Q Arts Case Study: **SPARKS**

1 **Summary**

Q Arts is currently involved in the development of a major capital project, QUAD, a new visual arts and new media centre for Derby. SPARKS was a project developed by Q Arts to test creative approaches to consultation through visual arts activities. The research project was designed to influence the future practice of the Q Arts Gallery Exhibitions Team and for the engagement of young people in QUAD’s future programme and planning. Through SPARKS, eight young people worked with five artists for three sessions at the gallery during Spring 2006. SPARKS provided a rich body of understanding about using the visual arts as a consultation tool. The young people’s work was exhibited as part of the QUAD / Architecture Week show.

2 **The context**

2.1 **The organisation**

Q Arts is an independent arts organisation, constituted as a charitable company limited by guarantee. The organisation is revenue funded by Derby City Council and Arts Council England and receives project funding from a wide variety of sources. Its stakeholders include arts organisations, artists, other agencies and organisations in Derby, programme audiences and participants, and its staff and board members. Q Arts currently has a turnover of £500k p.a. and employs 14 core and 5 project staff.

Q Arts is a visual arts organisation with particular strengths in photography, moving image and digital media. The Gallery shows a wide range of curated and touring exhibitions with work by local, regional, national and international artists. With participation and engagement at the centre of its work, Q Arts provides a distinctive programme centred on a unique fusion of exhibition, community participation and creative production. Q Arts has developed a wide reputation for innovative work in arts and social regeneration, working predominantly with disadvantaged communities and people with disabilities.

2.2 **The situation**

The next stage in Q Arts development is a major capital project, QUAD, to create a new visual arts and new media centre for Derby. This is well under way and the new building will open in Spring 2008. Since the new or-
ganisation aims to put participation by young people at its heart, it is essential that they are fully engaged with the planning and design process.

The Sparks project was created as a pilot with the aim of developing a programme for creative consultation with young people and a sustainable plan for individual their engagement in QUAD programme and planning.

SPARKS set itself a number of objectives designed to achieve this aim:

• To research previous work in the use of creative techniques for consultation with young people;

• To identify 3 techniques suitable for the project;

• To commission artists to identify creative techniques for consultation and to deliver this with young people;

• To work with the exhibitions team to identify key questions that they feel they could respond to when planning the exhibitions programme;

• To work with young people to identify issues that they would like to give an opinion on to influence the exhibitions team;

• To create a quality art product; and

• To set up a system to evaluate the effectiveness of this method in engaging young people, enabling them to express their opinions and serve as a useable and informative mechanism for the exhibitions team.

3 The project

3.1 Planning

A freelance project coordinator, Amanda McLaren, was commissioned by Q Arts to deliver the project. She worked closely with a member of the Exhibitions Team to plan sessions, select artists and organise workshop access to the Gallery space. The artists selected to deliver visual arts consultation activities were Darius Powell (a freelance new media artist), Red Ted’s (a participatory visual arts organisation) and Low Brow Trash (a new media and technologies organisation); all had previously worked with Q Arts.

The coordinator began recruiting 10 young people to take part in the project by contacting a range of organisations including the City Pupil Referral Unit, the Integrated Disabled Children’s Service, Derby Social Services and several schools and community colleges. The intention was to identify young people aged between 14 and 18, who have an interest in visual art,
and who could commit to attending on all three dates. Expression of interest forms were sent so that young people could request an opportunity to take part. A number of problems arose during this process:

• Young people needing additional support were unable to attend, due to the unavailability of support staff.

• Potential participants from the Pupil Referral Unit were unwilling to attend on Saturdays, when there was no support from unit staff.

• The timing coincided with the run-up to GCSE exams, which excluded a substantial number of young people; other children, who could have included the work in their year 10 course work requirements would only be 14 years old later in the school year.

3.2 Delivery
All the workshops took place in Q Arts Gallery, in Derby city centre, between 10.00 and 12.30 on Saturday mornings: the first two workshops were on consecutive Saturdays, with the third one taking place three weeks later. The workshops took place in the main exhibition space while the Gallery was open to the public and, sometimes, in the meeting room.

Workshop 1 - Creating icons for an interactive computer-based gallery tour
The workshop was run by Darius Powell, with support from the SPARKS coordinator and exhibitions curator Jennie Sysons; two gallery assistants were also on site. Seven year 10 pupils from three Derby schools took part.

The young people photographed a variety of found and created images to create icons for a computer-based tour of the gallery. The icons enable visitors to give feedback on their experience. The tour itself was devised by an artist in the current exhibition ‘Nazar’, showcasing contemporary Arab photography. The young people discussed and created icons for three topics.

• Access – getting to the gallery, outside impressions etc.

• Gallery environment - Lighting, information, space and the exhibition itself;

• Gallery Assistants – visitor requirements of gallery assistants.
Workshop 2 - Creating a quarter sized model of the gallery
Red Ted’s artists, Tan Draig and Clair Armstrong, led the second workshop with the same support staff as before; six young people took part. They used string and bamboo canes to measure the gallery’s internal dimensions; they then made a quarter-size scale model with the canes and used stickers and coloured twines to express opinions on these questions:

- Which area/s of the gallery is most intimidating or scary?
- Which area/s of the gallery is most comfortable or nice? (This and the previous questions were interpreted as referring to both the physical environment and the exhibition content.)
- In priority order, which are your five favourite exhibits? Which photograph you feel you have most in common with?

Workshop 3 - Video, Polaroid photography and gallery intervention
This workshop was run by Graham Elston and Thomas Hall (Low Brow Trash), with support as before; five young people took part. On arrival they were given 20 minutes to explore the newly opened exhibition: ‘Future Focus 06 - This Years Model’, a group exhibition presenting the best in new graduate work from the Midlands region. The artists then introduced the session activities:

- To each present a 2-minute ‘reality TV’ style video introduction to the exhibition, without the other young people present. This reportage should be a spontaneous reaction to the works (positive, negative or indifferent) aimed at their contemporaries;
- To award points to the works using a range of plastic animals; and
- To promote the exhibition using Polaroid cameras to take pictures that showed passers-by what was happening inside.

4 Outcomes

4.1 Impact on participants
It was strongly felt that engagement through creative activities was crucial to the enjoyment and sustained attendance of the sessions and therefore the quality of the consultation.

With each workshop the participants’ engagement in activities became more pronounced and confident. At the second workshop, they offered a more considered and informative opinion of the exhibition than at the first.
By the third workshop the young people demonstrated confidence in interacting with the exhibition, artists and the gallery environment. After this session, two of the participants wrote in the gallery comments book:

“The project I’ve taken part in has been an amazing experience. It has been so much fun and I’ve enjoyed every minute of the exhibitions. Thank you so much for making this so memorable.”

Young person B said

“hehe well what can I say the workshop I have taken part in was absolutely amazing!! I wish it was on for longer. I have learnt so much while having fun so gonna do it again sometime thank you Q Arts!”

After workshop One, a participant returned during the week with a friend to visit the exhibition. In Workshop Three, young people enthusiastically stuck Polaroid images on the glass doors at the gallery entrance. On leaving, they suggested that they bring their friends back to see, suggesting that they were proud and confident sharing their work at the gallery with their peers.

At least 3 of the participants have become regular gallery visitors and again are bringing friends along too.

4.2 Impact on others involved

Concern was raised in the planning stage about the workshop sessions being in the main gallery space while it was open to the general public, but this did not worry the young people themselves. On the contrary, working with artists and Q Arts staff in a public forum appeared to raise their sense of legitimacy in occupying the gallery space.

We have a clearer (and shared) understanding of how to deliver consultation workshops effectively, and Q Arts has a commitment to developing the project further to engage young people, artists and the exhibitions team so that young people have an influence in the programme and planning of QUAD.

4.3 Institutional change

After consultation with the young people at Workshops One and Two, the Exhibitions Team ensured that information panels addressed the issues raised by the young people.

Because of the project’s success in engaging young people and developing their skills, Q Arts are now seeking funding to extend this programme of work. The aim is to run regular consultation, curatorial and art form de-
development activities at the gallery and at the workshops. This group will be asked to identify which workshops they would like to attend, what the age group should be and when they should take place. We will also consult with the young people regarding ways to raise awareness of the project and other opportunities at Q Arts for young people to engage in.

5 Lessons learned

5.1 What worked and what didn’t

The project’s success was due to:

- Good interaction with, and project facilitation by, different visual artists.
- The young people’s commitment to attending all three sessions, which allowed ideas to develop alongside a growing sense of purpose and ownership of the gallery space.
- The participation of a curator from the team who could offer deeper knowledge of the exhibition, and who had the authority to implement changes in response to the ideas and responses of the young people involved.

The interaction between artists, facilitators, participants and others was a uniformly enjoyable, productive and informative experience. The young people developed ease in the gallery space and a confidence in voicing their opinions. Using different artists at each workshop offered a range of activities and different dynamics.

We were not able to secure the participation of the groups of young people outlined in the project funding application. With more experience and longer timescales, participation by young people from a wider range of social and economic backgrounds would be secured. It may be appropriate to offer a programme of activities from which individuals could choose so that they could develop a specific area of work in which they were interested.

5.2 Next steps

The same young people are now meeting regularly on Saturday’s to specifically look at the outcomes of this project and plan together how to move forward. We are asking the young people to identify which areas of work they would be interested in the future and how and to whom we should be marketing these opportunities. There work is currently on show at the gallery as part of the QUAD/ Architecture Week exhibition.
Funders for this project are:

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Creating sustainable communities

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Q ARTS

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engage in the visual arts