political and cultural experiences and values. The DCMS reports (1999, 2000) encourage the galleries and museums sector ‘to foster social inclusion’ and widen participation. Work carried out to this end has resulted in a body of literature, which explores the relevance of arts engagement and interpretation from differing perspectives. These include Barr’s (2005) critique of the view that arts education could be ‘dumbing down’ our experience of artwork in an aim to widen participation and Merli (2002) and Belfiore’s (2002) criticism of current arts agendas funded as as result of the government’s social inclusion policy. They argue that these are effectively avoiding the problem of our global economic system which is culpable in the creation of poverty and exclusion. Such ideas have been echoed in the more recent Scottish publication by the Cultural Policy Collective (2004), ‘Beyond Social Inclusion, Towards Cultural Democracy’. While it is not the function of this report to add to this debate through the development of argument it is important to recognise the political climate in which contributors are operating. This report does aim to provide a background of current practices in relation to interpretation and intellectual access to contemporary art across Scotland. This understanding of the nature of the work being undertaken, the issues and the barriers perceived by those delivering will provide material from which the action enquiries might be developed.
2 Aims

As indicated by the brief the aim of this study was to map current interpretation practices of contemporary art in relation to intellectual access. The main research questions were devised in consultation with the Scottish Arts Council and representatives from engage. These were as follows:

• What is the nature of interpretation practices across a range of venues?
• What are the perceived values of the range of practices employed?
• How is intellectual access considered by venues that exhibit contemporary art?

It was not the intention of this research project to measure the effects of particular practices, or to evaluate approaches in particular situations. This was a scoping exercise to generate a range of information as to what is currently taking place and to identify the emergent issues, hence the focus of a map or a plan of current activity.

3 Method

This qualitative research project was undertaken primarily through interviews and focus groups. As a mapping exercise there is no attempt to weight the responses, all views are represented in the analysis.

3.1 Research Contributors

The sample of contributors was drawn up using Scottish Arts Council and engage databases. The criterion for selection was that the venue or organisation should exhibit contemporary art in Scotland. Thirty-five venues and organisations were identified as potential contributors. The venues differ substantially. Some are museums, which predominantly exhibit historical and social artefacts, while
others exhibit only contemporary art. Some work with specific user groups whilst others are national organisations. Twenty-seven venues/organisations contributed to the questionnaire and these can be found in Appendix 3. A further thirty-six people contributed to the data collection through the focus group sessions, which are discussed below. These people encompassed a range of curators, artists, artist educators, education officers and outreach officers who responded to the open invitation to contribute to the research. Their names can be found in Appendix 4. While the intention of this research project was to gather the fullest range of perspectives and practices it was apparent that most contributors had an existing interest and commitment to interpretation. Therefore it may be that the views of those who do not consider interpretation important are not reflected in the data.

3.2 Data Collection
The methods of data collection were designed to address the brief in a way which was accessible to potential contributors. Three methods were adopted questionnaires, phone interviews and focus groups.

3.2.1 Questionnaire
The primary source of data collection was through questionnaires with follow up interviews. The questionnaire (Appendix 1) was developed as a response to the research questions listed above as a tool to unpack these. The questionnaire was sent out to the education officer, curator or director of the identified venues. All of the venues received a follow-up phone call to establish interest and to arrange an interview. Four chose to respond directly to the questionnaire without interview. In three of these cases the questionnaire was completed as a result of inter-staff dialogue.

3.2.2 Interviews
Telephone interviews were used to encourage the highest number of contributors possible and to ensure that the questions were clear. These were undertaken
with twenty-five contributors. In most organisations they involved the education officer or the person responsible for interpretation and education. The interview process took between twenty-five and forty-five minutes.

3.2.2 Focus Groups
The focus groups were designed as a vehicle to allow both the organisations who had responded to the questionnaire process, and other individuals and organisations involved in the production, curation and interpretation of contemporary art to contribute to the process. Invitations to the focus groups were made to all of the contributing organisations as well the wider engage Scotland membership and contacts through VAGA and Scottish Arts Council. Two groups were held one in Glasgow and one in Edinburgh, an intended third group in Aberdeen was cancelled due to limited bookings. Thirty-six people attended these events.

The format of the groups evolved around discussion of the maps which had been created with the questionnaire responses (see below). Small groups engaged with each of the maps noting their understanding and responses to this presentation of the questionnaire responses.

3.3 Mapping
As described by the brief this research project was of itself a mapping exercise which intended to provide an overview of the interpretation practices being used in Scotland in relation to contemporary art and to highlight the emergent issues specifically connected to intellectual access. The contributing organisations differed significantly; the information has therefore not been used to suggest the value of any one practice over another, only to document the information available from each context. The maps which can be found at the start of each section, are diagrams designed to represent all of the views and practices evident in the questionnaire responses.
4 Analysis

The questionnaires have been scanned and all of the points raised have been recorded on the maps. These can be found at the front of each relevant section. The following provides a discussion of the data in relation to the research questions and the themes of the questionnaire.

4.1 Exhibition and audience profile

The initial questions on exhibition range and general audience profile were intended to contextualise the responses to the remaining questions. They were never intended to provide quantitative data and as the venues operate in a range of circumstances and locations it was important to acknowledge this from the outset. While many of the contributors had been a part of a recent survey looking at audience numbers and profiles and had these results to draw upon, many were basing their figures on their own research or estimations. The indicators here are based purely on this level of evidence.

The points of interest which emerged were as follows: All of the rural gallery spaces reported a wide audience profile which was augmented by tourists in the summer months but remained consistently high across the year. The point was made by some that the gallery spaces also functioned as a social space so they could not say for certain that these numbers indicated an interest in contemporary art. The galleries based in the central belt and in bigger towns suggested that their main and consistent audience for contemporary art were young, reasonably well educated people. That was not to say that a much wider representation of the community did not also visit but that these were the biggest single group. This was not the case with all of the venues as there are examples of city-based venues who serve a very wide population. This was believed to be due to a number of factors such as central location and outreach work which had been carried out in the past. A small number of venues focused on work produced by specific groups such as disabled people or people with mental
health issues. These venues reported an audience which related to that particular group. While they also reported a wide audience base, their targeting was most often towards the mainstream arts audience.
Map One – Barriers
Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art

**ARTS CULTURE**

- Artwork
  - Requires prior knowledge
  - Difficult to understand
  - Antagonistic
  - Non-linear nature of artwork

**SPACE**

- Cost of entry to some exhibitions
- Galleries are intimidating
- Gallery staff can be intimidating
- Physical accessibility an issue
- Geographically inaccessible

**EXTERNAL**

- Negative media representation of contemporary art
- School education lacking with respect to contemporary art
- Contemporary art is not valued in our culture

**PEOPLE**

- **People lack:** knowledge; experience; confidence
- **People have:** preconceptions about contemporary art; closed minds
- **People:** associate the arts with the rich; are afraid of looking stupid; are not interested

**BARRIERS**
4.2 Barriers to contemporary art (See Map One)
Contributors were invited to identity the range of barriers which may obstruct the wider public interest in and ability to access contemporary art. While most of this information was based on the personal experiences of the particular contributors a small number of venues had conducted specific research into this area and were drawing on comments made by samples of the public. While some found this a challenging question there was breadth of consistency in the responses which predominantly fell into four categories; arts culture; the viewer/potential viewer; space; external factors. These will be discussed below.

4.2.1 Arts Culture
The culture within contemporary art was named in every response as a barrier. These were noted to relate to the artwork itself but also to the lack of value shown towards the arts in the limited available funding. However most of the difficulties mentioned related to the ways in which contemporary art is often presented. One of the main barriers was that of language. The language used by some artists and writers was described ‘inaccessible’ and ‘full of jargon.’ It was also deemed to be 'self-referential' implying that if you did not have prior knowledge or art historical reference points then much of what is written about art makes little sense. The point was made that many artists’ statements received by galleries are difficult for a wide audience to understand and that some, but not all artists actively resist interpretation as a means to make their work more accessible. Further to this it was evident that some gallery staff are also resistant to interpretation.

The work itself was named as a barrier. There was a sense that by its nature contemporary art can be challenging and antagonistic towards mainstream values. The meaning is often not obvious nor intended to be and there is an expectation of effort on the part of the viewer. While there was no sense in which contributors believed that the work itself should become any different it was seen as important to acknowledge the barriers which relate to the work.
4.2.2 Viewer/potential viewer
A large number of those interviewed suggested that the barriers could be found in the experience, attitudes and knowledge of the viewer and potential viewer. These also link with some of the external factors. There was a perceived lack of knowledge and experience of contemporary art by the wider public. It was expressed by many that most people do not have the tools to engage with contemporary art, it is not what people expect art to be and this unfamiliarity is off-putting. This lack of experiences was believed to lead to a lack of confidence and of value placed on the area at all. A number of contributors described many people as having ‘pre-conceptions’ and ‘closed minds’. A class distinction was also mentioned where opinions were expressed that the wider public believe the arts to be ‘for the rich’ and ‘not for them’. To contributors these types of attitude towards contemporary art suggested that many are just not interested and do not see its relevance to their lives. Interestingly a number of the contributors stated that the only people for whom there appear to be no barriers are small children who were observed to interact freely with the artwork.

4.2.3 External
The external factors raised have a clear relation to the above. In a sense these wider influences were named as culpable for generating the negative associations with contemporary art described above. Media representation was highlighted frequently as being a source of derision which de-valued the work of contemporary artists. A lack in the formal education system was also described, where contemporary art plays little or no part in the curriculum. The point was made in particular by those venues who exhibit social history artefacts as well as contemporary art, that it was much easier to attract school groups to the former.
4.2.4 Space
The gallery space itself was identified as a source of barriers. Physical accessibility was raised as an issue even though recent legislation has attempted to address this. To those living in remote areas geographical accessibility was believed to be an issue. Cost of entry to some exhibitions was believed prohibitive but most of the comments focused on the invisible barriers. These relate clearly to the above, in that attitudes towards contemporary art can make galleries difficult spaces to be in. It was believed that people do not know what is expected of them or how to behave. One comment was that ‘even artists don’t know how to behave at openings’. It was felt that the behaviour of gallery staff could compound these feelings of displacement and that much work was needed to overcome this.
Targeting

Map Two – Targeting
4.3 Targeting

The questions on targeting addressed the issues of why we target, who we target, who is strategically responsible within organisations and who delivers. Broadly speaking targeting was seen as a very useful tool, however at the same time many tensions around the practice and effects of targeting were described. Map two shown above indicates who is targeted, why, and who delivers.

4.3.1 Who?

The targeted groups could be seen in three areas; the first being the mainstream arts audience; the second was also mainstream, perhaps not specifically arts interested but local to the venue; the third were identified as specific under represented communities.

- Mainstream audiences were described as; the existing audience base, artists, arts students and those involved in the arts who have an existing interest. Artists talks, lectures and publications were the sort of materials which were believed to be of interest to this group.
- Local audiences included schools, the local community. These were those people for whom the venue was geographically accessible but it was noted that additional marketing was needed to make relevant connections.
- Groups described as under-represented were mentioned mostly in response to the question on the area of targeting. These mostly consisted of communities widely considered socially excluded such as ethnic minorities, physically and intellectually disabled people, economically disadvantaged communities, and the old and the young. Women were also mentioned here as a specific target group which conflicted with the views of the focus groups, many of whom believed that they belonged in the mainstream. Other such tensions which emerged are described below under Emergent themes and issues.
4.3.2 Why?
Why certain groups were selected for targeting varied depending on the group. Some focus group members pointed out that the reasons given for targeting were very much from the venue perspective and not from the prospective audience. Such tensions will be discussed later but for now the rationale for targeting could be understood in these broad areas:

- **Strategic** – Working with young people was viewed as an investment in the development of a future audience by most venues. Working with socially excluded groups was seen to meet the demands of the social inclusion agenda. There were also instances where the exhibition subject matter was seen to be particularly relevant to particular groups who may find it interesting but might not usually attend.

- **Accessible** – Accessible groups were those who were not seen as regular viewers but whom the gallery staff believed they could connect with more easily than others. As nearly all of the contributors reported limited resources, working to achievable goals was important. The groups here varied depending on the venue, for example one contributor said that they targeted schools as they were easy to engage with, while other venues said the opposite. Self-identified groups, that is groups who made the initial contact with the venues, also could be included in this section.

- **Financial** – Some organisations targeted businesses and individuals who they believed may buy or commission work. For the under represented groups there were funding streams attached to working with specific groups which presented viable opportunities and an incentive to target these communities.

4.3.3 Delivery
For the most part strategic delivery was in the hands of the staff team, while directors and senior managers took responsibility across the range of venues, gallery staff worked together in deciding on the design, development and delivery of the programme. Where there were curators, education officers and marketing
officers in post these were the key individuals who assimilated the evaluations and addressed the issues in programming, marketing and interpretation. However many of the contributing venues did not have the resources to employ such a range of staff and reported that while they wished to have strategic approach that this was not possible, or that it was made possible with brief injections of funding, but not sustainable without long-term investment.

Direct delivery was reported to be in the hands of the gallery staff, primarily education officers, outreach officers and front of house staff. Input of the exhibiting artists was dependent on their interest. There was also an important role for other artists whose contribution for the most part was described as workshop delivery and outreach. Where the venue was working in partnership with another organisation, they were also seen to be significant in contributing to the design and delivery of interpretation materials.
Map Three

Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art

Visibility

Increase relevance of work
Marketing
Making the institution visible

Sustainability

Provide Context
Intellectual Access
Access curatorial vision
Physical Access
Provide confidence through structure
Widen audience
Provide Enjoyment
Express Understanding
Overcome barriers to inaccessible art works

Purpose of Interpretation
4.4 The Purpose of Interpretation

The vast majority of the contributors were very clear as to their thoughts on the purpose of interpretation. Map three above provides a consideration of purpose. The list which relates to access is given in no particular order. There were a limited number who questioned whether interpretation was necessary or not, the view was expressed that the art in itself was enough. This was a tension which others recognised as they stressed that interpretation should not limit the indefinable potential of the artwork to connect with the viewer. The following three areas provide locations for the points made.

4.4.1 Visibility

Visibility was not suggested as the primary function of interpretation. However due to the outward looking significance of interpretation and its function to widen access from certain perspectives it became entwined with a marketing agenda. Some contributors described marketing materials and processes as interpretation practices and some venues selected the marketing officer as the most capable of discussing interpretation practices and issues. Marketing was in itself described as a function of interpretation and conversely interpretation was described as a vehicle to bring visibility to the venue and to increase the relevance of the work being exhibited.

4.4.2 Access

The vast majority of responses as to the purpose of interpretation were located in the realm of access. Access involved the provision of a range of physical and intellectual tools and resources which the viewer could use to make sense of the work, and also the spaces to express these views. The provision of material which contextualised the work of the artist and the vision of the curator was a point strongly made here. Many people made direct connections with the previous section which was that interpretation should address the barriers to contemporary art wherever they were present. Enjoyment was a theme frequently mentioned in that the viewer should take pleasure in the resources
and experience of attending an exhibition and that interpretation was a part of that wider experience.

4.4.3 Sustainability
A small but significant number of comments were made which suggest that interpretation has a purpose in sustaining the relevance of the artwork. These thoughts were expressed in relation to the important role of interpretation as documentation of the work. Due to the temporal nature of much contemporary work, visual and textual documentation in the form of publications, guides, videos, websites and posters amongst others were crucial forms of access to the work for future interest. These interpretative products permitted a type of access to the work for people who, for whatever reason, could not have a first hand experience. This ties in with the idea of one of the contributors that the venue is a caretaker of the work. The other sustainable function of interpretation was to inform the curator and in turn influence their future programming.
Map Four

Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art
4.5 Interpretation Practices

Map four shows the range of forms of interpretation and indicates their locations of use, which vary across the organisations. The forms which interpretation materials and resources took were varied and were highly dependent on available staff and resources within each of the venues. Where the venue had an established team of outreach, education officers and curatorial staff who worked in conjunction with the director to develop the programme with an awareness of the relevance to each of these areas, the forms of interpretation had breadth and depth. However many organisations expressed the concern that they do not have the financial resources to support the staff time or the cost of materials to initiate an interpretation programme beyond labelling and text panels. Therefore while many of the venues provide a range of interpretive routes, there were an equivalent number who did not. The following points highlight the significant areas in which interpretive practices are being developed.

4.5.1 Text

Textual methods were the most often noted. These were often listed as standard; labels, catalogues, panels, artists’ info/biography, leaflets, and accessible text versions of the aforementioned. These were all onsite resources, other offsite resources mentioned were: gallery guides, marketing info, press releases and critics reviews. This material was considered by some focus group members as marketing material which perhaps was not relevant. However its inclusion by many of the contributors is evidence of the crossover between what is considered marketing and what is considered interpretation. While text was the most frequently mentioned form of interpretation, it was the experiential and interactive modes which generated a sense of excitement and potential, these will be dealt with next.

4.5.2 Multi-literacy

These were the interpretation forms which did not rely on text. They included direct engagement with the artist and curator through talks, and in some cases
studio visits. Other approaches which use forms of literacy other than text were: websites, films of the artist talking and working, audio info, and the provision of a resource room which made all of these materials accessible in one room. The physical layout of the exhibition was also used as an interpretive vehicle where maps and other materials were used to guide the viewer through.

4.5.3 Participatory
A range of possibilities were mentioned in the area of participation, these included formal opportunities such as guided tours and panel discussions. However both through the interviews, and the focus groups, the greatest value was placed on informal discussions. Just as gallery staff were observed as a barrier where their behaviour was described as potentially intimidating, they were also viewed as a fantastic resource who could connect directly with viewers at the point of experiencing the work. Sensitive, approachable and informed front of house staff were perceived as a significant resource as their responses were immediate, interactive and in direct response to the needs of the individual viewer.

The other participatory form which was regarded highly by most was that of workshops led by the exhibiting, or another, artist. Just as there was a cross over with marketing, the inter-connecting between interpretation and education was most apparent in the discussion of workshops. While many contributors immediately listed workshops activity as a form of interpretation just as many paused to consider whether workshops were solely an educational activity. It became clear through discussion that most contributors believed that even workshops which were not directly related to an exhibition could help the viewers to access contemporary art generally as they had practical and personal experiences to draw on. The workshops described took many forms, they were mostly aimed at specific groups such as young people, families, and community groups. An artist other than the exhibiting artist facilitated most often and some
venues had worked with artists from different art forms which seemed appropriate to the exhibited work.
Map Five
Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art

Multi-literacy approach:
- Artwork
- Arts spaces

Vocabulary to express:
- Laying Information

Intellectual Access

Potential Audience
- turn non-linear artwork to narrative

not just text,
- overcome barriers of elitism such as language used and behaviour conventions in gallery space

 Enable audience to engage with challenges
- understand the concept not just the experience

provide means for people to make critical assessment
- Some work needs prior knowledge
4.6 Intellectual Access

While some of those interviewed were familiar with this term it was not widely used and the various definitions given showed a lack of clarity as to its meaning. Map Five indicates the range of, at times conflicting, responses to this question. Some described this as generating access to the well educated viewer while others suggested that this was about access for all, regardless of intellectual capacity. Whether comfortable with the term or not the overriding understanding of ‘intellectual access’, was grounded in addressing barriers. The idea that people should have access to a range of resources which enable them to engage with the artwork in greater depth was central to the discussion on intellectual access. There was scope in what it might mean to implement this in practice. The following encompasses the range of suggestions made.

4.6.1 Addressing barriers

- The artwork – Some spoke of the non-linear nature of artwork, the fact that meanings were rarely obvious and that this type of experience could prove challenging for a public accustomed to modes of engagement which lead more directly. The suggestion was that interpretation should unpack the experience for the audience allowing access. This idea proved problematic for a number of focus group contributors who believed that attempting to translate artwork into narrative was leading and detrimental to engagement and that people should be encouraged to accept the non-linearity as a different type of experience rather than one which needs translation. However the significant use of the term ‘entrance points’ by most of the contributors suggests that to some extent interpretation is providing a narrative, or a whole series of narratives, for the viewer to pick up on as a ‘way in’ to the work. There were a clear but complex set of tensions around this area which spanned the viewpoint of no interpretation to multi-modal forms of interpretation which by their range suggest that there is no one way to see or make sense of an artwork.
The other issue raised in relation to the art work was that of the need for prior knowledge, that is to say an understanding of art history which contextualised the form of the work. This was a point made often in relation to writing on contemporary art which was frequently described as inaccessible to those without understanding of terminology and context.

The need for vocabulary to talk about artwork which is accessible to most was voiced by a significant number of contributors. However there was a small group who believed that the work should stand for itself, the often made point that young children appear not to encounter many of the intellectual barriers could be used to defend this position. However many focus group members believed that the work should be made accessible on a range of levels.

- Gallery behaviour – issues related to the nature of the space in which the work was exhibited recurred frequently throughout the interviews. In relation to gallery space these were linked with conventions of behaviour. These were named at times as elitist and uncomfortable for many people unaccustomed to engaging with contemporary art at all.

- Critical engagement – This level of access moved beyond starting points for engagement. This was about the enabling the viewer to form and express opinions on the work. This was verbalised as ‘critical assessment’ or ‘critical engagement’. Other thoughts related to this were on accessing the concepts driving the work and responding to the challenges. Some of the focus group members raised issues on this point as they believed that viewers should not be under pressure to take a critical stance on the work and that they really should just enjoy it. However this tension in itself highlights the potential difficulties of attending to the perceived needs of a range of individuals simultaneously.
<table>
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<td></td>
<td>Focus groups</td>
<td>Comments to staff</td>
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<td>Phone surveys</td>
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<td>Interviews</td>
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Map Six
4.7 Evaluation

The questions on evaluation asked contributors to describe the ways in which they evaluated their interpretation practices, and then to provide examples of projects which were particularly successful or not. Map six shows the range of responses. These examples made concrete many of the ideas which they had discussed throughout the course of the interview. They also served to describe the complex and dynamic set of relationships between the gallery staff, the available resources, the space, and the artist. A subtle shift could make the difference between a project described as successful or unsuccessful. The following gives an overview of the methods of evaluation used and how successful different models of interpretation were considered to be.

4.7.1 How?

A range of methods was described; the overriding concern was that full evaluations were costly and that few venues had the resources to evaluate as they would wish. Of those mentioned the most often referred to were; artists reports, evaluation forms, and both visual and textual documentation. Informal methods such as comments books and comments made to staff were also highly regarded evaluative tools. A large number of interviewees and focus group members described how difficult it was to document viewer numbers and responses as people use gallery spaces in individual ways. While with performance events ticket sales indicate exactly how many people attend and how many of those receive concessions, this was not the case with galleries. Some of the bigger and better resourced gallery spaces described quite detailed methods employed to ascertain viewers’ thoughts on the presentation of exhibitions. These included, telephone surveys, interviews, focus groups and physically tracking gallery visitors to observe how they use the space.

Evaluation by external bodies such as the Scottish Arts Council and other funders were frequently mentioned, as valuable sources of evaluative
information. Critics were also described by a few as critical respondents who influenced an assessment of the success of exhibitions.
4.7.2 What works?

Map Seven above indicates the nature of the successful projects alongside those considered less successful. There are overlaps as multiple factors were seen to contribute to each area. The examples provided pointed to four broad areas where interpretive practices were seen to be successful. The rationale given as to why certain modes worked were rooted in the overriding factors of prior planning, adequate resources and ongoing evaluation.

- **Artwork** – Work which was relevant or timely in relation to other political, social or cultural events was believed to be more likely to engage a wide audience.

- **Artist involvement** – The direct involvement of the exhibiting artist or other artists was also mentioned as a successful tool. This included artist involvement in the generation of the interpretation materials, through film, through talks and workshops, or through forms of visual and textual guides. Here it was also frequently mentioned that sensitivity and an awareness of the individual skills of the artist was crucial. Some artists are more comfortable in workshop or talk situations than others. A very successful example of artist indirect involvement was ‘Life beneath the Shadow’ an exhibition in The Fruitmarket Gallery by Cai Guo-Quing. A resource which was reported to be extremely successful in engaging viewers was a film of the artist creating the works. Being able to see the process used by artists to create artworks was also reported as a crucial aspect of WASPs open weekends.

- **Audience** – Involvement of the audience was seen as central, whether the audience was the most important consideration in the development of interpretation or whether they were directly involved through workshops. Some galleries had developed projects where certain audiences took the lead on generating the resources for others. These projects were an attempt to overcome the perceived barrier of elitism created by arts-informed people responding to the work. One example of this is the TNT project developed in An Tuireann Arts Centre where a group of young
people created a website which used a range of media to report their responses to the exhibition programme. The other important consideration for the success of particular materials is that they were audience specific. It was acknowledged that certain audiences, for example deaf or blind people would benefit from specific resources to address the barriers they faced.

- **Space/resources** – Often the layout of the space was seen as important. Some contributors described the success of dedicated resource rooms, others of family rooms where the pressures of behaviour patterns were lessened. In terms of resources, interactive and participatory approaches were described as the most effective modes of engagement. Films which provided access to the process, and quality writing were also mentioned here.

- **Partners support** – The value of support by project partners in the community was expressed by a number of contributors. This was perceived to have huge benefits where they were supportive for the duration of the project particularly when this involved working with communities who did not have a history of visiting.

4.7.3 What didn’t work?

There are a significant number of echoes from the ‘what does work?’ section located here. This serves to enforce the idea mentioned above that generating interpretation resources is a complex activity where there is much to be considered within the context of each individual gallery and exhibition. That is to say that what works in one situation may work not in another. The variations are at times subtle. The main reasons given for certain approaches being unsuccessful were effectively the opposite of the above that is: lack of development time, lack of resources, lack of reflection and inadequately trained staff. This was augmented by a lack of commitment by project partners, who perhaps seemed initially interested but did not follow this through. A similar four areas encompass the range of approaches deemed less successful.
• Audience – Just as considered awareness of audience led to successful approaches so a lack of consideration led to unsuccessful engagement. Where ideas imposed on the audience were overly directive this was also seen to be unsuccessful.

• Space – Where the space was physically inaccessible or expensive this was seen to undermine the effects of available interpretation resources. Where staff within the space were unwelcoming this would have a similar negative effect.

• Artist involvement – Artist involvement was believed to have a negative effect when the artist was asked to participate in interpretive activities in which they did not have skills, examples given included public presentations or workshops. Another negative impact that the artist could have on the development of interpretation was where they actively resisted a desire to provide interpretation and believed that the work should stand on its own.

• Tools – A reliance on text based tools and where the text used was deemed inaccessible or jargon laden, was often regarded as ineffective.
5 Conclusions

The aim of this research was to establish the nature of current practices being used in the interpretation of contemporary art with a specific concern for intellectual access. This information would then be used to inform a series of action enquiries which would test and explore the effects of specific approaches. It is evident from the data that there are underlying concerns relevant to a significant number of contributors. While a spectrum of opinion can be seen in the responses, the themes are consistent.

5.1 Emergent Themes and Issues

The following discussion describes and summarises the concerns that emerged as significant to the majority of contributors. These are not exhaustive, however they serve to summarise the prevailing issues and underlying themes that emerged. They have been distilled in relation to three areas; policy, resources and arts culture.

5.1.1 Policies and Strategies

Points were raised in relation to policy and strategic planning at both local and national level.

- The main point made on policy was that galleries operate in a climate of ever changing political agendas. This factor affects the strategy adopted by the organisation in relation to targeting and also the funding available to deliver on particular areas.
- Formal education approaches, such as those used in school which do not value visual literacy were frequently named as a barrier to engaging people in contemporary art.

More time was given to strategic planning and the factors which affect or inhibit this within the organisations themselves. These were as follows:
• Team working – The coherence of the staff responsible for curation, education and marketing was seen as crucial to effective development and delivery of interpretation resources. A number of venues reported working practice which involved detailed consideration of each of these elements across their planning. In every case this was described as a strength which enabled them to consider the interpretation of each exhibition as integral to the experience. However many contributors reported conflicts across these same areas. They suggested that where the interests and vision of the curator were at odds with the education and/or marketing staff this led to difficulties and compromise in developing a coherent approach.

• Targeting – While this was recognised as a means of introducing the work to audiences who might not otherwise engage with it there were concerns as to sustainability. The question was posed whether these groups even count as audience when the likelihood of return was limited. The issue was raised that targeting generated a funding orientated culture where organisational strategies became defined by funding available for specific groups which in turn excluded others. It was suggested that this could lead to a loss of integrity for organisations which may be at risk of being consumed by current political agendas.

5.1.2 Resources
This was an area often referred to as fundamental, as without the resources there is no interpretation and with limited resources there is little scope for development. The areas most frequently referred to were as follows:

Staff – Team working at planning level is mentioned as an issue above. However just as often the importance of the front of house staff is raised. The knowledge and interpersonal skills of the people who come into direct contact with viewers on the gallery floor was described as an important resource where
skills were developed, and as a barrier where they were not. The need for training of front of house staff was frequently mentioned. The benefit of listening to front of house staff reflections on a particular interpretive approach was perceived as an underrated contribution to ongoing evaluation processes.

Funding – Funding was seen as an issue for most of the contributors. Some said that they did not have resources to undertake a developed approach to interpretation and that they were reliant on occasional short term funding for specific exhibitions. Others described how additional resources had enabled them to create effective materials using both human and technological resources which otherwise would not have been possible. The area of evaluation which was considered as extremely important was also perceived as the least resourced area. It was recognised that to develop evaluation processes was costly in money and time. A need for specialist input to gather and analyse information was recognised as desirable but costly and therefore prohibitive.

5.1.3 Culture and Language
With relevance to barriers and to intellectual access many of the points indicated concerns with visual arts culture generally, together with a perceived need to develop strategies and resources which side step or overcome these barriers. There was a prevailing feeling that contemporary art was perhaps not valued generally. It was believed by many to be subject to ridicule by the media and as previously mentioned, not seen as important in formal education. There are clearly wider social issues influencing the perception of contemporary art and some contributors had sought to address these through considered interpretation approaches. However while the finger of blame often pointed to these external factors, just as often the culture across the arts community was described as elitist and one which upheld exclusions for the wider public. Examples given indicated three areas of relevance.
• Dumbing down or jargon free language? – Language has been mentioned previously, and many comments were made as to the inaccessibility of writing on contemporary art. This was seen to be evident by both writers’ essays and artists' biographies. These comments did not address formal accessibility issues, such as the provision of large format or audio resources. This was an issue of language, the words and how they are presented. A few of those interviewed did not come from arts backgrounds and made clear the difficulties they experienced when encountering much of the writing associated with the arts. However the point was made with equal force that the inherent complexities of many artworks should not be reduced to simple narrative for the sake of accessibility.

• Expanding understanding of literacy – While text based resources were the most frequently mentioned, prevailing interest was with other media practices such as still and moving images, sound and interactive technology. Those who used such resources believed that they were more effective in engaging with the viewer than text.

• Behaviour – Discomfort with how you behave in a gallery space was described as an issue by a few of the participants. One person said that although they come from an arts background they were unclear as to what was considered appropriate behaviour in a gallery. Being unclear as to how you are meant to interact with an artwork is perhaps evidence of the underlying tensions around making sense of contemporary art and distilling meaning from objects and installations which are open to multiple interpretations.
5.2 Moving Forward – Key Areas for Further Research

The following suggested approaches are made on the premise that the purpose of this piece of research is to inform subsequent action enquiries. These are focal points where either specific barriers to engaging with contemporary art are addressed, or where particular approaches are believed to be successful.

**Interactivity** – Interaction with the interpretation resources was frequently mentioned as a successful approach to engagement with the work. This included technology, materials and people. The implicit theme was that of active engagement. Viewers were perceived to have a more positive experience where they became involved, this included:
- Talking to staff
- Accessing information via computers/web.
- Participating in the creation of work
- Access to a designated space where viewers can browse through different media and have a sense of control over what they look at and how.

**Audience generated artwork** – A small number of organisations reported working with specific groups to generate the interpretation materials. The responses of these groups through text, image and web resource formed elements of the interpretation resources available to other viewers. On one occasion the viewer was involved in creating the work with the artist which became simultaneously artwork and interpretation. These kinds of resources were recognised as valuable as they broke down some of the perceived barriers of elitism in two ways, firstly by recognising the significance of the viewer’s response, and secondly by providing resources which are not made by those with a background in the arts, thus widening the possible reference points for understanding.

**Space** – The gallery space itself was described as a barrier on a number of occasions. An example of the gallery space being extended to a different
audience is Duncan of Jordanstone Exhibition programme’s *Discparc* project. This project supports the production of music discs by sound artists. This interdisciplinary approach to the production, form and role of contemporary art addresses many of the issues that have been raised through this report. In another study conducted by one venue contributors said that galleries are not spaces that they see as relevant to them, the reasons given are described above in the section on barriers. In relation to widening participation the idea of relevance is one that recurred frequently and therefore is mentioned more than once in this report. There is potential to interrogate and explore conceptions of gallery space. A number of the rural galleries reported that their spaces served the local communities as social spaces with cafes, bars and shops. Their relevance to these communities differed from many of the urban galleries, they fulfilled a need which was not being met in other spaces. This suggests the potential for galleries to serve communities in a variety of ways which are not necessarily related to the arts. The variety and success of outreach work also contributes to the argument for galleries to have a more mobile understanding of their purpose to the communities whom they aim to serve. This idea differs from that which implies that the arts can or should address social issues, more that galleries have the potential to respond to the needs of communities as driven by the communities themselves.

**Language** - The frequency with which language was named as a barrier either in a predominantly textual approach to interpretation, or in the nature of the words used suggests that this is an important area for exploration. As has been mentioned previously much of the language used to discuss artwork is perceived as dense and reliant on jargon which is incomprehensible to all but those with prior knowledge. Coupled with this was a strong desire not to offer simplistic texts which reduced the potential range of meanings and complexity of the work. The project Writing PAD was developed as an initiative by a group of English art schools to address the difficulties which students encountered when required to produce text. Here students used a variety of forms and multi-media approaches.
to engage with art historical and contextual ideas which related to the production of art work. This project may provide material from which to develop textual approaches to interpretation which are accessible and interesting to viewers.

**Partnership approaches** – A number of the venues whose work relates to specific audiences such as disabled people, young people or those with health issues, report a desire to engage with the mainstream while many mainstream galleries name these groups as specific targets. This suggests possible opportunities for partnership working in the development of interpretation where staff and regular viewers from each venue may share understandings, looking at how the approaches in each case may increase capacity for relevance and accessibility. Those venues which had worked in partnership with other organisations and community groups reported that often the success of projects depended on the success of these relationships. These external partnerships were perceived as a route to generating connections which enabled the viewer to see the relevance of specific exhibitions where otherwise they would not.

**5.3 Summary**

The key ideas in relation to the development of interpretation practices suggested by contributors can be summarised as the following:

- There is a desire across the range of venues to develop interpretation materials which improve access to a wide range of communities allowing them to connect with contemporary art in ways which are meaningful and relevant to them. This overlapped across the areas of marketing, education and curation. Marketing materials were often named as interpretation materials and specific education projects were described as an interactive form of interpretation. Whilst this desire was generally grounded in a belief that contemporary art can and should be accessible to all there was also an aspiration to generate resources which did not reduce the complexity or challenging nature of the artwork.
• Critical awareness of the effects of targeting was important to many who believed that whilst being a useful tool targeting could create its own set of exclusions. One of the main threads was the idea of relevance and of being aware of the needs of communities in order to connect with them.

• Awareness of space, use of multiple literacy approaches and effective partnership working were the main means suggested to overcome barriers and engage with a wide range of viewers.
Bibliography


Department of Culture, Media and Sport (2000) *Centres for Social Change, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*, London: Cabinet Office


www.writing-pad.ac.uk
Appendices

1 Questionnaire pro forma
2 Contributing Venues
3 Focus Group Participants
Appendix One: **Questionnaire pro forma**

**Interpretation and Information Exchange in Galleries in Scotland Research Project**

It is the aim of this research to map the current interpretation practices in galleries across Scotland, in particular relation to contemporary art. As an organisation which exhibits contemporary artwork we would greatly appreciate your contribution in considering the questions below. Arrangements for discussion will be made in the near future at a time convenient for you.

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1. Describe the nature and range of your exhibition programme?

2. Describe the profile of audience who would typically visit?

3. What do you understand as the purpose of interpretation?
3.1 What forms of interpretation do you use?

4. Do you target specific groups? If so who? and why?

4.1 Who is responsible?

4.2 Who decides the approach?

4.3 Who delivers?

5. What do you see as the barriers to engaging with the contemporary art?

6. What do you understand by the term intellectual access?
7. What methods of assessment do you use?

8. Please give an example of a project which you see as being particularly successful stating why?

9. Please give an example of a project which you consider less successful stating why?

This research is commissioned and funded by the Scottish Arts Council
Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art

Appendix Two: **Questionnaire Respondents**

Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums, Aberdeen  
An Tuireann Arts Centre, Skye  
Art.tm, Inverness  
City Arts Centre, Edinburgh  
Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow  
Collective Gallery, Edinburgh  
Duncan of Jordanstone Galleries, Dundee  
Crawford Arts Centre, St Andrews  
Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee  
Edinburgh Printmakers Workshop, Edinburgh  
Fruitmarket Gallery, Edinburgh  
Gallery of Modern Art, Glasgow  
Glasgow Print Studio, Glasgow  
Glasgow Sculpture Studios, Glasgow  
National Galleries of Scotland, head office Edinburgh  
Paisley Museum and Art Galleries, Paisley  
Peacock Visual Arts, Aberdeen  
Pier Arts Centre, Stromness, Orkney  
Project Ability, Glasgow  
Stills Gallery, Edinburgh  
Street Level, Glasgow  
Taigh Chearsabhagh, North Uist  
Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh  
Tramway, Glasgow  
Transmission, Glasgow  
Travelling Gallery, head office Edinburgh  
WASPS, Head Office, Glasgow
Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art

Appendix Three: Focus Group Contributors

Tassy Thomson
Pamela Robertson
Lulu Black
Bec Carey Grieve
John Blundall
Vivien Hamilton
Diana Sykes
Kirsten Bannerman
Kirsty White
Sarah Yearsley
Alison Dearie
Miranda Appelby
Sean McGlashan
Stephen Foster
Louise Jane Davis
Monica Callaghan
Gill Hart
Elisabeth Gibson
Michelle Freeman
Janice Sharp
Susan Pacitti
Laura Hamilton
Adela Holubova
Kev Theaker
Tracy Morgan
Fiona Bradley
Jan MacTaggart
Seonaid Frame
Kirsten Lloyd
Nicola Kalinsky
Robin Baillie
Chrissie Ruckley
Lindsey Hamilton
Keri MGowan
Christine Millar
Rebbeca Marr