Part One
Introduction, Context and Methods
Introduction

*Interpretations* is a project rich in complexity and diversity. It explores the potential of gallery-based interpretation methods to develop new and existing audiences for contemporary visual art in Scotland through action research. *Interpretations* operates on two levels. First, at the level of individual galleries: project teams use an action research model to investigate the effectiveness of a gallery-based project, reflecting on the impact of such a participative process. At a second level, *Interpretations* looks across the four projects and attempts to draw out the commonalities and the innovation through a case study approach. It is this second level that is the purpose of this report. This report is not an evaluation of *Interpretations*. It is a stepping stone towards evaluation that offers a representation of the underpinning action research and identifies aspects that may inform the evaluation process. The report welcomes a wide readership but invites specific comment from the community of educators involved in interpretation for contemporary art.

The report is structured in three broad sections with the case-studies of the four projects at the centre:

- Vocal (CG) Collective Gallery, Edinburgh
- Minding The Gap (DCA) Dundee Contemporary Arts, Dundee
- Reach Out (PAC) Pier Arts Centre, Orkney
- Show Me Yours, I’ll Show You Mine (TRG)¹ Talbot Rice Gallery, Edinburgh

Individual project reports and other relevant documentation are located in the appendices.

Research Focus

The focus for the action-research is the practice of interpretation in relation to audience engagement with contemporary art, addressing the generic research question,

> How can we use interpretation to increase access to contemporary art, and to address perceived barriers to intellectual access?

Aim

To provide opportunities for gallery staff to look creatively at methods of gallery-based interpretation and to experiment with approaches addressing barriers to (intellectual) access.

This aim is to be achieved through meeting the following objectives:

Objectives

- consider each project as a case-study supporting gallery teams in the methods of action research
- identify common characteristics across the case studies

¹ Abbreviations in brackets used throughout document when referring to the specific galleries and/or projects. The alphabetical order of the galleries is a convention used throughout *Interpretations* and in this document.
- further promote and embed principles of equality into gallery practice through attention to equality in the selection, implementation and evaluation process of the action research

**Selection**

Through the websites of engage and the Scottish Arts Council, an open call for proposals was launched in June 2007. Twelve proposals were received from venues across Scotland and were considered through a process of blind peer review. The Advisory Group then invited nine proposals to a second stage. Three proposals were selected at Stage Two with the Advisory Group making a decision to invite a proposal from one further venue thus extending the geography, audience profile and exhibitions programmes represented across the four proposals. Written feedback from the selection process was emailed to all unsuccessful proposals.

**Background**

The provenance of the *Interpretations* Project is located in the scoping work of Heather Lynch, “Mapping Interpretation Practices in Contemporary Art” (2006). This document outlines existing interpretation practice of contemporary art venues in Scotland and describes the barriers to accessing this art as perceived by those working in the sector. Each participant of *Interpretations* contributed to the data collated for the Mapping document: *Interpretations* is inspired from within the profession rather than being imposed by outside agencies.

Existing forms of interpretation are summarised in “Map 4” (Lynch 2006:29) reproduced in Table 2. Methods appealing to the multiple literacies of audiences are highlighted in this “Map” including text, visual, tactile and media literacies. Lynch explores these methods and the contributors’ evaluation of them. The report identifies and concludes with five key areas for further research:

1. Interactivity – active engagement with interpretation offered in gallery
2. Audience-generated – creating content based on audience responses/engagements
3. Space – how physical and conceptual ideas of space promote or hinder interpretation
4. Language – the accessibility of scripted communications
5. Partnership approaches – negotiating shared meanings with external organisations

The action research projects within *Interpretations* address one or two of these key areas specifically but inevitably touch on aspects of all five. In implementing their action research, the gallery teams investigate the generic research through the pursuit of specific questions. These are listed on page 8 and discussed more fully in the case-studies.

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2 As described in Project Overview submitted to each gallery October 2007 (Appendix 1)
### Table 1: Forms of Interpretation from Lynch 2006:29

![Table 1](Image)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>On-site</th>
<th>Multi-literacy</th>
<th>Participatory</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Text</strong></td>
<td>Publication/catalogue</td>
<td>Films of artist/talking/working</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist info/biography</td>
<td>Artist Talks</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>Audio info</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panels</td>
<td>Exhibition layout</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accessible Text</td>
<td>Archives</td>
<td>Resource room</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outreach</th>
<th>Production of interpretation materials by audiences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Marketing info</td>
<td>Web resources</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gallery Guides</td>
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<tr>
<td>Press release</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Off-site</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Poster</td>
<td>Artist studio visits</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critics reviews</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Forms of Interpretation
Specific research questions

Vocal research question:
How does consulting a panel of audience members affect the delivery of interpretation for the Collective Gallery?

Minding The Gap research question:
How can we support Gallery Assistants to operate in the perceived gap between organisational aspirations for and audience expectations of a contemporary art experience at DCA?

Reach Out research question:
What interpretation strategies can we develop and adopt that will encourage and maintain interest from a locally-based audience?

Show Me Yours research question:
How do different audience interpretive communities receive and interpret artworks using a variety of tools and activities. How is this capability most effectively facilitated?

These research questions relate to the specific organisational and audience context of each gallery and are focused on issues of practice. The four different projects address the central research question in diverse ways reflecting the inherent variety within gallery education that gives it its strength. Whilst the variety brings strength it also means that general conclusions are harder to arrive at.

Interpretations contributes to a growing body of UK research in the field of gallery interpretation and audience development (Taylor 2006b; Charman & Ross 2006). Currently the research and dissemination of enquire and envision are advancing the significance of gallery experiences for young people’s learning. The enquire project, “Inspiring Learning in Galleries” (Burgess & Addison 2007; Taylor 2006a) facilitates intellectual access to contemporary art for school children through partnership clusters of artists, university-based researchers, gallery educators, pupils and art teachers. envision focuses on young people (14-21) working through action research with galleries. enquire and envision differ from Interpretations in terms of scale, scope and focus but they offer valuable insights into the various conditions for intellectual access, the sustainability and legacy of gallery-based projects for audience development. However, in common with enquire and envision, Interpretations is concerned with the participatory methods of action research as a means of professional development in the practice of interpretation.
**Action Research**

Action research, or action enquiry, has no single definition but can be characterised through its practitioner focus on practice in a way that promotes participation and empowerment. Table 2 lists seven definitions of action research, illustrating the main principles of this method.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Action research is a process of systematic reflection, enquiry and action carried out by individuals about their own professional practice.</td>
<td>Frost 2002:25 in Costello 2003:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action research is a term used to describe professionals studying their own practice in order to improve it.</td>
<td>GTWC 2002a:15 in Costello 2003:3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action research combines a substantive act with a research procedure; it is action disciplined by enquiry, a personal attempt at understanding while engaged in a process of improvement and reform.</td>
<td>Hopkins 2002:42 in Costello 2003:3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action research is... usually described as cyclic, with action and critical reflection taking place in turn. The reflection is used to review the previous action and plan the next one.</td>
<td>Dick 1997 in Costello 2003:4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Action research is always open ended; it is a process of discovery and is not used to test assumptions (evaluation).</td>
<td>Taylor 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...an important feature of action research is that the task is not finished when the project ends.</td>
<td>Bell 1993:6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>...action research breaks the divide between academic theory/research and professional practice by equipping actors with the reflective tools that will assist them to understand their professional action from the inside.</td>
<td>Grek 2008:4</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Table 2

Seven definitions of action research

Developing research capacity and culture through the promotion of action research is a key objective of *Interpretations*, but the purpose is not to teach it through didactic methods removed from practice. Rather, it is to offer the tools and support that participants might need in order to experience action research as practice. Therefore, *Interpretations* is designed as an experiential process where participants are asked to critically reflect on their practice and in their practice (Schön 1983 & 1987). This is often a provocative experience as practitioner-participants place themselves in a learning context and are asked to manage and reflect on two projects concurrently: the episode of practice under scrutiny (often devised as a special project) and the systematic reflection and enquiry that defines the action research. For many practitioners, the cycle of planning, problem-solving, evaluating and more planning is a familiar way of

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working. Adopting an action research framework can position the practitioner-researcher in order that everyday practice can be viewed from a different perspective. This new perspective offers new understandings and so leads to a development in practice. Thus the professional development occurs in a situated context and is therefore more likely to be transferrable (Lave & Wenger 1991). The case-studies emphasise the action-research of each project and tease out what new understandings may be emerging.

**Scope, Roles and Responsibilities**

*Interpretations* spans a period of approximately 15 months (May 2007 – August 2008) with gallery-based projects implemented between the eight months October 2007 to May 2008. The selected proposals are not representative of contemporary art venues but they indicate the variety of gallery context in Scotland. The projects are designed to appeal to a broad audience as identified by each gallery team. Financial support towards the implementation of the action-research was an award of £5750 to each of the four galleries. All galleries augmented this budget with in-kind contributions and other external funding.

*Interpretations* is project managed by the *engage* Scotland Coordinator; the action research is supported by an independent researcher whose professional interests lie in practice-based research in art and education, contracted for a total of 42 days and supported by the Advisory Group. The researcher’s remit was to facilitate the aims and objectives of *Interpretations*.

**Researcher Methods**

The researcher for *Interpretations* is the author of this report. The methods employed by the researcher relate to the coordinating nature of the remit and are mindful of the scholarship required for the stated aim and objectives. Through the Cluster Events, participatory workshops were devised in order to acknowledge and promote the visual and discursive aspects of interpretation as valid research tools. The content of each Cluster Event responded to needs identified by participants in previous sessions. Participant feedback was invited on materials disseminated at all Cluster Events. A chronological sequence of researcher process and outputs is available in Appendix 2. Project reports from each gallery were scrutinised using a simplified form of content analysis in order to extrapolate action research tools/methods implicit in the reporting. This analysis contributed to the construction of the case-study texts. Supporting the researcher’s personal process of critical reflection were visual illustrations of concepts, process and outcomes. A single example is included in Appendix 9 representing a personal way of working that does not necessarily resonate with participants’ working processes.

**Researcher Perspective**

This introductory section closes with a brief consideration of how interpretation practice is conceptualised by the researcher. Whilst researcher objectivity is sought through constant feedback, the position of the researcher is arguably never neutral. The following paragraphs are an attempt to lay bare researcher assumptions and prejudices implicit in this text and allow the reader to judge the text accordingly.

The practice of interpretation weaves threads of audience development, curatorship, marketing, education and art criticism into an intricate pattern of possibilities. It is a practice evidenced in catalogues and leaflets, on labels and layouts, and in workshops, walkabouts, websites and wall panels. It is a practice

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5 Advisory Group List located at the end of Appendix 1
that demands an understanding of audience perceptions and an appreciation for the multiple literacies through which meaning can be acquired. Confidence of non-understanding and a tolerance of ambiguity are perhaps useful dispositions for the practice of interpretation.

Within *Interpretations*, the participants have organisational remits ranging between gallery educator, curator, exhibitions programmer, education and access and gallery assistant. Researcher discussions with participants suggests that for some, the word “education” and its connotations of formal learning and school activities, sits uncomfortably with their understanding of the context of their practice. There is an aspiration to facilitate meaningful experiences for audiences of contemporary art, offering a range of resources that might appeal to the multiple literacies and dispositions of audiences. Perhaps education and learning are seen as restrictive terms by some but the acquisition of meaning seems central to what happens through effective interpretation.

The following quote refers to the work of artists and how their work challenges us to think about things differently. If the words of “art” and “artist” were replaced with “interpretation” and “interpreter”, does this help conceptualise the meaning and influence of interpretation practice?

> “artists, through their work, can change our way of seeing. They can influence what we regard as art; they can challenge us in special ways to think about how those relationships influence our experience. Artists, like scientists, are often troublemakers, and the trouble that they make is that their work confronts our customary modes of seeing and challenges us to think afresh about how aspects of the world might be experienced.”

*original text from Eisner 2002:124-125*

**Ethics and Consent**

Ethical principles of confidentiality, honesty and independence were applied to the management and conduct of *Interpretations*.

Each project coordinator completed a consent form confirming their participation and their permission to use photographs etc (Appendix 4). The issue of anonymity was discussed at the participant information session: given the relatively intimate scale of *Interpretations*, anonymity of participants could not be guaranteed. Gallery teams were responsible for ensuring proper consent appropriate to their individual projects.

In advance of this report the project teams were provided with drafts and invited to comment on details of fact and interpretation; their feedback informs this final version.