

The Arts



Left: Amanda Francis exhibit at Johnny's DIY in Deptford High Street



Right: one of the badges Bob and Roberta Smith will hand out to those who promise never to produce art again

X marks the new hot spot

Deptford is the unlikely venue for the most diverse arts festival in London

by Nick Hackworth

UNTIL recently the south-eastern corner of London occupied by Deptford and Lewisham wasn't thought to have much going for it in the urban "hot spot" stakes. A creek, some dusty maritime history, the venue of Christopher Marlowe's death and proximity to Greenwich didn't amount to a strong enough hand to compete with "edgy" west London or the post-industrial chic of E1 and E2. A particular low point came when, on being asked if he'd thought he'd get to heaven, Spike Milligan said: "I'd like to go there. But if Jeffrey Archer is there, I want to go to Lewisham."

During the mid-Nineties, however, the area saw a steady rise in the number of artistic rent refugees fleeing the increasingly overdeveloped and overpriced East End and — with dire inevitability — it was christened "the new Hoxton".

Though such labels can be dismissed as estate agent hype this weekend London's largest and most diverse annual arts festival, Deptford X, puts a seal on the area's creative credentials with two weeks and two days of local streets, galleries, colleges, shops and pubs playing host to art exhibitions and live performances.

Now in its fourth year, the festival's growing reputation is well deserved, as it presents myriad opportunities for local artists to show their work in the 40 or so venues while attracting a number of bigger names from the art world. This year's programme includes absurdist art "duo" Bob and Roberta Smith, painter and Sensation veteran Peter Davies and Italian conceptual artist Cesare Pietroiusti.

The festival is divided into five



His 'n' Hers by Patricio Grose Forrester: plan for a mural on the side of a building in Deptford High Street

sections: Core, Indigenous, Events, Open Studios and Fringe. The Core is a selection of events, featuring the better-known artists, which have been funded and curated by the festival organisers. The Indigenous section encompasses events and exhibitions put on by the area's main commercial and non-commercial galleries. They include the well established and likeable café-cum-art space Hales Gallery, the brilliantly named Museum of Installation (both on Deptford High Street), and Lewisham Arthouse, whose incongruously grand neo-classical façade rises above the convenience stores on Lewisham Way. Events features talks and live art performances, while Open Studios offers the chance to "meet local artists and pick up a bargain". Under the title of Fringe, finally, are 19 "open and unfunded" shows in locations ranging from the endearingly grotty Goldsmiths Tavern (on New Cross Road near Goldsmiths College) to Goddard's Pie Shop on Deptford High Street, taking in several pubs on the way.

One of the highlights of the festival, which is sponsored by Lewisham council, will be the show Resolution Way. This grouping of projects takes place from noon on Sunday and for the next two weekends underneath the railway arches on Deptford High Street. Cesare Pietroiusti, who currently has a solo show at the Bloomberg Space in the City, will be playing

the part of "An Agent in Rome" for the benefit of the citizens of Lewisham: from his temporary bureau he will collect information from locals concerning their particular skills, about which he pledges to spread the word back in Rome.

If, for example, you are a budding football star, he might try to fix up a trial with Roma FC. More likely, if you are trying to further your art career, he might drop your name into a conversation with an acquaintance in the Italian art world. The organisers warn, however, that this ambitious attempt to formalise the business of networking carries no guarantee of success.

With aims diametrically opposed to those of Pietroiusti's, Bob and Roberta Smith (actually a pseudonym for one man, Patrick Brill) contributes to Resolution Way with a timely Amnesty for Bad Art. Smith believes there are simply too many artists these days: "There are only ever 10 good artists in a generation, myself being one of them, and unfortunately there's been this huge expansion in the number of art students. It's like the new National Service."

He blames Tony Blair and the cult German conceptual artist Joseph Beuys, "who went round telling everybody they could be artists, and with the rise of this neo-conceptualism everyone with half an idea believes they are an artist".

CHARITABLY, Smith will be allowing mediocre artists to decommission their art by bringing it to him whereupon he will stamp it with the legend "This is no longer a work of art" and then dispose of it in a local landfill. Ex-artists must then promise never to produce art ever again and will be rewarded by the presentation of a badge, which they will be able to wear with pride, proclaiming "I Am No Longer An Artist".

Smith is hoping his actions will trigger a huge wave of early retirements in London's art community. It is a holy quest and one that deserves much support. If it succeeds it might even mean that Deptford X will take its place in history as Britain's last visual arts festival.

● Deptford X runs from Saturday until 7 July. For more information see www.deptford.org.uk

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Anthony Michaels-Moore as Macbeth (Photograph: Clive Barba)