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53 Million Artists
White Paper
For Cultural Institute at King's

November 2014

53MA:

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Executive summary

- 53 Million Artists (53MA) is a positive action national campaign, an action research study, and a collaborative art project that aims to realise the creative potential of every human being in England by giving time and space for creative and artistic practice and reflection. It seeks to counter the received wisdom that art is for the few; that creativity is the preserve of an elite, and that many of us don't possess creative potential.
- During a 6 month pilot research study funded by the Cultural Institute at King's and Arts Council England, 53MA has trialed two main forms of 'positive action':
 - i) a guided initiative in the workplace, where participants were given one day a month over a 3 month period to work on their own creative practice, with the support of an initial 53MA workshop and guided challenges available online; and
 - ii) the provision of guided creative challenges available online (only) that encourage everyone with access to the site to engage with creative practice and doing art.
- The project devised and refined a distinctive methodology resulting in a simple, compelling and robust four stage approach – Make Time, Do Stuff, Think About It, Share It. Feedback from participants (workshop attendees, employees at the two organisations piloting the workplace initiative, and individuals uploading to the web) during this phase has been honest, invaluable and largely very positive. 53MA has caught the imagination of a broad range of people representing a cross section of society – arts leaders, professional and amateur artists, the BBC, What's Next, employers, festival attenders & others.
- The project has exposed an endemic level of institutional discrimination, which we term 'artism', where art is very widely deemed to be *only* what artists do. Exploring what is involved in changing deeply engrained habits, it also signals the importance of 'giving permission' to be creative, and the pivotal role of different stakeholders (family members, education, industry, policy-makers etc.) in facilitating this.
- The potential benefits of being (more) creative, as a result of taking part in the 53MA initiative are shown to be multiple and varied. However, there remain challenges – including the fact that the project has had limited outreach in terms of its participants so far, connecting largely with a small section of English society – white, middle-class, educated, metropolitan. A key challenge, going forward, will be 'crossing the chasm', reaching the majority, rather than those already proactively embracing creativity and art in their everyday lives.

The Idea being tested

- The central idea being tested through 53MA is that creative practice and doing art *can* be beneficial for all human beings, and that carefully positioned positive action can transform society's take-up of art practice, for the benefit of both those involved and of society in general.
- 53MA seeks to counter the received wisdom that art is for the few; that creativity is the preserve of an elite, and that many of us don't possess creative potential. It aims to shift focus away from 'great art *for* everyone' to 'great art *with* everyone', promoting creative practice and doing art as potentially as beneficial to well-being as regular exercise and healthy eating. In stating this, however, it is important to stress that the project does not assert that it *will* be beneficial; more research is needed to determine what conditions might determine when such engagement is positive and/or negative for those involved.

The importance of the idea

- The ideas at the heart of 53MA are important because they challenge us not to accept the status quo regarding the provision of art(s) *for* everyone, and they encourage each and every one of us to explore how we could develop our creative and artistic practice for individual benefit, and that of the society in general.
- Though we believe that human creativity and doing art can be transformational for the many, rather than the few, and that the potential benefits of everyday engagement, living as 'artists', can be numerous, the underlying purpose of 53MA is not goal-driven *per se*. The project is important because it opens up the possibility of making new discoveries about human creativity and doing art and their place in our lives. In so doing, it also challenges us to think afresh about our relationship with the arts and with creativity in our everyday lives, posing the question – could we do things differently?

Testing the idea

- 53MA trialed two main forms of 'positive action' – i) a guided initiative in the workplace, where participants were given one day a month over a 3 month period to work on their own creative practice, with the support of an initial 53MA workshop and guided challenges available online; and ii) the provision of guided creative challenges available online only.
- By taking on a series of creative challenges (53 challenges were posted online as a guideline), from dancing in their bedrooms for an hour, to making a self-portrait, to making up and telling a story, participants dedicated time (or not) to creative practice and reflection, documenting their process online and in face-to-face feedback at workshops.
- Over a six month period (May-October 2014) the project team (Jo Hunter, David Micklem together with Dr Nick Wilson and Dr Laura Speers from the Department of Culture, Media & Creative Industries, at King's College London)

trialed the work-based positive action with the involvement of two London-based arts organisations (Julie's Bicycle and Arts Admin); a Tumblr-based website (www.53millionartists.com) where creative challenges could be signposted and art and reflections uploaded by 'everyday artists' was launched in May 2014.

- In keeping with the rapid prototyping methodology adopted, the research project developed a distinctively *multi-method* and emergent approach, with a range of sources being called upon to provide data, including the 53MA website with uploaded images and reflections, feedback from workshops and talks, a research 'sketchbook', interviews with artists and arts organisations, and internal project reflections between the members of the research team.
- A critical component of the action research methodology was to allow events, experiences and reflections to influence the shape and direction of the research. To the extent that we wanted to establish what was needed to promote a national conversation about participation in culture, we were keen not to invalidate our approach by theorizing any single answer before we'd set out to complete the task.

Outputs and outcomes

- As an action research project, the very 'doing' of 53MA constituted a primary area of data collection and analysis. A number of specific research outputs over and above this White Paper have been produced (including an academic journal article submitted to a Special Issue of *Sociology*, focusing on the sociology of everyday life, a short film featuring responses from 53MA participants, a research 'Sketchbook' (<http://sketchbook53millionartists.wordpress.com/>) to accompany the 53MA website, a dissemination event held as part of the Arts & Humanities Festival at King's College London - October 22nd, 2014, and an in-depth (44 page) final research report, which presents a robust realist evaluation of the project.

7 workshops/talks engaging over 260 participants have been hosted, and online media coverage has included 140 uploads by participants on the 53millionartists.com website; 1530 followers on Twitter; 294 'likes' on Facebook; and 770 hits for the Sketchbook blog.

Additionally, the project has developed a growing repository of user-generated content (on www.53millionartists.com) that documents processes and reflection within artistic practice; developed a language and underlying methodology that best facilitates the movement/campaign (Make Time, Do Stuff, Think About It, Share It), and generated a series of in-depth interviews with artists and arts organisations, revealing fascinating answers to the question 'what is an artist?'

The innovation

- 53MA has given rise to important new findings and knowledge. The project has exposed an endemic level of institutional discrimination across society - 'artism', where art is very widely deemed to be *only* what artists do; this

inevitably results in a predilection for the arts to be considered the preserve of an elite. The project has brought attention to the likely challenges of addressing a high level of 'presenteeism' in the workplace, which means making time for creative and/or artful activity is more difficult. The importance of 'giving permission' has also been shown to act as a vital conditioning mechanism.

- The project team has developed significant new knowledge concerning the challenges of building a national conversation – including surfacing design issues relating to the beta website, and working effectively across a broad remit.
- The 53MA research team has been innovative in adopting a distinctive approach to research that embraces mindfulness and the mind-set and practice(s) of the artist. The project reveals the importance for researchers of a heightened awareness of what they are paying attention to. Furthermore, to the extent that the artist shares an awareness of the world with others (through the representational form of whatever they 'make'), we also highlight here the importance of being able to communicate with others – as artist-researchers.

The recommendations

- This pilot phase project has proved that 53MA has an important and achievable agenda and methodology (Make Time; Do Stuff; Think About It; Share It), worthy of further support and investment by the cultural sector (though not exclusively).
- The project needs now to be tested outside of the arts and beyond London – we seek to work with ordinary people across the English regions (the pragmatic majority) to hone the methodology further and create contexts for its adoption.
- We seek to develop the four-stage methodology for a range of platforms – online, real world, at work and for the family, understanding how deeply engrained habitual behaviours can be changed in the process. It will be important to understand what the impact of such transformative projects might be on the cultural sector and 'the arts' (and this could form the basis for a significant AHRC funded research project).
- Taking account of key lessons learned, 53MA and its primary mode of communication (i.e. the website) is ready for investment in a second phase. We now seek a balanced mix of public, private and earned income (less solely reliant in public subsidy).
- Finally, we seek to build a network of creative champions from all walks of life and all backgrounds to work on the next phases of the project.