

Young People as Interpreters:

Manchester Art Gallery's Creative Consultants

Katy McCall

Artist and freelance educator

The Creative Consultants are a group of young people based at Manchester Art Gallery. They were first established in 2003 through an envision-funded project, that aimed to break down barriers and encourage more young people to access art galleries. The group was initially recruited through adverts in the gallery brochure, links with schools and work with Social Services. There is now an established group that comes to the gallery independently. They are a mixture of young people ranging from secondary school students to degree students to young people in employment. This mix works surprisingly well, with the younger members feeling confident to contribute. Of course there are times when the group is depleted in numbers, especially around exam time. However, it is true to say that the group we work with is exceptionally committed and intelligent.

They meet once or twice a month and have consulted on a variety of projects, exploring exhibitions and collections, helping to interpret artworks for visitors and a young audience. The group has designed trails and activities, run events and talks. They work with curators and artists to develop resource rooms for temporary exhibitions including the *British Art Show* in December 2005, the *Pae White* exhibition in July 2006, and most recently they have been approached to work on the resource room for the *Kylie* exhibition coming to Manchester in July 2007.

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The integrity displayed by the Creative Consultants and their determination to do an intelligent and well-researched job is partnered with their fresh and irreverent approach to the gallery. The gallery recognises the potential of the group when it comes to interpreting art and creating ways in for other visitors. Respect for the Creative Consultants within the organisation has grown over the years, particularly through its ongoing work on the *Visual Dialogues* programme.

Visual Dialogues is a project managed by Tate, in partnership with various regional galleries. Working in collaboration with artists and gallery staff, groups of young people across the country are developing a range of interpretative resources and audience engagement programmes around works from the Tate's collection and regional gallery collections. Experiment and risk are key to the programme. This article focuses on the first phase of the *Visual Dialogues* project at Manchester Art Gallery which ran between 2004 and 2005.

The brief was for young people to choose artworks from Tate's collection to link with work from Manchester's collection and then develop a digital 'interpretative tool'. Sounds simple? We had approximately 18 months for the first phase, which is a long time in a young person's life; however the majority of the group stayed with the project until the end. The budget was approximately £10,000 for production. Expert guidance was provided by Manchester Art Gallery staff, Tate staff and Dr Veronica Sekules of the Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts. A series of seminars with interpretation experts was programmed for gallery staff to attend. The project was structured as follows: Exploration of Manchester Art Galleries collection; Finding a Theme; Identifying loans from Tate's collection; and Developing Interpretation.

Exploring the collection and finding a theme

The Creative Consultants explored the collection through gaining knowledge, personal connections, and making activities. Curators' talks gave the young people a background to the galleries' collections. They got a real buzz from learning about works and discovered how they themselves could be brilliant interpretation tools, when retelling the history of works to other young people and visitors.

The group explored the variety of interpretation methods employed at Manchester Art Gallery. During the re-development and expansion of the gallery between 1998–2002 an interactive gallery was developed for families. Other physical, interactive interpretation was also placed throughout the galleries. The gallery uses traditional text panels and labels as its main interpretation method, although all text is written in Ekarv text – a style of writing which keeps one idea per line and is very active.

Finding a theme that was interesting to the group was important. Veronica Sekules led a 'free writing' workshop which enabled the young people to make personal connections with artworks. They were asked to think of a personal object and use that as a starting point for a piece of writing. The writing

was then connected to work in the gallery. Poignant and unexpected links were made and this really started to shift the group's idea of how to connect, interpret and engage with art. The group moved away from understanding interpretation as purely knowledge-based.

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Making activities helped the group further develop thematic ideas. Objects related to the themes were made and then taken into the gallery to use as a way in to the collection. The group delighted in making links from their own experiences and building on connections. All these activities helped the group to get to know each other and develop confidence and an understanding of what it is to interpret art. They eventually chose a theme which they felt to be as relevant today as it has been throughout history: 'Conflict and Resolution'.

Identifying and researching artworks

Artist-led workshops and group work enabled the Creative Consultants to explore Tate's collection. After intensive discussion, they identified two works which they collectively decided to apply to loan: Tracey Emin's *Hate and Power can be a terrible thing*, 2004 (textile), and Jacob Epstein's *The Rock Drill*, 1913-14 (bronze). They felt that these two works would allow a really rich exploration of the complexities of the theme and allow it to be treated both historically and in the context of contemporary events and ideas. We were extremely lucky that both our requests were successful.

A period of time was spent researching the artworks. *Rock Drill* was made in response to the atrocities of the First World War and the impact of new technology. Emin's textile commented on the Falklands war and Margaret Thatcher's role in the conflict.



The group was inspired by the combination of ideas about war, technology, personal memory, gender, identity and fear. They were interested in drawing out these references by comparisons between the works and pieces in the Manchester Art Gallery's collection. By using the Tate loans to assist interpretation, work previously unnoticed became alive and relevant. It was a really experimental and mind-expanding time for the group.

What is an 'Interpretation Tool'?

The Creative Consultants had spent a few exciting months interpreting the work for themselves. The next task was to work out how to enable others to engage actively with the work, enjoy viewing it, and be stimulated to connect in new ways with ideas around it.

Throughout the project there were meetings with gallery curators, education curators and the young people. Decisions needed to be made about where the loans would be located. The logistics of placing loans into an existing collection were exposed to the group. The group was asked to think about the difference between curating an exhibition and creating an interpretation tool.



Ideas around integral interpretation were explored. They decided they really wanted to place the loans next to each other and felt the juxtaposition of the two works would raise many questions and aid the interpretation process. The gallery was accommodating to their decision. The Creative Consultants explored the idea of relocating works from Manchester Art Gallery's collection to display next to the Tate loans. A Chinese lotus shoe and a 15th century painting of a knight in armour were two works they felt would have helped interpret the loans. Eventually it was decided against moving works.



Regular meetings were extremely useful for the development of the Creative Consultants as they learnt how to assess all the variables in putting together a display. It also highlighted how risky this project was. The nature of *Visual Dialogues* is to be experimental and take risks. However, the gallery, in some respects, doesn't have the staff or procedures in place to support such an experimental approach. Staff could only cope with a certain amount of risk and uncertainty. The question 'What is the interpretation going to be?' was asked by curators months before the loans were even confirmed. The young people would turn up to one meeting with ideas of electronic pads on the floor that accessed video links, then at the next meeting they would be exploring something completely different. This approach was, unsurprisingly, difficult

for some gallery professionals to comprehend and really scary, yet exhilarating for us.

There were concerns about the time needed to manufacture the interpretative tool. As we didn't yet know what the tool was going to be, it was difficult to employ the right person to manufacture it. In the end, Chris Parker of Heritage Multi-Media, an expert in technology based education interactives, was employed to work on the project. The Creative Consultants briefed him and showed him a huge mind map that had been created while researching the works and themes. This was a record of the Creative Consultants' exciting journey and the group could not get away from the map, continually making new links and expanding their research. They wanted to record their findings and present them in a way that enabled visitors to make their own discoveries. Chris asked the group what their objectives were. This was a real turning point as it made the group step back and really evaluate what they wanted the visitor to experience and who they were aiming this tool at. The group created objectives for the interpretation tool. It needed to:

- Enable people to engage in the process of interpreting.
- Enable people to understand that interpretation is affected by context.
- Enable people to create links between artworks and ideas in the galleries.
- Demonstrate the importance of personal experience.
- Enable people to record their personal experience.
- Create social interaction.

At this point the young people decided that what they had enjoyed and gained most from was making and finding their own interpretation. They agreed that historical knowledge was important but only after they had explored the work instinctively first. They often found that having the confidence to come to their own decisions gave them a fairly insightful interpretation of the work.

It was decided that posing relevant questions was key to getting people to interpret artworks and come up with their own answers. After sessions trailing key questions and discussing the look of the interpretation, they came up with the 'Intelligence Centre'.

The Design

'Intelligence Centre' is an interactive, themed as a military command and control desk. It is designed to elicit visitors' personal responses to the artworks on display. Intelligence

Centre holds no predetermined interpretive content. Instead, a series of questions is designed to guide visitors through an exploration of conflict and resolution inspired by the two artworks in the gallery. The questions start by establishing the personal and how the visitor is feeling. 'What is your name?' 'How do you feel today?' The questions then encourage the visitor to look at the artworks and consider materials, themes and connections between the works. The questions lead back to the personal and issues of conflict, 'What would you like to shout about but won't?' 'What conflict affects you today?'

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Intelligence Centre reads each question to the visitor using text to speech software deliberately chosen to deliver the audio in a robotic computer generated voice, representative of the 'dysfunctional' *Rock Drill*.

The visitor then responds to the question by writing directly onto a screen. The response is analysed by handwriting recognition software and read back to the visitor, using the text to speech software, to confirm their entry. The personal is transformed into the robotic. The questions are designed so that as the visitor answers them, the interactive builds up a structured personal response to the artworks.

Having completed the questions, the visitor is asked for 'Permission to Fire'. The visitor presses the fire button and their words are ejected, in rapid succession, over a tannoy system into the gallery, recreating the vitriolic nature of the Tracy Emin artwork. The young people felt it was important to reference the works in the design of the tool. During this broadcast, Intelligence Centre produces a printout providing the visitor with a record of their response in the context of each question and in relation to the work of the artists. This printout provides the visitor with knowledge to read at their leisure.

The Creative Consultants felt it was important to highlight the diversity of people's interpretations. The responses of all visitors giving 'Permission to Fire' are stored in a database and displayed as objects on the radar screen. Selecting an object allows visitors to listen to their entry again, or experience the perspective of another visitor.

Visitor responses have been very positive: 'Fantastic project, a really professional interactive and display – well done!' 'I enjoyed the interactive thing – it did encourage us to think about connections and the vulnerability inherent in the *Rock Drill* piece. I also saw the blanket in a different way when asked to think about it representing Emin's shouts – rather than a piece about hate dressed up as 'pretty'.' 'Volatile, visual display of thoughts, great impact.' 'Very cool, makes you think about your life.'

Lessons Learnt

The brief was to work with new technology to create digital interpretation tools with young people. This was unknown territory for everyone. Due to timing there were problems with trailing and testing the interactive, and a few technical difficulties to start with, but they were rectified fairly quickly.

Because the Intelligence Centre was designed to accompany specific artworks, it could not be used when the Tate loans had been returned. However, the software can be reprogrammed and questions changed to be used with other artworks and this is something the Creative Consultants are keen to work on.

One of the group's objectives had been to design something that created social interaction between visitors; however, only one visitor could use the interactive at any time.

Phase One of *Visual Dialogues* has informed the second phase of the project in many ways. In Phase Two, the Creative Consultants have designed an activity cabinet that can be used by many visitors at any one time. The activities encourage visitor interaction. This choice of low technology methods came about because they were keen to try out something new, not because they felt the digital tool was unsuccessful.

In conclusion, like many experimental education projects, this one could have gone horribly wrong or maybe veered off in another direction. The guidance, experience and encouraging support of the project team gave the group the confidence to experiment and push their ideas. There has been a real sense of everyone learning together on equal terms within the team – so much so that the young people insisted on Veronica Sekules' and Chris Parker's names being included in the 'Creative Consultants' members' list on the gallery wall.

Images in order of appearance

- 1 Creative consultants using own work to interpret Manchester Art Gallery's collection
- 2 Interactive Intelligence centre
- 3 Mind mapping