GREEN PAPER

We have a situation!

Fostering active citizenship through creative networked collaboration

1. Introduction and Scope

This Green Paper has been prepared as part of the European Cultural Foundation funded project *We have a situation[1],* which explored the potential for networked performance to facilitate cross-cultural trans-European discussions around current important issues. The purpose of this Green Paper is to encourage discussion and debate about networked art projects as a way to foster active citizenship, participatory problem-solving and cross-cultural understanding within Europe.

In the first half of 2013, four "situations" were held online and in each of four European cities: London, Nantes, Eindhoven and Graz. Each situation addressed a different topic (chosen by the local participants) and comprised a workshop with local participants and a networked (online) performance and discussion event. From an analysis of this experience, our conclusion is that networked performance/cyberformance[2] can be successfully employed as a tool to promote social agency and engagement, and greater trans-European understanding.[3]

The partners[4] and participants in this project are artists, researchers, cultural workers and citizens of Europe; we share a strong interest in how ordinary people can become actively engaged citizens, participating in the decision-making and policy development that impacts on us, in a manner that is appropriate and realistic. As artists, we are communicators, provocateurs and facilitators of community interaction; and as artists who work with new technologies, we believe that digital and online media offer exciting new potential for meaningful and ongoing active citizenship, beyond the superficial and increasingly commercialised world of "social media". It is this potential that *We have a situation!* set out to explore, and this Green Paper invites European policy-makers to share the project's findings and enter into a discussion about this potential.

1.1 Objectives of *We have a situation!*

We have a situation! created four live, trans-border, online-offline participatory performances addressing current European issues, and developed an artistic model that can be applied in a variety of situations.

The objectives of the project that relate to this Green Paper are:

- to develop a meaningful and productive **collaboration** between the partners and individuals involved in the project: through regular emails and online meetings, appropriate documentation, face-to-face meetings, shared online research, and workshops.
- to create a networked performance **framework** that is appropriate for addressing, exploring and discussing different situations in a live performance event.
- to **document and evaluate** the project: via the web site, video and screen recordings, text logs and other documentation.

Documentation of the project and the framework (model) can be found on the project web site, www.wehaveasituation.net. The full project report is also available on request.

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1 http://www.wehaveasituation.net
2 the term *cyberformance* refers to network performance that is specifically taking place within internet networks (as opposed to other networks e.g. mobile phone, satellite or LAN networks); for more information see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cyberformance
3 For the full analysis, please see the *We have a situation!* project report, available on request.
4 Project partners are APO33 (Nantes, France), Furtherfield (London, UK), MAD emergent art centre (Eindhoven, Netherlands) and Schaumbad Freies Atelierhaus (Graz, Austria); more information about the partners is provided in the appendix to this paper.

2. Promoting social agency, engagement and cross-cultural understanding through networked performance

Digital and online media offer exciting new opportunities for active citizenship: as well as finding and sharing information from perspectives including and beyond mainstream media, the general public is engaging through tools such as online petitions, discussion forums and instant messaging/telephony. Popular social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook provide virtual gathering places for communities of interest where information can be rapidly shared, and this has contributed to a growing sense of agency for the masses. The widespread use of such technologies in recent political upheavals has been well-documented in the mainstream news media, giving rise to terms such as "Twitter revolution". However, the commercial social media platforms have financial profit as their basic motive, not fostering social agency and engagement or cross-cultural understanding - unless there is money to be made through doing this. Despite generating a sense of empowerment, these platforms ultimately withhold actual ownership - of both data and technology - from their communities. Opportunities for meaningful discussion are limited by the design and functionality of the interface, there are constraints of rules and censorship and, as recent revelations about the USA government's PRISM project have shown, such technologies can be used against citizens just as easily as by them. It is therefore vital that the general public develop a critical understanding, at the same time as taking advantage of the benefits offered by these tools. Throughout the ages, artists have played a significant role in helping us all to understand and adapt to new technologies and social changes[5], and we are continuing this in the digital environment.

> *Question:*
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> *How are digital arts practices contributing to raising critical awareness of the politics of social media?*

Undoubtedly, the internet and digital media are now embedded in our daily lives - from the workplace to travel planning to grandparents having contact with distant grandchildren. The European Commission's Digital Agenda[6] recognises this, addressing the digitisation of life and work, science and the news media. The arts, however, are noticeably absent from the Digital Agenda. "Cultural Heritage" addresses archiving and documentation - libraries and museums; under "Audio-visual and Media" can be found digital publications and media services; "Collective Awareness" is a euphemism for data harvesting and analysis. Science and technology, innovation and employment, environment, health - all of these areas receive attention within the strategy but the closest it comes to addressing the arts is the use of words such as "creativity" and "media" - which mean very different things in different contexts.

> *Questions:*
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> *Should the arts be included within the EC's Digital Agenda?*
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> *In what ways do digital / networked arts support EC goals and actions?*

EU cultural policy[7] tends to prioritise either large-scale mass participation activities such as the Capitals of Culture and other high-visibility projects, or the preservation of cultural heritage. "Audiovisual media" is understood as film, television and video, and discussion around the "digital"

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5   P.J.H. Kockelkoren (2003), *Technology: art, fairground and theatre*, Rotterdam: NAI Publishers
6   http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/
7   EU Culture Programme (2007-2013) http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/culture/l29016_en.htm

within "culture" is about digitising existing non-digital work, managing copyright and piracy issues, or maximising the economic potential of the "creative industries". Networked arts practices are noticeably absent from European cultural policy, as is any discussion of the potential of networked arts practices in either creative, social or economic terms.

Certainly, the networked arts form a small field that sits uneasily between various recognised artforms including theatre/performance, visual arts and music, and within this cyberformance is an even smaller, niche, artform. It is difficult to categorise or even describe to those who have not participated in any cyberformance event. It is highly experimental, existing in the "fringe" or "alternative" art worlds that sit outside of what is accepted as popular culture. Yet this very position of being outside creates an interesting opportunity: traditional codes of behaviour are less enforced, and the hierarchies and hegemonies that disempower and silence people are weaker. In a situation of mutual discovery and exchange, the participants are more equal; anyone with internet access has the possibility to participate at a similar level.

The small-scale, "D.I.Y" attitude of cyberformance and the immediacy/intimacy of direct personal contact via an online interface all contribute to a sense of ownership, engagement and "temporary community" in collaboration with other participants. While large-scale events such as festivals, popular music concerts and public screenings also generate a sense of community among audiences, the experience is very different: at an event attended by hundreds or thousands of people, each individual is part of the crowd, a spectator. The goal is entertainment, consumption, and conformity to accepted behaviours and responses. Whereas in a small networked event, each individual has the potential to have a voice, to be heard, and to have agency within the event itself, building empowerment and relationships that can continue beyond the actual event. Critical thinking and discussion are encouraged and possible in a way that cannot be achieve at large events.

> *Questions:*
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> *Are small-scale cultural events better able to promote real social agency, engagement and cross-cultural understanding than large-scale events?*
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> *What new possibilities can networked arts offer in terms of engaging and empowering audiences/participants?*

2.1. How can networked performance do this?

We have a situation! employed cyberformance, a form of networked performance that refers specifically to live performative events situated within internet platforms and technologies. Inherent to cyberformance is a critical understanding of the tools - hardware and software - that are used. This promotes a sense of empowerment that is fundamental to engaged citizenship: if we are confident to use and understand the technology that now drives our daily lives, we can also feel empowered to have a voice in decision-making processes related to that technology and to our daily lives.

Cyberformance is live, like theatre, but with artists and audiences in various different physical locations. A virtual space is created where discussion between diverse people is possible, usually without any commercial imperative. Of course, such spaces can be and sometimes are commercialised (for example, the virtual world Second Life); but the accessibility and flexibility of the technology involved makes them highly appropriate for grassroots community-oriented purposes. The "low-tech", often open source, technology functions over domestic internet

connections. An international gathering can be convened, information shared, and meaningful discussion entered into with relatively little resources required. *We have a situation!* used the free, open source web-based platform UpStage.[8]

Presenting a "situation" or topic as a performance creates a contextual frame within which a conversation can take place. This frame acts as a provocation or starting point, bringing a distributed group of participants into a temporary community with at least the shared experience of the performance as a common ground within which to converse. During the performance, the participants become attuned to the specificities of the virtual environment, such as communicating with each other via text chat and familiarity with glitches or delay in the system; and they start to know each other a little through their responses to the performance and to each other. In UpStage, participants are able to comment anonymously throughout the performance via a text chat window. This creates a special camaraderie between the invisible, anonymous online audience members, building a strong base for a following discussion.[9] The ultimate intention is that in the discussion following the performance, the audience can collectively imagine possible solutions to the presented situation. When this is achieved the participants experience agency, engagement, and enhanced understanding (see feedback below).

The extent to which networked performance events can successfully promote social agency and engagement, and enhance cross-cultural understanding, depends on the content of the performance and on the ability of the artists to execute the work. Another factor is the audience's ability to "read" cyberformance: it is still a new artform, unfamiliar to most outside of the digital art world, and demands a level of interpretative and technical multitasking that can initially be challenging or confusing. Therefore it is important to offer "clues" or "doorways" through which less experienced participants are able to enter - without becoming didactic or "spoon-feeding". This is a difficult balance to achieve with a very diverse audience from different cultures, languages, and so on.

Some of the techniques that were developed during *We have a situation!* to achieve this include:
- having a simple, clear storyline or structure on which the rest of the performance hangs (e.g. a game, a journey, or other familiar sequence of events);
- recognisable characters that act as guides (e.g. a news reader or flight attendant), or characters or tropes from classic or popular literature;
- repetition - of structural elements, and/or audio or visual media that can act as signposts (e.g. a sound that signals the next stage of the journey);
- minimising text: when the intended audience is multi-lingual, translation is problematic (in which languages should translations be given?) and time-consuming, and for those less familiar with the form it is difficult to read or listen to a lot of text at the same time as processing the other audio-visual material and technical aspects; therefore non-verbal ways to express ideas and information need to be utilised as much as possible;
- posing specific, concise, questions for discussion: this invites the audience to think, prepares them for the discussion, and emphasises the topic of the event.

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8   UpStage is a web-based platform for cyberformance; www.upstage.org.nz
9   There are other networked performance platforms which have similar chat facilities and where this connection between participants can also be observed, for example the Waterwheel Tap (www.water-wheel.net).

2.2. How can we measure success?

We have a situation! demonstrates the potential of networked performance and discussion events to promote social agency and engagement, and enhancing cross-cultural understanding. This can be seen in the successful collaboration between the partners in organising and delivering the project, as well as in participant/audience responses. There has been significant cross-cultural exchange and collaboration, as well as research, learning about the situations, and specific action taken towards solving or at least influencing those situations. In a participant survey, 70% answered that their behaviour or attitude had been "considerably" or "somewhat" changed by their participation in *We have a situation!*

Feedback comments included:

> *I really enjoyed the workshops and felt my understanding of the topics changed considerably through the process of learning and producing work around these.*

> *We (my family) has decided not to consume any processed meat or food stuffs. We will only eat organic certified meat and vegetables - preferring to seek out direct sales from producers rather than purchasing from supermarkets.*

> *I found WHAS an open place to exchange with a large variety of people on site and online, younger ones in particular during the workshops I have been privileged to attend, an experience re waste and consequence of 'creeping' consumerism expressed in artistic and mindful ways, with communications made available to the greatest number on a global space at local level, a different look at citizenship and responsibility upon an issue that affects everybody on the planet.*

Learnings from the project include:

- that it is important to a clearly articulate a specific issue, rather than a large general problem, in order to be able to present its nuances and have a focused discussion;
- that the discussion needs to be extremely well prepared and with a limited number of participating groups, e.g. not more than 3 networked locations, in order to be manageable.

These learnings suggest that networked performance and discussion events are more successful as small-scale grassroots projects, addressing local issues and allowing a limited group to have full participation in the conversation, rather than attempting to reach a mass audience with a single event. This contradicts the current embrace of social media as primarily a mass communication tool, but arguably results in greater impact at an individual level, since the sense of direct engagement is much greater and possibly longer-lasting.

> *Questions:*
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> *Can the success of networked performance projects be measured in terms of the level of participant engagement, rather than by audience numbers?*
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> *How can truly grassroots projects (in the arts and other areas) be recognised within large-scale initiatives such as the Digital Agenda?*

3. Creative Collaboration and European Cultural Policy

One of the most satisfying aspects of *We have a situation!* has been the collaboration between the partners: arts organisations APO33 (Nantes, France); Furtherfield (London, UK); MAD emergent art centre (Eindhoven, Netherlands); Schaumbad Freies Atelierhaus (Graz, Austria); and freelancers Martin Eisenbarth (programmer, Augsburg, Germany) and Helen Varley Jamieson (artist, Munich, Germany). The four organisations had not previously collaborated, and were brought together for this project by Helen Varley Jamieson who knew them all through her work with the UpStage platform or from prior connections.

The organisations are based in four different countries, speaking four different languages, and have different focuses, priorities and funding structures. What we share is our philosophy of openness, collaboration, and the active role of the arts in society. Furthermore we all work closely with local communities and generally operate alongside the mainstream art world rather than within it. This means that all are well-positioned to create opportunities for open public discussion that are embedded in the daily realities of ordinary people. *We have a situation!* connects our communities through the creative exploration and discussion of common problems, across language and culture, in a very rich exchange. Individually, the partners have furthered our skills in online communication and project management, remote problem solving, and inter-cultural collaboration; and learned about internet technologies, how to create and present cyberformance and networked discussions, the topics of each situation, and also about each others' different cultures and contexts.

The European Union wishes to promote cultural diversity and dialogue[10]; culture as a catalyst for creativity and innovation[11]; and culture as part of the EU's international relations.[12] In all of these areas, projects such as *We have a situation!* have much to offer.

- <u>Cultural diversity and dialogue</u>: networked events give citizens a voice and enable a "low-tech" grassroots level of participation, removing barriers of hierarchy and authority and creating accessible participatory conversations. Artists and individuals from all European countries are able to participate: as well as the countries of the organising partners, *We have a situation!* involved individuals from Greece, Spain, Portugal, Serbia, Croatia, Italy, Cypress and others who did not identify their countries.

- <u>Culture as a catalyst for creativity and diversity</u>: approaching digital technology as an artistic tool, medium or platform opens up new creative possibilities - participants are encouraged to think outside the square; remote communication and collaboration skills are developed and intercultural collective problem-solving is encouraged. Further collaborations are already happening between people who met through *We have a situation!*

- <u>Culture as part of the EU's international relations</u>: Europeans living in other parts of the world are able to participate, non-Europeans learn about European culture and issues, and European voices are presented, creatively, to a global audience. The audience of *We have a situation!* extended as far away as New Zealand.

Question:

How can the EU best support small-scale networked performance projects that advance European cultural policy and EU goals?

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10 http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/intercultural-dialogue-in-the-spotlight_en.htm, http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/skills-mobility_en.htm

11 http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/cultural-and-creative-industries_en.htm, http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/culture-and-regional-development_en.htm, http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/cultural-heritage_en.htm

12 http://ec.europa.eu/culture/our-policy-development/culture-in-eu-external-relations_en.htm

4. Conclusion

European cultural policy prioritises large-scale events and wide-reaching cultural programmes. These are undoubtedly important initiatives in terms of advancing EU goals, however they do not always create ideal conditions for agency, empowerment and meaningful cross-cultural understanding. Small-scale grassroots projects have an important role to play in generating lasting and meaningful intercultural exchanges at an individual level. In particular, networked performance events are participatory experiences that enable agency, engagement and actual dialogue across geographic, cultural, linguistic and other borders. Such encounters have unique direct impacts at a very personal level, which are often difficult to measure since it is not about enhancing economic growth or meeting targets, but rather about quality of life, happiness, and empowerment at a personal level that enables individuals to function well within a democratic community.

We have a situation! is an example of a small-scale networked event that expresses European cultural diversity and dialogue, acts as a catalyst for creativity and diversity, and contributes to international relations. Social agency, engagement and cross-cultural understanding are effectively promoted, practiced and enhanced. One of the outcomes of *We have a situation!* is a model designed to be used by other similar projects that want to explore this potential of networked performance.

Questions:

What qualitative methods are appropriate for measuring the success of small-scale arts projects?

Should networked arts practices, such as cyberformance, be specifically included in cultural policy, other arts/cultural-related policy, and documents such as the Digital Agenda?

Should the EU recognise and support non-EC-funded projects that successfully promote and advance EU goals, and if so how?

Appendix

Project Partners

We have a situation! is a trans-European collaborative project between four arts organisations and two individuals. Many other groups and individuals have participated in the situations, details of whom can be found at http://www.wehaveasituation.net in the information for each situation.

APO33 (Nantes, France)
http://www.apo33.org

APO33, based in Nantes-France, is a not-for-profit association/artists collective founded in 1996 by Julien Ottavi. APO33 research practices cross philosophy, poetry, visual, sonic art and anything else that may arrive through collaborative working. APO33 operates across networked and physical spaces and develops tools (hardware/software) for creative projects and the wider FLOSS (Free/Libre Open Source Software) community of artists and programmers.

APO33, as an interdisciplinary laboratory drawing on the artistic and technological fields, fosters various collective projects associating research, experimentation and social intervention.

Furtherfield (London, UK)
http://www.furtherfield.org

Furtherfield was founded by artists Ruth Catlow and Marc Garrett in 1997 and sustained by the work of its community as the Internet took shape as a new public space for internationally connected cultural production. Furtherfield is now a dynamic, creative and social nerve centre where upwards of 26,000 contributors worldwide have built a visionary culture around co-creation – swapping and sharing code, music, images, video and ideas.

Furtherfield believes that through creative and critical engagement with practices in art and technology people are inspired and enabled to become active co-creators of their cultures and societies. Our mission is to co-create extraordinary art that connects with contemporary audiences providing innovative, engaging and inclusive digital and physical spaces for appreciating and participating in practices in art, technology and social change.

MAD emergent art centre (Eindhoven, Netherlands)
http://madlab.nl/

Foundation MAD (Multi-Disc Art, 1995) was established as an artists initiative and has become a very active organization with enthusiastic volunteers, each with their own specialization, which develop connections between art, science and technology. MAD acts as a laboratory, platform and provider of Emergent Art: art that arises from the tension between cultural – and cutting-edge technology. MAD maintains its interfaces as large as possible and focuses on artists, designers, scientists, technologists, public interest groups, educational institutions, governments and businesses. This takes place both regionally, nationally and internationally. The use of networks like the Internet, ICT and new media offer the possibility to represent interactive research, development, presentation, production, distributions, and discussions that are accessible for public.

Schaumbad Freies Atelierhaus (Graz, Austria)
http://schaumbad.mur.at

Schaumbad – Freies Atelierhaus Graz is a self-organised platform of artists, currently engaged in the restoration of a new studio-house in a former mill in Graz (AT).

The artists involved work in all artistic fields, from visual arts, media art, photography and video up to performance, literature and music. This creates a mutually inspiring neighbourhood fostering synergies, such as mutual support or collective projects.

Founded in 2008 in a former bathroom warehouse, Schaumbad established a diverse exhibition programme (annual group show, steirischer:altweibersommer…), as well as lively networked activities with local and international artists and art spaces, such as symposia, workshops, online networked projects and exhibition exchange. The group had to move out of their building in 2011, now working on the restoration of the new space.

Helen Varley Jamieson
http://www.creative-catalyst.com

Lead artist Helen Varley Jamieson is an artist and writer with over a decade of practical experience in cyberformance, a term she coined in 2000 to describe the new form of live, online performance that she was experimenting with. She completed a Master of Arts researching cyberformance in 2008, and is recognised internationally as a pioneer in the field of networked performance. She regularly performs and presents at festivals and conferences around the world.

Martin Eisenbarth
http://www.foobarlab.net/projects

Programmer and artist Martin Eisenbarth developed audio-visual streaming within the cyberformance platform UpStage for this project, and is now developing DownStage, a new concept and architecture for UpStage. Martin has been involved in the UpStage community since 2009, and developed the concept of DownStage in his Diploma thesis (completed 2011) to radically update and enhance the existing UpStage platform. His background is in multimedia design.

European Cultural Foundation

http://www.culturalfoundation.eu

ECF's grants programme stimulates transnational cultural collaboration, artistic expression and the mobility of cultural change-makers and cultural players across Europe and beyond.