Autumn 2001 / Volume 6 / *Number* 4

interpretation

journal

of the Association for Heritage Interpretation

AHI

Interpreting Fine Art

Making art more accessible

Published by the Association for Heritage Interpretation

ISSN 1357 9401

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Printed by **Dataprint, Oxford**

Cover photograph: **Engaging with Monet through audio**
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Interpretation is published three times a year in Spring, Summer and Autumn

You can visit AHI's website at:
www.heritage-interpretation.org.uk

Contents

Membership Rates:

Fellow	£55
Full member	£45
Associate member	£25
Student member	£14
Corporate member:	
1 copy	£38
2 copies	£53
3 copies	£70
4 copies	£83
5 copies	£104

Overseas Postage Supplements

(1 copy)	
Europe airmail	£4.50
World airmail	£9.50
World surface mail	£4.00

The next issue will look at:
Interpreting Britain
Award Winners 2001

Send contributions for Interpreting Cultural Identity (Summer 2002), Interpreting Historic Sites (Autumn 2002) to Ruth Taylor, Managing Editor, National Trust Wessex Region, Eastleigh Court, Bishopstrow, Warminster, BA12 9HW

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Why interpret art?

Jo Digger argues the case for interpretation of all art for all people

Many people regard the interpretation of art as an aberration. They see it as explaining away art and dumming down. For them, the problem is the nature of art itself; it is communicating already so why do we have to add more communication? Art speaks for itself, they say. Of course it does - we know that artworks communicate to different people in different ways regardless of the intentions of the artist.

For interpreters, the problem is that people bring different skills, experiences and knowledge to bear when looking at art. The more skills and knowledge you have the more you gain from the process. But some people have so few skills in looking at art that they dismiss anything they think they cannot immediately understand, and worse, they often feel inadequate because they don't understand. People may lack these skills because they are very young or because they have disabilities that prevent them from looking. Perhaps they are from a different cultural background to the artist and artwork and therefore have different visual skills and knowledge.

Interpretation should exist for people of all abilities, to facilitate and enhance the enjoyment and engagement with art in all its many wonderful and diverse forms. If we are to fulfil the educational remit of museums and galleries, we should aim to help people acquire the skills they need to enjoy this experience. For example, the interpretation of cutting edge contemporary art works in the Discovery Gallery at the New Art Gallery in Walsall is designed to communicate with a diverse range of people. The text panels and photographs aimed at adults provide information about the artist and the artist's work and are augmented with films of the artists at work and sound recordings of the artists talking about themselves and their work. Interactive interpretation provides opportunities for creative play for example, dressing up as characters in paintings, jigsaw puzzles of the artworks and computer programmes that tell stories or enable you to recreate paintings in different ways.

In this Journal Ghislaine Kenyon discusses how the National Gallery attracted new audiences with an exhibition curated by the much-loved illustrator, Quentin Blake, John Iddon explains how he trains guides at the Guggenhein in Venice to stimulate visitors into thinking about paintings in refreshing new ways and Jacqueline Yallop looks at how artists themselves have been commissioned to interpret the new Persistence Works building in Sheffield for the public. Marilyn Scott and her colleagues discuss how artists help children look at historic buildings in new ways, Cara Cod explains the policy for family interpretation at the Lowry and Leah Kharibian looks at how audio guides help to free up the interpretation of art.

Jo Digger is Collections Officer at the New Art Gallery, Walsall

Tell me a picture

Ghislaine Kenyon explains how illustrator and first Children's Laureate, Quentin Blake, curated an exhibition at the National Gallery, London

'Here was an exhibition that we in the Education Department had been groping towards for some time'

Below: P for Piero *drawn by Quentin Blake on the walls of the National Gallery*

The National Gallery is home to the nation's collection of Western European paintings from 1250 to 1900, an unrivalled group of works including pictures by Leonardo da Vinci, Rembrandt, Monet and Van Gogh. In the splendour of the Gallery's 19th century building or the severe stone spaces of the Sainsbury Wing, the 5 million or so people who visit each year seek out and worship icons such as the Leonardo '*Cartoon*' or Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. So if between February and June of this year you had approached the Gallery's Sunley Room you might well have paused and wondered at the buggy park, the scurrying of little feet and the unfamiliar level of high-pitched chatter . . .

A new idea

When the then recently-appointed and first Children's Laureate, illustrator Quentin Blake, approached the Gallery with a new idea for a non-art-historical exhibition for young people, we were all gripped with enthusiasm and anticipation, but also with a kind of relief. Here was an exhibition that we in the Education Department had been groping towards for some time, an exhibition that would reflect our belief that you can be four years old and enjoy looking at a Renaissance painting of an obscure mythological subject. That whether you were 4 or 34 or 94 you would unfailingly respond to a painted moment such as this one by Piero di Cosimo, where two creatures bow with sympathy over a dead or dying girl. In other words the show would among many things emphasise the importance of the personal response to works of art, something that we are all apt to ignore in our desire to admire, to learn, to be improved.

Words and pictures

Blake's brief as Laureate was to promote the cause of children's literature, and in his case this meant both words and pictures; the wonderful thing about being the first Laureate was, according to Blake, that he could do anything he liked. What he liked was the idea of showing how children's early experiences of responding to good picture-book illustration can and do lead seamlessly to enjoyment of the kind of art they were not necessarily likely to encounter at home or school. He would assemble 26 works including National Gallery pictures, loans of art made since 1900 from other collections, and children's book illustrations of the present day. So although the show was partly about 'putting illustration somewhere where it would be taken seriously', Blake saw it just as much as being an opportunity to have 'Old Master' paintings in the context of more familiar children's illustrations which would provide the 'gentle gradient access' that some of these older and more remote works might occasionally require.

A sense of story

The important criterion as far as the choice of pictures was concerned was that all the pictures would have what Blake describes as 'a sense of story'. This is eminently present in his own work, but also in many of the paintings in the Gallery's collection. Some of the pictures such as Uccello's *Saint George and the Dragon* would refer to specific and well-known stories. Others for example the quirky Quay brothers print *Serenato in Vano* have no story implied. Yet another group, including the illustration by John Burningham to *Oi! Get off our Train* do of course come from existing stories, but seen out of context they might conjure up different narratives. Blake's choices struck some adults as being dark and serious. Surely those *Sunflowers*, which he didn't choose, would be more appealing to children than Goya's spooky little painting *The Forcibly Bewitched* which he did, where a terrified man in sober black dress pours oil onto an evil anthropomorphic lamp, a collection of ghostly donkeys rearing up behind him? Our experience of working with children in the Gallery for many years tells us the opposite. Children, like adults, are often drawn to the unusual, the scary, or the picture filled with minute detail. And a bunch of flowers is a bunch of flowers is a bunch of flowers.

A non-hierarchical display

The number 26 was not random, nor was it determined by the size of the exhibition space. To make his point, Blake needed this display to be non-hierarchical. His child-friendly solution was to make the choice of works alphabetical by artist's name. As a result a painting by Goya hung in between an illustration by Michael Foreman and a print by

Below: Piero di Cosimo,
A Satyr Mourning Over
a Nymph, *c. 1495*

'An additional innovation for the Gallery was to hang the pictures at child height (62 cm)'

Edward Hopper, a first for the Gallery. But this was not the only first. Pursuing the idea of spontaneous responses, Blake suggested that this should be exhibition without any words, other than the artists' names. In an art gallery a child's natural inclination, as distinct from his or her adult companion's, is to look at the picture rather than read the label or graphic panel hanging next to it. The basic facts about the works would be available for those who wanted them in the form of a handout, but the aim would be for the child and the adult to feel free to explore the image, to speculate about possible stories, and not be bound by the kind of information usually offered by labels.

Narrowing the selection

At one of the early exhibition meetings we decided there would in fact only be space for each letter of the alphabet to be represented by a single artist - narrowing the selection down in this way was a challenge, particularly when it came to the letter B. With typical modesty Blake suggested Botticelli and the illustrator John Burningham. Head of Exhibitions, Michael Wilson pointed out the absurdity of Blake the artist not being represented in his own exhibition and immediately proposed that he should draw on the walls. 'I didn't know you were allowed to do that' was Blake's happy response. From that moment the shape of the exhibition became clear: Blake would draw young characters, one or two for each picture. One of these characters would hold up a notice with the appropriate letter and the artist's name, and the other would react with gesture, expression, costume or props to something in the scene in each work. So, for example, next to the Uccello stood a small boy with a big lance, a tiny dragon-like crocodile skewered onto its tip; a little girl gazed with all the sadness of the world at the woman on the ground in the Piero di Cosimo; a child balanced precariously on his friend's shoulders to mirror the horse riding taking place in Daumier's *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza*. This cheerfully familiar, near life-size crew had the effect of halting children in their instinctive rush to get to the end of anything; being children, they understood the game, you looked at the drawings and then moved on to looking at what the drawings were looking at with such engagement. However Blake was also keen to point out that these small figures, although simplifying the access, were in no way intended to be reductive. If anything, he said, they were also there to hint at the breadth of ideas, stories and techniques that could be contained in a single work.

Hot sticky fingers?

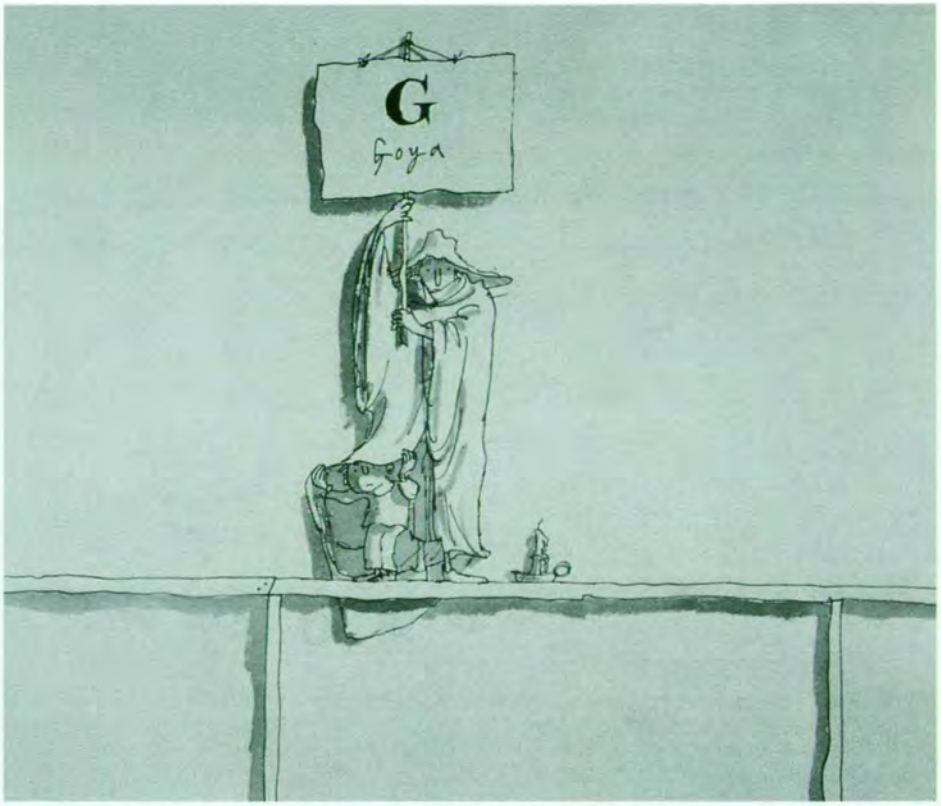
An additional innovation for the Gallery was to hang the pictures at child height (62 cm). While this was a shameless piece of discrimination against the tall, in fact most adults including many Gallery employees commented that they had a more direct contact with the works at this height. One or two of the curators had small panic attacks at the thought of hot sticky

fingers being so close to unglazed works, but a combination of Quentin Blake's polite 'do not touch' notice and extra warding staff who were also extraordinarily patient, ensured the works' safety and the curators' peace of mind.

Feedback

We could never have predicted the effect this exhibition was to have. One spin-off was our decision to put the whole show including Blake's drawings on-line on the Gallery's website. We asked children to respond by emailing us their stories based on the pictures. Many school literacy hours must have been enlivened by this activity because we had over 4000 responses, from all over the world, in twelve languages apart from English. A small but significant number were sent in by adults, including one from a Hispanic-American student on an adult literacy programme in New Jersey, who in halting, but deeply touching English, wrote about David Jones' small picture *The Garden Enclosed* from Tate Britain's collection. The picture shows a couple kissing in a forest-like garden, with a little red and white house in the background and a doll lying prominently on the ground. It was actually painted to mark Jones' engagement to a girl who was not quite eighteen, and the doll probably stands for the childhood this young person was already leaving behind. However the American student interpreted this picture in her own terms: this was a couple who were very much in love but who were only able to meet in the forest. Their parents wanted to stop their meetings

Paolo Uccello, Saint George and the Dragon, *c. 1490*



Right: Blake made his choice of works alphabetical by artist's name

because, in their view all free time had to be spent on studying English so that they would be able to get better jobs... The quality of the writing that these pictures inspired was superb, and teachers commented that as a result they now planned to make regular use of pictures as a stimulus for creative writing. Some schools decided to have their own Tell Me A Picture exhibitions, which would involve children in art, design and literacy too. A synagogue representative phoned to ask whether they could borrow the idea, and to date there is interest from at least one major gallery in putting on a local version of it.

A resounding success

The figures told us that 250,000 children and adults including 200 primary school groups visited and 8000 copies of the book of the exhibition (not a catalogue) were sold, both records for a Sunley Room exhibition. But from our point of view the exhibition's success was about more than numbers; the whole project grew into something immensely bigger than we had planned - Blake certainly had no idea what he was letting himself in for when he made his original proposal - and it taught us many lessons including this essential one: here was a venerable institution with an iconic collection which could if it wanted take a different look at itself through the eyes of the show's curator Quentin Blake. And with his own (sometimes deeply unserious) reactions on the walls to the works in their frames came the implied permission for others to do the same thing: in the form of their own animated conversations about the pictures, or through pieces of art and writing made back at school after a visit to the exhibition or website, or, as Blake wisely remarked, in responses which remained as feelings, none the less real for being undefined.

Ghislaine Kenyon is Head of Schools at the National Gallery and with Quentin Blake co-curated the exhibition Tell Me a Picture, an exhibition selected by Quentin Blake

The view from the Guggenheim, Venice

John Iddon demonstrates how he helps to train guides to interpret art

'Each group selected a work to brainstorm upon and then present their interpretive ideas to the rest of the group'

For the last three years I've been going to the Peggy Guggenheim Art Gallery in Venice to help train the interns who act as interpreters there. These interns are mainly young art history graduates from around the world, although chiefly from the United States, who hope to go on to careers in gallery curatorship. My role has been to introduce them to ways of interpreting art by running workshops in the Gallery.

The Guggenheim

The appeal of the Gallery is considerable. It's situated in the Palazzo Venier de Leoni, an unfinished palace on the Grand Canal from which you look left to the Accademia Bridge and right to the splendours of the Dogana, Salute and St Mark's. To see it another way, you look across to the canal to the Palazzo Gritti, on the right, where Ruskin stayed and to the Palazzo Barbaro on the left where Whistler stayed. Those two 19th century artists battled about what art was for, 'moral improvement' or 'for art's sake' though it was with the latter sentiments of Whistler that Peggy would have concurred. Then there is Peggy's sequestered sculpture garden. In a city where gardens are hard to come by, her beautiful leafy sculpture garden and pet Pekinese cemetery present a wonderful green refuge from the stone, water and heat of Venice. Finally, in a city rich in pre-20th century art, the gallery offers visitors the only permanent collection of modern art, built up by Peggy until her death in 1979. Her collection includes work by Magritte, Dali, Ernst, Calder, Chagall, Pollock, Picasso, Gris, Mondrian, de Chirico, Brancusi and Bacon.

My most recent session earlier this year started with lectures on the ways in which galleries attempt to 'bring art to life' for the average visitor. Then, after the Gallery had closed to the public, we split into five groups (there are about twenty-five interns in all) and each group selected a work to brainstorm upon and then present their interpretive ideas to the rest of the interns. The works chosen were: Constantin Brancusi's *Maiastra*, Alexander Calder's *Mobile*, Joseph Cornell's *Fortune-Telling Parrot*, Max Ernst's *The Antipope* and Jackson Pollock's *Alchemy*.

The groups were told that they should consider using one of the following four types of interpretation: a talk in front of the picture; a workshop where materials were provided; live interpretation; poetry or story-telling workshops. Various groups used all these kinds of interpretation, but I'd like to describe three in particular.

Joseph Cornell's *Fortune-Telling Parrot*

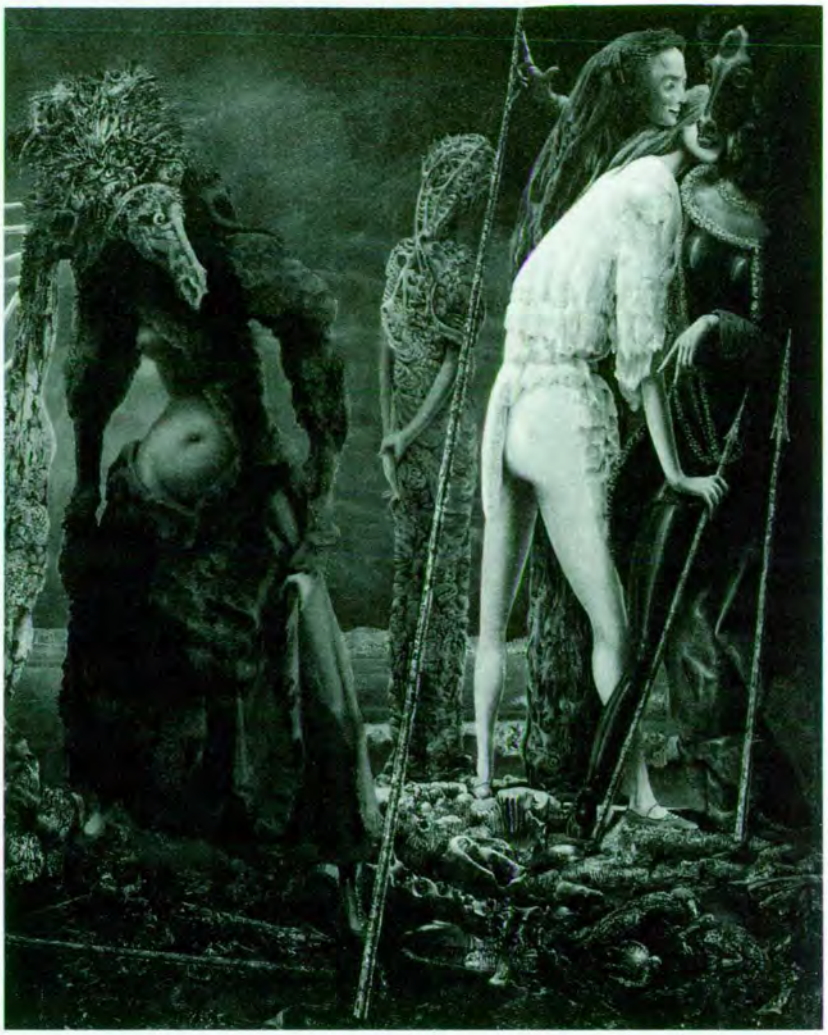
Joseph Cornell lived a reclusive life with his mother in Flushing, New York. He neither mixed socially nor travelled except for solitary excursions into Manhattan to gather material for the 'boxes' he constructed in his cellar at home. These boxes became exotic substitutes for travel and contact with the outside world.

The *Fortune-Telling Parrot* resembles a hurdy-gurdy, suggesting the bohemian life of travelling gypsy musicians. There is a crank that once activated a now broken music box that in turn activated the cylinder above. The cylinder is covered with motifs of the gypsy fortune-teller: playing cards, a game of cat's cradle, a Romany woman in traditional dress and various astrological signs. The parrot was a common companion for the itinerant fortune-teller and this one (stuffed) stares at the rotating auguries like a soothsayer's assistant.

Although he never travelled abroad, Cornell collected guidebooks, maps, shipping and railway timetables from Europe. These found their way into other boxes with titles like '*Hotel de l'Ange*', '*Hotel de l'Etoilles*' and '*Hotel de la Mer*' - revealing the exotic travels of his dreams.

The interns started off by saying 'of course you need to make a working reproduction of the *Fortune-Telling Parrot* in order to demonstrate how it was meant to sound and move, with the fairground music tinkling and the magic symbols rotating'. However, their main enthusiasm was to run workshops for the public which would enable people to create similar boxes into which they could transport their dreams or obsessions. Examples of themes came from memorabilia they had at home, like a brother's climbing equipment and maps and photos of a trip to the Andes, a father's medals and service papers from

Below: Joseph Cornell The Fortune Telling Parrot, *1937-8*



Right: The Antipope *by Max Ernst, 1941-2*

'Workshops for the public which would enable people to create similar boxes into which they could transport their dreams or obsessions'

Vietnam, a mother's collection of Hollywood magazines and a grandfather's memorabilia of crossing the Atlantic in the Queen Mary.

The ideas began to seem reminiscent of the 'People's Show' exhibitions so popular in British museums four or five years ago. But the interns had never heard of them and the idea of creating little 'box museums' of the imagination, inspired by the poignant works of Cornell, struck everyone as something that would excite public participation and, ultimately, a deeper appreciation of Cornell.

Max Ernst's *The Antipope*

'From one disturbed artist to another', laughed the intern who then introduced us to the subject of her group, the Surrealist, Max Ernst. *The Antipope* is an unsettling work of strange horse-headed figures in puzzling relationship and against a background of a Caspar Friedrich-like grim lagoon. Through Peggy's memoirs it is clear that at least on one level this painting represents a psycho-drama of Ernst's complex relationships at the time.

Ernst escaped from occupied France to New York with Peggy in 1941 and married her shortly afterwards but the relationship was far from happy or uncomplicated. Ernst was also having an affair with Leonora Carrington and the day before his wedding to Peggy, Pegeen her daughter, pleaded with her mother not to marry him. Various close friends as well as Peggy herself saw *The Antipope* as emerging from this triangular relationship. Ernst is seen as the horse/knight figure on the far right with Carrington in amorous proximity to him, Pegeen is the skeletal figure in the centre and Peggy is the baleful owl/horse figure isolated on the far left. The spear cutting the painting into two reinforces the separation of Peggy and Pegeen from Ernst and Carrington.

The interns felt that there were several ways in which this painting could be interpreted. One was to have a performance of readings from the memoirs, diaries and letters of Peggy, Pegeen, Carrington and Ernst shedding light on the tensions behind the painting. Another was to have a talk by an expert on mythology and symbols (horses, owls, knights, lances etc) that would relate to the canvas. Finally, one student from England mentioned Dr Anthony Clare's Radio 4 programme 'In the Psychiatrist's Chair' and the others agreed that a short, carefully scripted interview about the picture by a psychiatrist with Ernst 'in the psychiatrist's chair' might help to illuminate this compelling but complex work.

Alexander Calder's *Mobile*

This magnificent mobile hangs in the main hall of the gallery, between the door the public enter from the sculpture garden and the door they exit in order to

enjoy the verandah overlooking the Grand Canal. Hence the mobile at times 'breathes' with the through-draughts from the doors. It is one of the Gallery's most popular pieces.

At first the group which had been given this piece as their project thought that workshops in making mobiles would be enjoyable, but they all preferred another idea lending itself to live interpretation. This related to the question of positioning or 'hanging' a work. While the through-draughts from the doors were seen as an advantage in animating the piece there were other disadvantages with its position.

As the first port of call or 'hall' the public enters there is much competition to create impact by placing other prestigious works there. Amongst these is Picasso's large *The Studio*. But this painting can often only be seen properly by looking through the mobile and also the Picasso occupies a large white wall which might otherwise reveal the reflections and shadows of the mobile's 'leaves' as they glide and flit in the air. Many also felt that the work would be more powerful in a loftier and entirely white space where the work would be exclusively housed, like some great delicate sea creature and where perhaps also currents of air could be trained to create the occasional chords of wind chimes.

Their solution to interpreting these issues was to have two actors, one as Alexander Calder himself and the other as Peggy Guggenheim. The scene would begin with an angry Calder objecting to Peggy's choice of location and hang. Peggy would be furious back and an argument would ensue on what the best setting and conditions would be and whose views were the more valid in such a decision, the artist's or the owner's. In real life Peggy got on well with Calder - commissioning him to design her famous silver bedstead - and they would have had a robust and lively exchange.

'They clearly revelled in responding to visitors' questions, able to adapt to different levels of interest and background from a strong and varied reservoir of ideas and approaches'

Conclusion

The benefit of allowing the interns (or gallery attendants or interpreters as they might be called elsewhere) free reign in the galleries to explore potential ways of interpreting works is immense. They are provoked into researching more, thinking and debating more, brainstorming, looking at the works from different points of view and seeking innovative ways of presenting the works. This all showed markedly afterwards in the way they clearly revelled in responding to visitors' questions, able to adapt to different levels of interest and background from a strong and varied reservoir of ideas and approaches developed during the workshops. These workshops had (as I've found with similar exercises for volunteers in historic houses) contributed to greater confidence, enthusiasm and curiosity in the interns' approach to the collection and greater 'zip' in their interaction with the public. It was good to see these gallery curators and administrators of the future delighting in the pleasures and potential of interpretation.

Below: Interns standing under Alexander Calder's Mobile *made in 1942*

John Iddon, formerly Director of Heritage Interpretation at St Mary's College, Strawberry Hill is now a free-lance trainer of guides, interpreters and front-line staff at museums, galleries and heritage sites
e-mail: john.iddon@tinyworld.co.uk

Art on the loose

Jacqueline Yallop recounts how artists have been commissioned to interpret space in the Persistence Works project in Sheffield

Right: Details of the Peace Gardens, Sheffield. Artists designed the planters, stonework, water features and furniture

If...?

If we encounter a piece of art in a gallery we may expect it to be accompanied by some kind of information - about the artist, about the medium, perhaps about the technique or the historical context. The fact that it is considered worthy for display in a particular space, or important to the argument of a particular exhibition, often acts implicitly as the first level of interpretation. Depending on the policy, or mood, of the institution there may be a raft of additional layers of information. But what if an artwork sneaks into everyday life - say as part of a library or a shopping centre? What if it acts as a landmark in the city, a bench or a fountain or even a litter bin? Do we still think of these pieces as art, and if so, how do we interpret them?

Making spaces

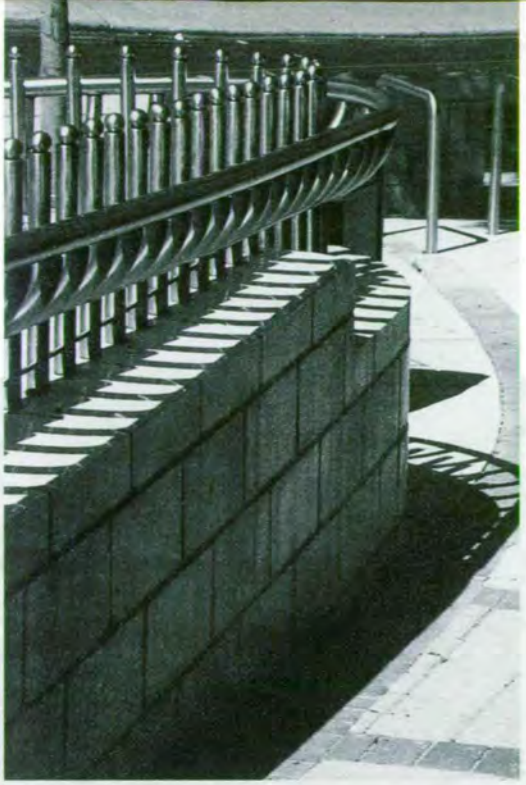
Once a piece of art is launched into a public context, all kinds of new elements affect the way we view it. Among these might be how the work makes us think about the place it inhabits, how it makes us look again at the buildings or spaces around it, what it suggests about civic aspirations. It might articulate - or subvert - political and economic manoeuvring. It might give voice to community desires. But for all this complexity, it will rarely be interpreted beyond a brief note of title and artist's name.

In the ways the artwork responds to its site, it is likely that it will have a key role to play in interpreting that space. What the artist chose to make and how they chose to make it will inevitably comment on the place and the context of the work and on the people who consume it. The constraints of planners and highways officials, of health and safety, of funding partners and political sensitivities will be ingested during the artistic process and reinterpreted into art that - hopefully - rises above all the pragmatic issues to make the space resonate.

A context: Sheffield

In Sheffield there is a fertile history of using artworks to punctuate and interpret the city. Since 1985, the City Council, public funders and private developers have commissioned over 150 pieces of work. The City's taste has been largely for integrated, often functional artworks - paving schemes, car-park grilles, railings. Alongside the production of physical interventions there has been an emphasis on asking artists to interpret their work by including workshops with the public, hands-on opportunities, sessions with schools. Communities have been encouraged to engage with their environments through art - and the artist has been at the front line of interpreting and enabling.

Not all artists, of course, are comfortable in working this way. Sheffield is fortunate in having Yorkshire ArtSpace Society (YAS), an artists' organisation with a focus on education and public activity. So in 1999, for example, when artists were drafted in to help transform the City's largest public square,



© BRETT PAYNE

Right: Castle Square railings, previous work by Brett Payne, an artist on the Persistence Works design team

The Peace Gardens, from dingy rows of wilting bedding plants into a vibrant meeting space of stone, ceramics, metal and planting there was also an ambitious series of public workshops and events. These were organised by YAS, which asked new artists to work with the public and so allowed the design team to get on with the time-consuming business of recreating a City.

The Persistence Works project

Now it is the turn of YAS to take centre stage. October sees the opening of its Persistence Works building, a Lottery and ERDF-funded, purpose-built workspace for 74 artists in the city centre, the only project of its kind in Europe. At the heart of the development has been the role of the artist in interpreting the new building. The seven commissions for Persistence Works include a 35 metre long floating glass wall made from eighty four slumped glass panels by Jeff Bell, and a project to get the door handles to all the public rooms and workspaces designed by nine selected artists and cast in aluminium.

This is of course not new. Many successful recent buildings have integrated commissions from artists into their development - the Bridgwater Hall in Manchester; Sunderland Library; Basingstoke Town Hall and the Edinburgh Dental Institute. What is different about Persistence Works is that the space is by artists and for artists - when it opens it will be the place in which they work every day. So the commissions are not only interpreting another building. They are also interpreting the way in which artists view themselves and their practice.

Sara Trentham, YAS Projects Officer, explains 'These are not precious objects. They are there to be touched and to give people a sense of a creative building. If someone comes who has no interest in what we do - say to read the gas meter - they still won't be able to leave without coming into contact with the public manifestation of what we're about, even if it's just by pushing a door handle.'

'These are not precious objects. They are there to be touched and to give people a sense of a creative building'

For Jo Fairfax, working on a Persistence Works commission to light the exterior of the building, the ultimate use of the space as working studios was a defining factor in his thinking. 'The fact that it is going to be an artists' space definitely made a difference. I wanted my piece to reflect the arts' capacity to be magical, to create things beyond the ordinary. I wanted to create a sense that we are entering somewhere unusual.'

This attempt to mark a pioneering project extended beyond the commissioning of physical pieces. Unusually for a visual arts organisation, one of the key commissions went to a composer. The renowned Lindsays will play Hugh Wood's fifth string quartet *Persistence Works* at its world premiere at the Crucible Studio Theatre in October. Sara Trentham hopes that this departure from the functional or sculptural tradition of commissions will 'not only let new audiences know about the development but will also add a complex layer to its interpretation. The finished work will stand as a celebration of the whole process of making a work of art, whether it is a piece of music, a building, a painting or a ceramic dish. And that's what we are about.'

Artists in hard hats

As a working artists' space, those who would be using the studios were keen not to abdicate control of the Persistence Works project to the architects and developers. They wanted to retain a voice in the discussions and a hand in the process. Brett Payne, a designer and jeweller and member of YAS since 1983, was paid a small fee to become a member of the design team from the outset. 'It was an absolutely fascinating experience' he enthuses, 'but also very frustrating. You realise how little you know of the architectural and building processes as an artist. If you're not careful you end up being vaguely superfluous, the outsider on the sidelines without any technical knowledge. I had no idea how complicated it all is.'

The principle of incorporating an artist into the

Right: Door handle commissions: (top) Tentacle *by Penny Withers; (bottom)* Wedge *by Jez Thompson*

design team is one eagerly encouraged by organisations like the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) which runs an annual prize for best practice called Art for Architecture. Described as 'a catalyst for collaborative ventures between artists and architects' the scheme is directly involved with allowing artists a more visible role in creating and interpreting our environment. Admirable as the idea sounds, Payne sounds a word of warning from the artist's viewpoint.

'I had to interpret for the team just what it means to be an artist'

'Looking back, my role on the design team was often in conflict with my own work - I just couldn't afford the time needed to go to every meeting over the three year lifetime of the design process. If an artist is going to be successful in having a serious impact on the overall look of a building it requires quite a bit of technical knowledge and the ability to spend hours and hours, days and days on it - it's a full time job.'

The learning curve may have been precipitous, but Payne feels it was worthwhile. He believes that the building is better suited to its purpose, and better interprets the vision of Yorkshire ArtSpace as an organisation, because of his input to the design team.

'My main contribution was getting everyone to fully understand the purpose of the building. It's a production facility but not a factory or a gallery or a shop. So what is it? Without an understanding of this, the finished building couldn't work. I had to interpret for the team just what it means to be an artist and just what you need to be able to work in a given space, whatever medium you're engaged with.'

'People are very interested in the whole commissioning process. They want to know how it works'

Interpreting commissions

Now that Persistence Works has such a wealth of commissions and primary artist input, what is it going to do with them? While everyone seems to agree that integrating the work of artists into design is valuable there is little experience or consensus of interpreting it once it's there. As Sara Trentham points out 'It's very difficult to interpret art in public places. How do you do it? You wouldn't want a big notice board next to every artist intervention but there should be some mechanism for people to find out more. Where do you put the information?'

Many pieces of artwork in the public realm may not need interpretation. The railings or benches do their job at improving the urban environment and no more needs to be said. But more complex and innovative pieces like those commissioned by Yorkshire ArtSpace will be of wide interest on many levels - those wanting to know the technical details, those wanting to know more about the artist and those interested in the philosophical basis for the designs.

Jo Fairfax is keen that information is available about his lighting piece. 'There are reasons for each of the components within the commission and many people are often interested to know what the thinking was. By understanding the ideas behind a work they have a starting point with which to connect to it and enjoy it'. As Fairfax points out, artwork in public places is often contentious; it is a prime motivation for angry letters to the local press. He believes part of this problem is that people are not helped to understand what the artist was trying to do. 'The immediate response is often a negative one. People claim that the money should have been spent on hospitals, schoolbooks, etc. Information can help address any negativity - it can show that the budget was not available for other uses. I think people are often reassured by seeing the rationale behind the work.'

Yorkshire ArtSpace is still thinking about the best ways to make this information available. Primarily they are looking at ways of using their website as a tool for interpreting the pieces. 'It's not just about what the artists say", explains Trentham. 'People are very interested in the whole commissioning process. They want to know how it works from picking the artist to putting something into the building. We could have lots of information available on the website but obviously we'd have to make sure everyone could look at it. We're thinking about having a terminal in reception so that anyone who's just passing by and wants to know all about the floor or the gates or the mosaic wall, can just come in and find out.'

Alongside new technology YAS will also be using old-fashioned hands-on opportunities. The commissions programme has included, from the outset, a scheme of putting artists into schools. pARTicipate has found an eager partner in the LEA allowing this

Above from top: Persistence Works: rear elevation; Persistence Works: side elevation

year's pilot project to target nine schools and to use the experience to build a three-year project across the city. This is the only one of the Arts Council-funded commissions which is entirely focussed on outreach and education, with no permanent manifestation required. It gives the freedom to develop long-term relationships with young people, allowing them to understand what art is about and how to get involved. It makes the vision of YAS expressed in Persistence Works tangible and achievable to those who will be the next generation of working artists.

And so . . .

What does the Persistence Works example show about the way in which artists perceive their work and the interpretation of it? It shows what an artists' organisation can contribute to the regeneration of a city. Many places have a gallery that allows us to consume art, but often the means and place of production are invisible. Persistence Works makes visible the beginning of the process.

It shows how commissions can be used imaginatively to interpret a building, or indeed any public space. And it shows how important activity and participation are in interpreting the sometimes complex pieces an artist makes.

But of course none of these things can be harvested into hard and fast rules. Art in public places is slippery. It eludes easy solutions. An artist's response to our favourite street or park is just an artist's response, no more or less valid than our own. Perhaps the problem with commissioning art for public places is that artists are often contracted to make permanent responses while we still have the freedom to change ours with the weather, or our mood, with the information or conversations we develop. Finding ways to make these dynamic responses part of the artist's brief is perhaps the greatest challenge.

Jacqueline Yallop is Public Art Officer for Sheffield. Yorkshire ArtSpace Society, www.artspace.org.uk

Left: Yorkshire ArtSpace/ Persistence Works Special Projects Programme Year1: commissioned work in precious metal, maquette by Maria Hanson

'You now have a choice...'

Leah Kharibian looks at using audio to aid interpreting art

Above: Engaging with Monet through audio

Audioguides can provide far more than 'talking labels'. Powerful technology and imaginative production are offering audiences interactive, plural experiences of art.

As any curator worth their salt will tell you, the meaning of an artwork is not fixed. In the same way that the production of art has numerous contexts, so too does its interpretation. Education and exhibitions staff are aware of the need to undermine the idea of 'correct' readings of exhibits. Education programmes, organised activities and lecture series can provide part of the solution. But what can be done to offer stimulating, plural interpretations of art for the general public whose age, background and interests are by no means uniform? The creative use of audioguide technology and content offers some exciting possibilities.

Creative technology

Digital compression technology - whether it is on CD-ROM or chip - means that current audioguide design offers enormous flexibility. Visitors can create their own tour round an exhibition by accessing commentaries to individual objects as and when they choose. They can hear 'layers' of extra information after initial commentaries. Infra-red triggering can automatically provide a gallery overview when the visitor enters that space, and can allow sound to be synchronised with video installations. All these aspects of audio technology allow visitors to exercise choice.

'Visitors can create their own tour round an exhibition by accessing commentaries to individual objects as and when they choose'

The high storage capacity of many guides allow them to carry multiple commentaries for a single exhibit, so that a family group, for example, is able to listen simultaneously to different material relating to the same object. Permanent collections such as the National Gallery, London, are now seeing the benefit of several years of investment in their audioguide systems. Their audio guides are provided by Antenna Audio. In addition to commentaries on individual works, there are now several themed audio trails through the galleries, creating virtual exhibitions without having to re-hang pictures. Indeed a single picture can make an appearance in several trails at once.

All of these elements can encourage multiple readings for art while making audioguides an active experience. However, technological advances alone won't eliminate the danger of audioguides distancing visitors from art.

More voices, more meaning?

There's a point at which both institutions and visitors view the taking of audioguides to art exhibits as a 'serious' learning opportunity. The reverence (and also, often, fear) with which art is held by the general public often fuels assumptions about valid forms and sources of information. In the early days of the audio guide, when tours were on cassette and were therefore linear in format, most guides were of the one-size-fits-all variety. Often narrated by an authoritative (generally anonymous male) voice they frog-marched visitors along a prescribed route and told them what to think of the exhibits into the bargain. Today's more imaginative productions try to present multiple perspectives on art objects through the use of a variety of voices, archive material and drama. But guides can easily fall into the trap of being over-produced and however democratic the choice of interviewees, the visitor can still remain a passive recipient of information. To liberate the interpretation of art as experienced by the visitor, and validate the personal response of the visitor alongside a variety of alternatives, audio doesn't necessarily need more production and more interviewees. Rather, it needs to reassess its attitude to interpretation, exploring a more open-ended, less conclusive approach to imparting information. It also needs to make a more imaginative use of audio technology. In this way visitors can become active rather than passive listeners.

Active listening

The greatest advances in the handling of audio guide technology and content have been made in family and children's tours. Because of their target audience, these guides take a far more relaxed (and in certain cases downright irreverent) attitude to the imparting of 'important' information. And

Far right: Antenna Audio's X-plorer audio guide

Above: Antenna Audio at MACBA (Barcelona Contemporary Art Gallery)

You now have a choice . . .

	Agents Vasari and Shapiro discuss Titian's *'Bacchus and Ariadne'* on the National Gallery's Soundtrack Family Trail.
Agent Shapiro:	This picture is just plain weird.
Agent Vasari:	I'm sure if we examine it closely the truth will emerge.
Agent Shapiro:	Okay. So some weirdo is jumping out of a chariot, wearing only a bit of cloth, and he's throwing a cricket ball at a woman.
Agent Vasari:	I don't see a cricket ball, Agent Shapiro.
Agent Shapiro:	Okay, but he looks as though he is. And just below him is a boy with goat's legs, and he's dragging the head of a calf on a string. And next to him there's a naked man covered in snakes. Perhaps he's from a circus, or maybe snakes just like him. And the man next to him is waving the leg of an animal in the air. Oh, and the chariot is being pulled by cheetahs. So the truth would seem to be that whoever painted this picture is seriously weird.
Agent Vasari:	I believe that the man jumping from the chariot is the god Bacchus.
Agent Shapiro:	Who he?
Agent Vasari:	The god of wine. Those strange figures are his followers. Bacchus liked to go about eating and drinking and making merry.
Agent Shaprio:	Making merry as in waving animal legs about?
Agent Vasari:	It would seem so . . .

'The reverence (and also, often, fear) with which art is held by the general public often fuels assumptions about valid forms and sources of information'

because clients for these guides within galleries and museums tend to be the education department, there is a greater understanding for the need to present material in a way that encourages the listener to think for themselves.

One of the National Gallery's Family Trails, works on the idea of detectives trying to figure out the possible meanings of the picture through the act of detailed looking (see above), it actively stimulates enquiry. And the listener is left to make up his or her own mind.

In Europe and the US where galleries and museums regularly commission a variety of guides for their collections, it's often found that adults are sneaking the kids tours. It's not just that they're more fun, and less concerned about teaching facts. They're most likely to be the guide that encourages active listening. Rather than mediating the experience of art, these guides give the experience of encountering art back to the visitor.

Leah Kharibian is a freelance writer and the senior scriptwriter for Antenna Audio Europe

Family focussed

Cara Codd writes about developing interpretation specifically for families at The Lowry, Salford

Above: The Lowry at night

The Lowry, set in a magnificent waterside location at the heart of the redeveloped Salford Quays in Greater Manchester, is an architectural flagship with a unique and dynamic identity. Rising from the regenerated docklands, it is designed to reflect the surrounding landscapes and waterways in glass and metallic surfaces.

The Lowry opened on 28th April 2000, bringing together a wide variety of performing and visual arts under one roof. Opening its door to the best in entertainment and education in the arts, it aims to give everyone access to new areas of creativity. There are two theatres for performing arts (drama, opera, ballet, dance, musicals, children's shows, popular music, jazz, folk and comedy), gallery spaces showing the works of LS Lowry alongside contemporary exhibitions and ArtWorks, a unique interactive attraction designed to encourage individual creativity.

'I liked the way I had something to do as I went round. I love to draw so this was so exciting.'
Charlotte aged 11, Sheffield.

Forming family policies

'Within a 30 minute drive time of Manchester there are currently 82,500 adults with at least one child, living in within 450,000 households, who have a propensity to visit the arts. Families stay in this life stage for a long period and so consequently they represent a relatively constant and loyal market.'[1]

Prior to opening, The Lowry commissioned Morris & Hargreaves to undertake research that would determine our possible audiences. Families were one of the main target groups identified and feedback from families expressed the need for:

- Family friendly information and interpretation materials
- The explanation of terminology and art movements
- The provision of free information sheets on artists
- The provision of family relevant programme,
- Children to feel welcome
- Family outings to be affordable.

From this research The Lowry has developed a policy which not only supports the development of family focused programmes, events & activities, but also enables families to access reduced ticket prices, special programme packages and family targeted publicity and marketing material. This policy gives family visitors the opportunity to give feedback on their experiences and help inform future Lowry programming and policy.

The All Arts Team

The All Arts Team at the Lowry undertakes education, community and outreach activities. The team's major role is to develop an exciting and varied family programme interpreting temporary

'The challenge was delivering activities that would appeal to different types of family users, taking into account different 'learning styles'

exhibitions, the L.S. Lowry collection and the architecture of the building. This is the task faced by many other arts venues, (and there is much evidence of good practice with regards to family programming and family friendly venues) but the Lowry is unique because it is a totally new venture, with no track record to build upon. The building and its programme have been developed entirely from the ground up, for the needs of not only its local community, but for national & international visitors too.

After many drafts of the All Arts strategy, we finally agreed on long-term goals for family visitors:

- To increase the take-up of family activity at the Lowry and to continue to develop the quality of the family experience when visiting the galleries and artworks, promoting the idea of The Lowry as a leisure destination
- To develop more activities that look at inter-generational activity, increasing the involvement and learning of adults as well as children
- To continue to develop a range of activities, drop in, self-help and scheduled workshops and to monitor the use and evaluate the success of these activities
- To develop 'Salford Family Days', targeting local residents
- To offer free & reduced rates tickets to Salford families
- To develop special projects or focus groups consulting with past/ current family visitors to The Lowry, on the delivery of future programmes
- To deliver family programmes during annual family friendly scheduling (e.g. summer holidays, half-term), and establishing this as a regular programme pattern through targeted marketing
- To offer parents the opportunity to develop creative skills through special taster sessions, working in partnership with Family Friendly agencies

The challenge was delivering activities that would appeal to different types of family users, taking into account different 'learning styles':

- Activists who like to leap up and have a go. They learn by doing
- Reflectors who like to think about things before having a go, and to learn by watching others
- Theorists who like to understand the theory and to have a clear grasp of the concept before having a go
- Pragmatists who like to have some practical tips and techniques from someone with experience before having a go.

Above from left: Family groups at the Lowry; L.S. Lowry, Coming from the Mill, *1930*

Family trails

'Family learning can contribute to the reversal of an otherwise vicious downward spiral of underachievement, low grade employment, unemployment, poverty, low self-esteem, poor quality of life and social exclusion' [2]

For first time family visitors and families with limited time to spend in the galleries, we developed paper-based family trails guides allowing them to tour the exhibitions at their own leisure. The first family trial 'Art Detective', accompanied the exhibitions 'Lowry's People' and 'The Double' and was surprising successful, even though it is was only black and white and photocopied. The important element of this trail was that it gave families an in-road into reading artwork and looking at how and why artists make art. The trail included riddles, drawing exercises, clues and information, providing something to interest both parent and child. The next trail, 'Animal Safari', was designed and printed in bright colours to complement the exhibition 'Carnival of Colour'. It is important for us to continue to develop these trails, as more often than not gallery text does not provide the right vocabulary for parents to engage their children in interpretation.

Activity tower

For families who are more familiar with The Lowry, but are unsure about taking part in scheduled workshops, Activity Tower encourages a higher level of participation with the exhibitions. Activity Tower, currently in its test phase, is a portable storage unit, housing worksheets, cut & paste activity, text quizzes and drawing activities. Activities are aimed at families with children aged 5 -11, and some activities are purposely devised so parents have to help children complete them.

PlayHouse

'Parents and carers are responsible for 85% of child's waking time. Less than 5% of parents participate in parenting education programmes. It is estimated that around one in five adults has difficulty with literacy and numeracy.' [3]

For family visitors who want to experience the full creative hands-on experience we have developed PlayHouse. PlayHouse, the first family activity to be established at the Lowry, gives parents with children aged 5 -11 the opportunity to explore the current exhibitions through making activities. It takes place every Saturday between 11am - 12.30pm and is led by a different artist each week. PlayHouse provides a selection of taster experiences from printmaking to circus skills, allowing families to pick and choose what they want to try.

PlayHouse has been extremely successful, mainly due to the following components:

- Activities change from week to week, interpreting the current exhibitions and architecture of the building
- Families (grandparents, parents and children) have time to interact with each other, learning together not only about the arts, but about each other
- Families take time out from their busy schedule to learn to play
- Families learn about using the gallery and building resources to create interesting and fun visits
- Families learn about how artists work
- Families experience a diversity of arts practice and creative techniques
- Families learn about the role of galleries and the relevance of exhibitions to everyday life.

'The current exhibition 'Pizzazz' uses cartoons to interpret artworks instead of the usual text labels'

The success of the building and the focus on architecture means The Lowry is developing a new family activity, which encourages families to explore and interpret the architecture. Architrails will be launched in October and is currently being designed and developed by artist Jane Kelsell, in consultation with PlayHouse visitors. Architrails will consist of a kit of games, trails and props related to architecture aimed at educating families about the building via a multi-sensory journey.

Family interpretation is integral to the presentation of exhibitions at The Lowry so where possible curators have involved families in curating exhibitions. The 'Who Chose That?' exhibition gave PlayHouse families the opportunity to choose their favourite Lowry painting or drawing to be included. Alongside the chosen artwork families talked about why and how they made their choice. The current exhibition 'Pizzazz' uses cartoons to interpret artworks instead of the usual text labels. The exhibition has been specifically curated to appeal to the summer family audience and incorporates giant puppets, breathing sculpture and automated peepshows within the main gallery spaces.

Although The Lowry has achieved a lot in its first year of family interpretation, we still have a very long way to go. It will take at least two to three years for The Lowry to test all its ideas and implement long-term schemes of work. In order to do this we are planning to set up a Family Focus Group, which will advise us on interpretation methods and who will act as testers for future interpretation initiatives. In reality all we can hope to achieve is that we engage family visitors and provide them with an enjoyable gallery experience, in which they may learn something new. I don't believe we will ever stop and say, 'Well we've done families, who's next on the list?' The Lowry has to grow-up with its family audiences. The goal has to be to develop life-long learning audiences.

References

[1] Family Policy Studies Centre Report, 2000
[2] DfEE 'Creating Learning Cultures: Next Steps in Achieving the Learning Age', 2nd report of the National Advisory Group for Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning.
[3] Arts About Manchester, Family Friendly Review Presentation

Cara Codd is the Visual Arts Co-ordinator for the All Arts Team at The Lowry and responsible for developing informal education, community and outreach initiatives

Art interpreting historic buildings

Marilyn Scott, Tina Cockett and Amanda Devonshire discuss how artists worked with school children to interpret buildings

'Children were empowered by the opportunity'

Woking Galleries is a new heritage and arts centre project under development and due to open in 2005/6. Throughout the development period it has sought to make contact with target audiences through innovative outreach projects. In 1997, with the difficult task of developing an education service with no building, the education officer turned to the Borough's historic environment for inspiration and stimulation for creative arts activity. This is a reflection on how the project developed and the success of the interpretation methods utilised.

Above: Muslim Burial Ground, Woking, Surrey

Community partnership

The English Heritage Education Scheme 'Schools Adopt Monuments' (SAM) was launched in 1997 to encourage schools and county groups to engage more closely with their historic environment. Woking Galleries joined the scheme and four projects were set up involving nine schools, adults with learning difficulties and professional artists. The aim was to stimulate interesting and exciting responses to historic sites through the facilitation of an individual artist working with groups of children and young people. The groups were taken to visit individual sites after selecting their 'favourite' site. In reality, for practical purposes this was usually the site closest to their school. The visits were complemented by the handling of original artefacts, such as Tudor bricks from Woking Palace. The groups met with their artist-facilitator to produce individual and collaborative artworks to express their creative interpretation of the site and showcased through public exhibitions, workshops and events. Partnerships were an essential element of the programme enabling Woking Galleries to establish links in the county and develop new audiences.

New opportunities

Despite its modern image of high tech companies and new buildings, Woking has a rich history with several sites of national significance, including the first mosque built in Britain and the county's largest cemetery, established in 1850 as an overflow from the crowded burial places in London. The SAM scheme enabled Woking Galleries to introduce children to this hidden heritage and increase their understanding of the importance of preserving and caring for their history. Over the next three years Woking Galleries devised and managed four major artists-in-residence projects often involving schools that had never offered pupils access to professional artists before. Teachers were offered in-service training to assist in this work. For many, it was a very new way of working and the project highlighted the desperate need for schools to be supported in developing partnerships with artists and how fulfilling the opportunity to work with heritage organisations can be.

'It was better than watching T.V '

An unseen rich heritage

All the primary, secondary and special schools in the Borough were invited to participate. Initially, five schools agreed and selected sites ranging from a 900 year-old church, to a burial ground for Muslim soldiers in World War 1. A ceramicist, artist and storyteller worked with a range of groups from the five schools to make collaborative works of art and to tell stories. The time the artists spent in schools was relatively short, mostly five half day sessions. The resulting art works were quite stunning and illustrated how very inspiring the combination of historic stimulus and creative artists is for children. Results of the project range from a ten foot textile wall hanging inspired by the door of St Peter's Church, panels of ceramic angels based on memorials in Brookwood Cemetery to colourful mono prints of the Muslim Burial Ground. In the summer Woking Galleries staged an exhibition of the schools work alongside artefacts from the sites themselves. This publicity resulted in a further six schools joining the project. Other partners soon became interested and many other creative links were made, for example with dance and poetry.

Project examples

Beaufort Primary School adopted the ruins of Woking's Tudor Palace. An aim of the project was to try and help children to imagine how vibrant and colourful Tudor life was for the people who once lived in the palace. They were assisted in this by the historic dance troupe Baroque 'n' Roll. The troupe worked with the school to create a dance item that they performed together in the local shopping centre on a Saturday. So the visual arts merged into performing arts in the effort to inspire young interest in heritage sites.

Greenfield School adopted Woking Park as their site. Woking Park is a centre for leisure activities but

Above: A SAM project workshop

Right: Artwork produced by schoolchildren involved in the SAM project

lacks a cohesive' heart'. Children became involved in creating a poetry trail through the park to encourage a sense of place and then artist Clare Staiton took over and created sculptures with the children, using natural materials found in the park. A book of poems was produced and the sculptures remained in the park for the public to enjoy.

Woking is a very culturally diverse town and another part of the project brief was to highlight culturally diverse approaches to heritage. This was done by using artists from non-western traditions and choosing some sites which did not have roots in western tradition. The Shah Jehan Mosque built in 1898 was used for the exploration of Islamic art and architecture. Children worked with an Islamic calligrapher and also worked with artist-in-residence, Bhajan Hunjan. A wall-hanging inspired by Islamic tiles was produced and two Perspex panels, both of which have become part of the permanent decoration in the schools which made them. The children drew so much pleasure from all these activities and their enthusiasm was confirmed when many participants reported that 'it was better than watching TV. '

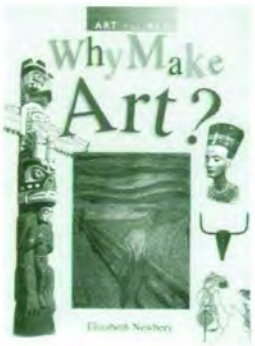
Our achievement

For Woking Galleries the SAM project proved to be a turning point for our education service and our recognition in the community. We were able to demonstrate how powerful the visual arts are in increasing knowledge and understanding of heritage sites. Children were empowered by the opportunity to show and demonstrate their own creative work and local teachers learnt a set of valuable new skills in the teaching of history.

Marilyn Scott is the current Director of Woking Galleries, Tina Cockett was the former Education Officer and Amanda Devonshire the former Director

'To highlight culturally diverse approaches to heritage'

Book reviews



Belitha Press 2001
£9.99 each

Why Make Art?, Colour in Art, How is Art Made, and Secrets of Art

Elizabeth Newbery

Elizabeth Newbery has produced four delightful books in a series entitled 'Art for All' which set out to stimulate children to think about four key aspects of art through the use of often unfamiliar images from a range of ages and cultures. The books are largely intended for children of the 9-12 age range, but as the title implies, there is something here for others as well, particularly teachers and adults who would have great fun interacting with children while leafing through the pages.

The books cover four themes: 'Why Make Art?', 'Colour in Art', 'How Art is Made' and 'Secrets of Art'. Each book is designed for use, either in school or at home with the family. All are to be recommended but I'll confine my remarks largely to one, the theme of which particularly appealed to me, 'Why Make Art?'.

This book looks at the things that motivate artists to express themselves, such as telling stories, recording scenes of everyday life, showing important events or affecting people's attitudes or emotions. Coloured photographs of an impressive variety of works of art are used to illustrate these motivations and one is really drawn into them in a way that would not have been possible without the author's chosen approach. Two sections are particularly successful: *Get the Message* and *In the Mood*.

In the Mood demonstrates how colour as well as composition creates mood, vividly illustrating this from three particularly powerful and varied examples: Munch's *Scream*, Cassatt's *Mother and Child* and Kokoschka's *Mandrill*. In each case the accompanying questions and comments in the text provoke insight and understanding as do the list of practical 'Things to Do' which apply activities to each section.

The book ends nicely with a section called *But is it Art?* challenging the reader to consider provocative or unconventional examples. It also provides a glossary of technical terms and a section of profiles of artists used. Finally, as with the other three companion books in the series, the most satisfying effect is that children and others will have been exposed to some brilliantly fresh and stimulating artists and images.

Review by John Iddon

Explaining our World: An Approach to the Art of Environmental Interpretation

Andrew Pierssené

E&FN Spon 2001
£4.99

Andrew Pierssené has, or ought to have, a long service medal, with bar, for involvement in the field of interpretation. Like all of those who were front-runners in the field 25 and more years ago, his credentials included no 'previous experience', for the field was a new one. But it brought together people of expertise in many other fields and a desire to help their fellows understand the magic, mystery and sometimes the mundane of their surroundings.
These three elements all suffuse Pierssené's book in different ways, and none to disadvantage.
To say it is a worthy piece of work sounds pejorative or even patronising, but this is not intended. It is worthy of reading from cover to cover, by those who may know much of the subject to discover nuggets here and there, by those new to interpretation to learn from the wisdom of long association, and by those practised but not perfect to gain further insights. The book reflects the era of the writer and its carefully considered (and grammatical) prose will leave some readers wishing it hastened on a bit. But they will miss nuances that way, and interpretation depends as often on nuances as on bold statements.
The author calls upon many other communication and inter-personal disciplines to make comparisons and contrasts that add insight and depth - it is interesting that he particularly suggests interpreters can learn from the way advertising makes its impact -

it comes near the end when least expected.

Some of what Pierssené says may appear obvious, occasionally a little dated and certainly conditioned by personal experience. But how often we all miss the obvious and we can all do our own updating. It inevitably concentrates for many of its examples of good and other practice on past and present interpretation in East Anglia (the author's territory); more generally it refers to experience and organisations in England with a few references to Wales, Scotland, the USA and elsewhere. It is a pity that his references to north of the Border contain inaccuracies and, in general, take very little account of the considerable impetus the whole field of interpretation received in Scotland, particularly in Don Aldridge's early days at the Countryside Commission for Scotland. These and other gaps notwithstanding, this is a book that students of interpretation (at college or in practice) should read. It provides a valuable counterpoint to the more zappy, 'can do' approach adopted by authors based in the USA by being more reflective, more conscious of many of the subtleties of the art of interpretation and, in some ways, more demanding of its readers.

Review by Michael Glen