Interpretations: VOCAL Evaluation Report

VOCAL – the Context
Specialised terminology and the use of abstractions in interpretation materials can be alienating unless viewers are already familiar with the work and the concepts under discussion. Such language is particularly disempowering if viewers think that they are ‘missing’ something that everyone else understands. An additional challenge for the Collective Gallery is that it deals exclusively with emergent practice – audiences will encounter work that is often experimental, and inevitably unfamiliar, and traditional interpretative strategies may not be appropriate.

VOCAL – the Aim
VOCAL was designed to test an alternative approach to interpretation: offering multiple voices rather than a single ‘authoritative’ voice, and paying attention to specific works rather than to context or abstract notions. Drawing on the participatory ethos of the Collective’s One Mile Project, a panel of audience members and staff met to discuss three exhibitions in detail.

VOCAL – the Panel
The panel included staff members that were regularly in contact with the public (interns, marketing staff and programming staff) and audience members that were representative of the core Collective audience, and who might act as advocates for contemporary art with their peers (a student, a librarian, a community worker, an artist, and a journalist.) I facilitated most of the discussions, and, on two separate occasions, asked Sarah Munro and Kate Gray to chair evaluation sessions.

VOCAL – the Project
Three exhibition conversations were recorded and used to generate interpretation materials. These discussions were preceded by workshops on the aims and formats of interpretation, and followed by evaluation sessions where the panel assessed the project’s progress, and discussed the content, tone and delivery of the materials being produced in their name. (All sessions were recorded and edited for archive purposes. I referred to these recordings when structuring subsequent stages of activity – this was crucial to ensure that individuals’ points were not forgotten, and professional pre-conceptions did not skew planning.)

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<td>Materials: Headphones with podcasts available in the gallery; explanatory display panel in the gallery; alternate VOCAL handout</td>
<td>Materials: Podcasts available online, with photos; an expanded gallery guide in colour, with plastic cover, incorporating VOCAL essay and a reprinted feature from the Sunday Herald</td>
<td>Materials: Podcasts available online, with photos; an expanded gallery guide in colour, with plastic cover, incorporating VOCAL essay and a transcript of a talk given at the Freee symposium</td>
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The perceived risks at the outset of the project were: the difficulty of creating materials out of a conversation, and/or the possibility that the results would be superficial. As facilitator, I was surprised to find that the conversations were very rewarding to edit. Using speakers’ points as building blocks, I was able to construct micro-conversations for podcast and coherent essays for the gallery guides. Although the essays may read as if they are written by an individual, they contain ideas and phrases directly lifted from the panels’ conversations. As for the risk of superficiality, the panel was keen to preserve the immediacy of their conversations, as this was, they argued, what
differentiated Vocal from the usual ‘expert’ interpretation. They insisted that their descriptive informality be maintained in the writing (even if this occasionally meant stating the obvious), in order to reflect the spontaneity of a first response which served as a valuable affirmation of a viewer’s own experience. The panel decided it was important for more uncertain visitors to be able to identify with aspects of the interpretation, but felt that a variety of voices and approaches were needed in order not to alienate more confident viewers. Even though the panel resisted the option of responding to pre-prepared questions from the facilitator (preferring instead to formulate their own), their conversations still yielded a number of significant critical insights. Individual works were addressed in detail – something that had not been a feature of previous Collective interpretation. In the case of film-based work, often quickly forgotten by visitors or sometimes only partially viewed, a critical description was considered to be a valuable record of content.

The first round of interpretation materials drew mixed feedback from gallery attenders, which suggested that some of the Collective audience were alienated by interpretation that seemed too didactic/institutional in terms of the ‘acoustiguide’ format and ‘education project’ branding, and too superficial and congratulatory in terms of content. Audience members on the panel confirmed external perceptions of the gallery’s identity as experimental, open and unpredictable, and this encouraged us to shape interpretation that would support this, rather than conflict with it. The podcast discussions were moved onto the website, where they might be perceived as adventurous rather than conventional, and as ‘extra’ rather than ‘official’. This, in turn, gave individuals freedom to be more critical of the work when appropriate – this was a controversial issue, but it seemed important to acknowledge (in a constructive way) a work’s difficulties as well as its strengths. It was also felt that hearing clear and opinionated voices would give individual listeners something to react to. Younger members of the panel said they and their peers were extremely likely to research an artist online, both before and after a visit to the gallery, endorsing our decision to make the audio material available exclusively on the gallery website. This was corroborated by large download numbers (578 downloads across four months).

The first Vocal essay was presented as a complement/ contrast to the usual gallery interpretation. This confused visitors, who tended to pick up one or the other, but not both. Asking audiences to compare the two modes of interpretation for the purposes of our research was unrealistic, and it was decided that we should confine the research element of our project to the panel and professional colleagues.

In our second workshop, the panel considered a number of forms of interpretation produced by different galleries. Several admitted that they rarely read more than the most basic information in an exhibition, where they prefer to concentrate on the work. Most were interested in the longer essays, but usually planned to read them after their visit. This was more likely to happen if the essay appeared in a less ‘throwaway’ format than the photocopied handout that many galleries use. The panel decided to take advantage of the extra funds associated with Vocal to develop a new, more substantial gallery guide, and include a colour image of the exhibition, the usual exhibition introduction, the Vocal essay and another complementary essay (selected from outside the gallery – a newspaper feature, or a symposium talk, say), along with associated event listings, and a selection of relevant web links. Encountering multiple voices, both within the podcasts and across the expanded gallery guides, was a palpable and direct extension of the aims of the project.

As well as being used by gallery visitors, the gallery guides and podcasts are well placed to attract new audiences to the gallery. The gallery has no generic marketing material, and the Vocal guides have been used at corporate events to illustrate what the gallery does (not the least of which is participatory projects like Vocal). There is now a suggestion that new images, and possibly film extracts, might be added to the podcasts page, as orientation for those who have not seen the exhibitions for themselves.

VOCAL – Evaluation
Audience responses to Vocal interpretation were collected in a comments book and solicited by staff in their interactions with visitors (although the scope for this was reduced once the podcasts were re-located online). Staffing and time constraints meant that there was not scope for more pro-active canvassing of a wider audience – something that would have been helpful in gauging the value such an unusual interpretative tone.

Although audience feedback was initially mixed, there was a very positive reaction to the new, more varied and expansive gallery guide; and a large uptake of podcasts suggests that these have been useful too. Although a small number disliked the format, several visitors expressed pleasure at hearing different people discussing the work in a range of accents, and enjoyed the novelty of a discussion, even if they felt this might not be appropriate for every exhibition. The panel agreed that the Vocal model might be suited to more difficult/abstract exhibitions, whereas it became clear in retrospect that offering commentary on films like Jason Nelson’s (witty, immediate, strongly narrative) threatened to interrupt the viewer’s spontaneous enjoyment rather than enhancing it.

Every member of the panel found participating in conversations about art rewarding – both audience and staff attested to the fact that such opportunities were very rare. Knowing that they would have to talk about the exhibitions meant that panel members engaged with the work in a deeper, more sustained way - expanding their own ideas, and exposing them to the ideas of others. They were particularly gratified by the idea that, through discussion, research, and reflection, they had palpably improved the interpretation offered by the Collective. Audience members on the panel felt that the project gave them an insight into the gallery’s workings and made them feel more secure about going into a gallery. Staff felt better equipped to discuss the work with visitors from their own perspective, rather than as a mouthpiece of the artist, and they enjoyed having other people they could quote. They also felt they had more empathy with a wider range of audience perspectives. For almost everyone, involvement in the project made them more aware of, and interested in, issues around interpretation.

VOCAL – the Legacy
The panel’s testimony in relation to a range of issues proved to be very useful to the Collective. Vocal’s various models of interpretation emerged from an extended period of testing and consideration, and will certainly be developed and adapted in the future, particularly as the Collective now has a field recorder at its disposal, and has dedicated space on its website for podcasts. There is also a determination to tailor the form of interpretative activity to suit each exhibition – this approach is already central to the Collective’s programming philosophy, and Vocal’s review process has demonstrated just how effectively an integrated evaluation structure can contribute to creativity and inspiration in planning interpretative activity.

The key benefit of the Engage Interpretations award was to focus sustained attention, for the duration of the project, on matters of interpretation. Importantly, the grant enabled the systematic review of evaluation conversations - a time-consuming but crucial element in ensuring that the panel’s observations influenced the way the project proceeded.

Perhaps the most surprising and interesting aspect of the project was the panel’s commitment to a relatively descriptive language, and their estimation of its usefulness, something that professionals might underestimate. Equally important, though, was the recognition that this approach worked best for the Collective when accompanied by other, more challenging texts. Overall, the enthusiasm amongst panel members for presenting multiple voices has galvanised the gallery’s commitment to assembling not just conversations, but also numerous essays, sources, links and associative materials to accompany each exhibition – thereby inviting the audience to interpret, rather than handing them a ready-made interpretation.
Appendix to Vocal Evaluation Report

Example of resources generated through the Vocal process: Essay for Freee, How To Be Hospitable
This essay, put together by Kirstie Skinner, is based on the responses and ideas expressed in a VOCAL conversation between the following people: Emma Henderson, Rose Ruane, Matt Carter, Mel Brimfield, Jill Brown, Jenny Richards, Siobhan Carroll, and Kirsten Body. In How to be Hospitable, the Freee Collective, (Dave Beech, Mel Jordan and Andy Hewitt), have made a series of billboards and displayed them in locations around Edinburgh and Leith, as well as in the gallery. Each billboard features the three artists in a different scenario. In one, they stand in Brick Lane, amongst props and words that make up the slogan ‘Immigrants of the World Unite.’ Their expressions are unreadable – Beech looks ‘off’, Jordan seems to be snarling something, and Hewitt smiles blankly to camera. Is this a straightforward protest, or are they are posing? It looks like some sort of fashion shoot, or album cover, or maybe a 1970s street performance piece like those by Adrian Piper. The theatricality of the scene is emphasised by their portable proscenium arch. Although it approaches agit-prop (the genre of travelling political theatre that originated with the Russian revolution), it seems less sincere, more knowingly artificial. Are they really appealing to ‘immigrants’ to unite? By putting themselves in the picture, they seem to ‘sign up’ to the statement; but the terms of the slogan are so ambiguous and broad, (and impossible to act on), that one wonders if their ‘real’ motivation is veiled. In another billboard, the artists crowd together with tea mugs that say ‘I am a local outsider’, ‘I am a foreign citizen’, ‘I am a migrant worker’. Although their smiling faces appear quite convivial and sympathetic, their role-play is unsettling. There is a touch of irony to these (selfcontradictory) phrases to begin with, but as the artists’ own stories are clearly in contrast with the slogans they are brandishing, the irony becomes almost sarcastic. Of course, drinking tea is a national institution – a perfect way to ‘be hospitable’. Are the artists parodying a builder’s café, exposing the complex social mix and tensions that underlies the camaraderie of the British workforce? Or are they targeting the language itself, and mocking the political and cultural institutions that use such terms to group people together and address their supposed needs? Would anyone willingly refer to themselves in such terms? The first impression is of strong personal statements that are humorous and self-deprecating, but soon the phrases start to seem emptied out, hollow. The third billboard, which appeared in the city with text but without the images, is arguably the most provocative. Here the artists dress up in schlocky costumes, each representing a different stereotype: one is in a black afro wig, one, a ‘see you Jimmy’ hat, and the other wears a headscarf like a burkha. They poke their heads through three holes that look like stocks, or else the painted boards of a seaside attraction. It is as if there is a deliberately failed attempt to be both sinister and humorous. Above their heads is written: ‘Fight against multiculturalism’, and below: ‘commodifying your difference’. This refers to the idea that multiculturalism might be responsible for creating stereotypes, rather than getting rid of them. Using academic language makes this slogan more difficult to grasp than the others; and by dividing the slogan in two, it becomes open to ambiguity – ‘Fight against multiculturalism’, for instance, might also be a rallying cry for racists. These billboards are located on hoardings where we expect to see advertising, or perhaps government messages. Such posters use direct language: to sell you something, or tell you something. In such locations, Freee’s billboards appear ambiguous. For all the trappings of a campaign, and the provocative nature of their statements, the message remains unresolved. The artists’ true motivations are enigmatic, but what is certain is that with their seemingly artificial poses, misfiring humour and their ambiguous messages, they are challenging their audience to think again about the language of sloganeering and activism. ‘Their smiling faces unnerve me...’

To hear extracts from this and other Vocal conversations for yourself, go to www.collectivegallery.net and click the VOCAL PODCAST tab.
Note

The review material contained within this appendix does not necessarily reflect the thoughts or position of the Collective Gallery. The material is included to offer the reader additional perspective on the art works that contextualises the Vocal project.
The Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, until Sat 22 Dec

PRINTMAKING, FILM

The Collective Gallery's annual New Work Scotland exhibition this year showcases, among others, the work of Dundee-based artist Jason Nelson. Born in the ex-mining town of Kelty in Fife, Nelson explores how his adult identity has been informed by this upbringing. Since completing his studies in Dundee, Nelson has returned to Kelty to find inspiration for a substantial body of work, including illustrative etchings, screen-prints, performances and videos. In all these works Nelson documents real episodes and stories taken from daily life, introducing us to a range of different characters along the way.

While there is clearly respect for his hometown here, Nelson does not present us with an idealistic view of life in Kelty; many of his stories are smattered with tragedy, alongside their delicate and dry humour. He also presents the deliberately harsh and unromantic setting of the place, often aptly recreated in black and white, as an ideal backdrop for the unfiltered honesty of his soap opera-like events. At the root of Nelson’s practice then, is a fascination with the atmospheres and identities conjured up by effective story telling, be they stories of the ordinary or extraordinary. The Collective Gallery promisingly describes him as ‘a natural storyteller, who can uncover day-to-day episodes of life in a simple truthful Scottish patter.’

extracted from

http://www.list.co.uk/article/5771-jason-nelson/

last accessed on 03 July 2004
The Collective Gallery, Edinburgh, until Sat 22 Mar

VIDEO AND INSTALLATION

Polish filmmaker Artur Zmijewski has established an international reputation and this film, 'Them', was originally shown at Documenta 12. The film is a documentary ‘social experiment’ by Zmijewski which brings together members from conflicting social groups in Poland including left wing socialists, the nationalist Polish youth and devout Catholics, all of whom he refers to as ‘real people, absolutely real – but members of an invisible majority’.

Zmijewski refers to ‘Them’ as a ‘movie about political desires’, where each group is initially asked to make a proud banner promoting allegiance to their cause. But then the teams are gathered together in an enormous abandoned warehouse space and asked to ‘amend’ the opposing groups’ banners. As expected, a gradual breakdown occurs, and the film seems to finish just before physical fights ensue.

‘Them’ draws attention to the important role visual language and symbols play in creating causal allegiances, where each group uses symbols, logos and collective sayings as a means of asserting opinion or expression, the banners at times almost resembling expressionist paintings. But the destructive power of these symbols also effectively highlights the reactionary responses from the opposing groups, and the film is a fierce reminder of the force of visual language in political debate.

extracted from
http://www.list.co.uk/article/6722-them-artur-zmijewski/

last accessed on 03 July 2004
Freee @ Collective Gallery

Written by: Daniella Watson
Published: 23 April 2008

Freee: How To Be Hospitable

Event Review

Rating ★★★★★
Event nameFreee - How To Be Hospitable
Venue Collective Gallery
Date 5 Apr - 17 May

Venue details

Collective Gallery »
Gallery, Exhibition Space
22-28 Cockburn Street, Edinburgh
0131 220 1260
www.collectivegallery.net

The tone of this exhibition is both meaty and rousing, drawing in visitors with a catchy simplicity reinforced by the use of primary red and blue emulsion paint as a backdrop for the performance props and text on two of the gallery walls. Like the billboards which were temporarily pasted at sites around Edinburgh, vivid widescreen posters fill the space drawing double taken glances from passers-by outside the gallery’s glass frontage. The crux of the mighty-mighty debates that Freee aim to trigger with their eye-catching billboards emblazoned with their cheeky mugs, street protesting, and acrobatic textly twaddle, instead seems to be a cursory engagement with the Polish community. It all gives the impression of well intended fun.

It is hard to shake some nagging questions that pop up through this exhibition. Are these three pals engaging in multi-cultural drag because they are desperate to shape shift out of their white bodies? Perhaps they are asking if by paying lip service to spectacular social problems public opinion could be galvanised, prompting the much-lamented chime, ‘things can only get better’? For me their protest of inflated imagery, jovial colours and jocular japes sits uncomfortably. It’s hard to be convinced when a sense of satisfaction hangs so palpably in the air, and leaks from the academic-artists as they show and tell us about the contradictions of the term, and experience of, immigration. There is something difficult to reconcile here, and this might be, wittingly or unwittingly, the best thing about this exhibition. [Daniella Watson]

extracted from
http://www.theskinny.co.uk/article/42546-freee-collective-gallery
last accessed 03 July 2008