

Whither the Imagination? Making Sense of Art

Lecture by Shawn Van Sluys on February 11, 2013 at The University of Lethbridge

“When he sees his own people destroying the world, what is the poet to say? *Stop?* Or more politely, *Please stop, please?*” — Robert Bringhurst¹

Introduction

I remember reading an abridged version of *Robinson Crusoe* as a nine-year-old boy. It is among the first English novels ever published (1719) and it is the most reprinted, adapted, and parodied one. It wasn't until I recently read Northrop Frye's *The Educated Imagination* that I began to understand why the novel is so compelling. I — as do most readers, I'm sure — had a tacit, subconscious recognition of something significant and personal in Defoe's work even at that young age, something that strikes at the very core of human existence, something that also gives Primo Levi's novels as raw an emotional power as the solitary dances of Pina Bausch and the performances of Marina Abramovic — that is, the withholding of one of the most defining aspects of our humanity: our most fundamental human need to be social (our sociality or socialness). And by creating that lack, the artist makes it more desirable — the artist crafts what poet Don McKay calls “the eloquent absence.”²

Robinson Crusoe is a work of the imagination that we often encounter in our youth because it appeals to our sense of adventure, a world where we become our own masters, free of rules and parents. But even more so, *Crusoe* frightens us — not with stories of cannibalistic savages and shipwrecks but by showing us a world of isolation, a world void of human interaction, a suppression of our ego, and an annihilation of our social selves. We discover, as a child reading one of the 700 versions of *Robinson Crusoe* or as a traveller reading Dante, that works of the imagination — the arts — show us paradise and reveal to us hell: herein lies the irrepressible power of the arts. Every work of the creative imagination, every artistic utterance, expresses a desire, a longing, a want, a hope, a dream, either by revelation or by deprivation.³ There is beauty in both. Heidegger called this notion of beauty and truth “aletheia” or “unconcealment” — a form of perception by unblocking our eyes.

The fictional Crusoe languished for 27 years in isolation on the island. Using an epistolary style to tell a story of adventure, Daniel Defoe gives the reader everything he needs to comprehend the thoughts of a man living so completely outside of society and in conflict with nature (or Nature). His solitary antics are aimed at mental and physical survival even while he undergoes a spiritual catharsis; he becomes a contemplative muse resigned to Destiny. But lest the reader be despondent to see Crusoe wither, destiny brings forth a companion, his man Friday. The narrative arc reduces Crusoe to absolute solitude, fully establishing the hellish lack only to be offered the greater sweetness of companionship at the moment when he nearly has reached a transcendental oneness with himself and a reconciliation with his destiny. This is a story of longing furnished and hope fulfilled — and that is a story worth telling again and again.⁴

I am talking about *Robinson Crusoe* today because the novel articulates allegorically the duality that is the core of the arts and the soul of our humanity: what Northrop Frye calls “the *language of humanity*.”⁵ It is the interplay between that which we desire and that which we resist, that which we like and that which we don’t like.⁶ It is simultaneously the desire for sociality and the fear of solitude; the desire for social change and the resistance of universally destructive forces.

The arts reveal to us that which is perceived by the body and formed in the imagination. The artist reveals perceptions. Ideas formed in the imagination are made manifest by artists, sometimes as a gesture of protest, sometimes as an insight into the complex workings of human life. Artists help us to understand systems, spaces, and concepts so we can imagine how they can be different. We imagine resistance and realize it through the arts. Bridging difference in the imagination where there are no rights or wrongs — where there is no moralizing element — enables us to build sentiments and systems of tolerance. Nothing is outside the human imagination. If we place limits on it, then something of our humanity dies. Again I quote Frye, who gives us the most succinct Dantean summary of literature, and, by extension, all the arts: “Literature keeps presenting the most vicious things to us as entertainment, but what it appeals to is not any pleasure in these things, but the exhilaration of standing apart from them and being able to see them for what they are because they aren’t really happening.... Literature is two dreams: a wish-fulfillment dream and an anxiety-dream.”⁷

Don McKay, a poet and writer who lives in Newfoundland, writes that “the poetic frame permits the possible to be experienced as a power rather than a deficiency; it permits the imagination entry, finding wider resonances, leading us to contemplate further implications for ourselves.”⁸ He, along with other poet-philosophers such as Jan Zwicky and Karen Houle,

address ecological and environmental issues with a lyrical aesthetic rather than a realist one, believing that the urgency of these crises must be addressed ethically, both within our imaginations and by scientific reason.⁹ But too-great dependency on instrumental reason in our modern society, as Charles Taylor argues, has quashed our imaginations, limited our perception, and therefore we are at risk of erasing ourselves. Our world is plural, consisting of multiple stories that, as Bringhurst observed, cannot be dealt with in the world we construct in the television set and in the shopping mall, where our stories are commodified.

To replace malaise and anxiety with hope: this is what Musagetes, an Ontario-based philanthropic foundation and artistic organization, strives to achieve.

Musagetes: Practice, Contemplation, Memory

In Classical mythology, Musagetes is the name given to the god Apollo in his role as protector and promoter of the Muses. It's an apt name for a philanthropic entity that strives to make the arts a more central and meaningful reality in our daily lives and in our societies and communities. *Apollon Musagetes* was the leader of the three Muses who originally comprised three goddesses: the goddess of poetry (Aoidē, meaning "song" or "tune"), the goddess of thought and meditation (Meletē, meaning "practice"), and the goddess of memory (Mnēmē, meaning "memory"). It wasn't until Hellenistic times that they were expanded to nine muses, corresponding to the artistic disciplines and humanities that we refer to today.

Practice, poetry, and memory are the fundamental components of a creative imagination, embodied in artistic expression. The arts evoke the three Muses in harmony:

- repetition (the mastery of articulation, representation, and analysis that is only possible through practice);
- contemplation (thought, which is the poetic material of the imagination); and
- memory of that which came before (history and precedence).

Poetry is not just a literary term. It contains all that can be imagined through contemplation and all that can be wrought in a work of the imagination. The most concise, yet expansive, definition of poetry I have found is by Bringhurst: "Poetry is a quality or aspect of existence. It is *the thinking of things*.... Poems are the tips of the icebergs afloat on the ocean of poetry.... When you think intensely and beautifully, something happens. That something is called poetry."¹⁰

Robinson Crusoe was alone — alone with his thoughts. He refined a practice of meditation

through his allegorical relationship with the island anthropomorphized as a sensual woman.¹¹ He was alone, thinking intensely and beautifully at times; morosely and despondently at others.

That which we imagine — our creative idea — is not fully formed until it finds its concrete expression in an aesthetic or artistic form. Without the aesthetic (Aoidē = poetry), the arts would be no different from other processes that require practice (Meletē) and memory (Mnēmē), such as scientific experimentation, historical documentation, and innovation. Musagetes' Manifesto, emphasizing the eminence of history, declares that the human values embodied by artistic creativity "are what give the arts deep significance for individuals, communities, and even, over time, history."¹² Alberto Manguel, in *The City of Words*, offers a correlation between the pace of human evolution and the development of the means to create, tell, and preserve stories.¹³ The production of meaning is often delayed when a generation doesn't value its contemporary artists, as with William Blake, Vincent van Gogh, and my favourite novelist, James Purdy. No creative act is performed outside of history and, therefore, no act is fully original.¹⁴ History, according to Aristotle, is the story of *mimesis*: of imitation, of participation, and of learning while doing.

A search for *the* meaning of a work of art is futile, but the discovery of *a* meaning can be attained through a contemplative disposition, an active imagination, and a social spirit. One of the most powerful encounters with art I have ever experienced happened at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery in 2000 when I was in my second year of an art history undergrad at the University of Lethbridge. Catherine Ross's *Stella Mere*¹⁵ was installed in the main gallery. A shimmering wave of aluminum starfish, hand-cast by the artist, mimicked the undulating form of the river coulees that rut the prairie. The work filled the central space, brightly lit, leaving the outer areas of the gallery in mysterious darkness. Ross created a sublime moment of beauty that brought together most vividly the memory of slow geological forces that shaped the prairie alongside her process of thinking intensely and beautifully during the contemplative, monotonous, repetitive, and painful casting of hundreds of starfish.

Practice, contemplation, and memory are the Muses of the arts, of artists, and of those who desire the aesthetic expression of the imagination — that is, all of us. In the *Letter from London*, drafted in 2007 at the conclusion of a gathering of cultural thinkers who convened to discuss Musagetes' Manifesto, the participants wrote that they were preoccupied with "the right of all people to express themselves and to develop their full creative potential. This perspective moved us past notions of the artist as the uniquely gifted individual acting in isolation from the

community into a recognition of what artists share with all human beings.”¹⁶ The ability to shape experience, imagine it into being, and to do that in search of what is common to the community — that is creativity, for that which is common can only be our humanity.

Pursuit of Humanity

A meaningful relationship with the arts is both solitary and social; it involves the faculties of the self and the functions of community. Musagetes’ Manifesto declares that we “recognize that egocentric and mechanistic values can alienate people from their own inner reality and deprive them of a sense of shared belonging to the human community. Artistic creativity gives spirit a connection outside itself; while it originates in the self, it aims to create work that enters the common space of humanity.” This language in Musagetes’ Manifesto reflects what Alberto Manguel has written: “The language of poetry and stories, which acknowledges the impossibility of naming accurately and definitively, groups us under a common and fluid humanity while granting us, at the same time, self-revelatory identities.”¹⁷ Yet, on the importance of being social, he writes that “our life is never individual.... It is endlessly enriched by the presence of the other, and consequently impoverished by his absence.”¹⁸ Furthermore, speaking of the malaises of modernity, Charles Taylor cautioned that “the dark side of individualism is a centring on the self, which both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society.”¹⁹

I said earlier that the arts show us paradise and reveal to us hell. Our humanity encompasses all of this for it is true that “paradise will not be our asylum, and our hell will not be anywhere other than here.”²⁰ Our identities are shaped by our experiences and our imagination, and vice versa. All art, especially literature, is the story of the loss and regaining of identity.²¹ For this reason, and the fact that the imagination can’t be contained, destructive forces are threatened by the very existence of the arts. Benedict de Spinoza wrote: “If the mind, while imagining non-existent things as present to it, is at the same time conscious that they do not really exist, this power of imagination must be set down to the efficacy of its nature, and not to a fault, especially if this faculty of imagination depend solely on its own nature — that is if this faculty of imagination be free.”²² Propaganda and much of religion codify and limit the imagination, attempting to establish a moralistic, collectively sanctioned imagination. The artists’ role is to induce us to continually question our beliefs, enlarge our understanding, overturn our assumptions, and broaden our humanity. Because of that, the arts are continually under attack

from nefarious forces as extreme as fascism and neoliberalism or as subtle as austerity and back-to-basics fundamentalist economics that we see in so many nations and cities worldwide.

Musagetes sees the absence of contemplation and meditation in today's societies as the erosion of the imagination and of love: "With the emptying-out of mystery, spirituality is assumed to be dead except in organized religion. Some people fill this emptiness by taking refuge in fundamentalism or intolerance and hatred, others through a frenetic 'busy-ness' that keeps thought and feeling at bay."²³ With the diminishment of contemplation — that which Plato gave us, apart from his mysticism — we have also depleted our erotic life, our capacity to love; and have immersed ourselves in the self-pleasuring practices of *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even*.²⁴

Musagetes in Action

I have given an exposition on the importance of the arts as works of the imagination that reveal and transform our reality and our humanity. We considered the importance of a contemplative disposition and a social will. And we confounded the great paradox of beauty in the arts: of desire and resistance in tug-of-war.

But what does all of this look like in action? If these are the values and principles on which Musagetes was founded, how do we realize this in our daily work? In short, we "create living experiences, some small, some large, that bring people together to articulate social needs, generate ideas, and spark action."²⁵ Musagetes' artistic projects consist of aesthetic, social, critical, and pedagogical elements. The critical often takes the form of societal critique, spatial reorganization, or social-justice activism. The pedagogical hones the spirit of contemplation; practices the acts of seeing, listening, and feeling; and investigates forms of articulation. We engage in sense-making processes whereby we begin to understand more deeply how individuals make sense of the art they are experiencing. This is our approach to cultural mediation.²⁶ Musagetes, in practice, doesn't have much mind for separating the disciplines but rather returns to the three original Muses that were promoted by *Apollon Musagetes*. The language of the Manifesto is thereby inspired.

When we work with a community — that is, a city consisting of multiple communities — there are negotiable and non-negotiable aspects to the design of our projects. We don't do community arts. Instead we want to form and critically engage communities of concern so they become

communities of engagement. We don't build new institutions such as art centres, but we will enable the shaping of informal social spaces as hubs for creative energy. We engage artists who are local to our communities to support cultural production, and we engage artists from outside in order to understand better the community. We are neither inside the art system nor outside, giving us the capacity to be mutable and to build bridges. We aren't formulaic in our artistic programming but instead we remain responsive to local specificities, framing those within global themes and allowing the process to emerge iteratively and self-reflectively. Our projects involve aspects of research, relationship-building, dialogue, artistic inquiry, pedagogy, and dissemination.

We work in four mid-sized cities, two in Ontario — Sudbury and Guelph — and two in Europe — Lecce (Italy) and Rijeka (Croatia). In each of these places we have a series of interwoven experiments investigating how the arts can be more central and meaningful in peoples' lives, in our communities, and in our societies.

This leads to the question: how can we amplify our experiences in the four cities into a larger narrative about the importance of the arts? We're not looking for change for change's sake; rather, we're looking for a shift in perception ignited by an encounter with art that can inspire and move an individual to action. Art instills in people the possibility of change, of hope. It sparks in people the possibility of living with uncertainty, with the possibility of imagining something beyond present conditions, of transforming and starting again. Musagetes doesn't lose sight of the importance of social activism and social change, but this element of our narrative happens alongside our goal to make the arts more central and meaningful. We recognize that communities are made up of individuals, and a movement is a group of individuals who take action. Karl Marx didn't know immediately the significance of *Das Kapital*; change comes suddenly at times and in unexpected ways. Musagetes acknowledges this. A too-intense search for change can stifle art.

To this end we are experimenting with forms of sense-making — processes of understanding how people make sense of the artistic experiences they encounter. This was a logical development from a project in Sudbury, where we recognized that a more specific set of tools are required to elicit insights from participants. We don't just produce art but are engaged with art and artistic projects. Our pedagogy is designed to encourage individuals to have a deeper, lifelong engagement with the arts: every individual is a site of culture.

A methodology is emerging, along with patterns we recognize. Musagetes undertakes artistic projects that are social, engaged, and pedagogical, leading to further creativity and production. As with any story, ours “is an assemblage...of intellectual chromosomes.”²⁷ The narrative must empower in the same way that our artistic projects do, so that when people are already engaged at a certain level they can take the work even further. Our exit strategy from the cities in which we are working relies on this. Art inspires art. Musagetes taps into the creative potential of the community, helping it to acknowledge the possibly latent creativity of its members. Sometimes it takes an outsider to make this happen.

How do we go from a radical idea to radical transformation? By acting as brokers, allowing innovators to operate in the cracks that form — as Leonard Cohen says, “There is a crack in everything; that’s how the light gets in.” We have learned that social spaces are essential to the process of building communities that convene around their belief that the arts are most powerful when intersected with other elements of our communities, such as politics, activism, diversity, and even business. As Musagetes lends more emphasis to this with the formation of the Ammirato Culture House in Lecce and Publication Studio in Guelph, we can look to others for ideas, models, and solutions such as the Feminist Art Gallery (FAG) in Toronto — they crack things open and leave the door ajar. Our Manifesto speaks of a mistrust of institutions, but perhaps this could be reframed in our contemporary, mid-recession malaise as a mistrust of growth.

The *Letter from London* gives us a rich framework within which to consider Musagetes’ work: “The engagement of artists with social change can take many forms. It can mean creating art intentionally expressive of a political or social aim; making art in collaboration with communities, to give them confidence in expressing themselves and taking charge of their lives; developing sites, venues, and projects rich in opportunity for human growth; getting directly involved in politics; influencing regeneration and community renewal programs; supporting particular social causes — or any combination thereof. We recognized that all of these can be of great value.” They are all of great value, and have found their way into our projects.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

In 2006, Don McKay was invited to join a group of artists who were convening at a sort of art camp in the Muskwa-Kechika wilderness of Northern British Columbia. The art camp was organized by Donna Kane and Wayne Sawchuk as a way, in McKay’s words, to direct aesthetic

attention to an area — one of very few — in which a wild ecosystem remains virtually intact. As a product of this experience, McKay created a book titled *The Muskwa Assemblage*, a remarkable collection of poetic musings and drawings. There is one passage in particular that stands out. He describes a burnt-out forest in which another artist, Karl Mattson, had assembled a lone chair out of charred wood and slate:

Karl's seat beckons just like park benches everywhere, speaking against the impulse to hasten through the burn. It says, take a load off, sit down for a moment with dissolution and see it with something other than horror. When I sit there, I can feel the power of this aesthetic gesture — a small blow against the urge to permanence and immortality, that panic which can lead to imperishable art on the one hand, and atrocity (the reduction of *being* to *matériel*) on the other. Pause here, the seat suggests; be at home with the mortality you share with other life forms. Feel the soot on your arms, sense the false False Solomon's Seal breaking through the blackness at your feet. This is the seat from which Hades first saw Persephone. This is where Death first fell in love.²⁸

The poet's astonishment at experiencing, with deflected horror and sublime awe, this respit-lending artistic chair in a site of desolation and destruction transforms him. He no longer "hastens through the burn" and is rewarded with a moment of beauty when he least expects it.

The revelation of abject beauty has been the subject of art for millennia. But in the shadows of the great cosmic and geological forces that shaped Sudbury, it takes on a new significance.

The *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* project began in Sudbury in June 2011 when Dutch artists Bik Van der Pol cleaned an outcropping of black rock for the duration of four days as a performative action. The black rocks, both loved and hated by the citizens of Sudbury, are an unavoidable part of the city. The history of Sudbury as a mining centre has not only had an impact on the spatial arrangement of the city and the shaping of its citizens' everyday life but it has also had — and continues to have — an impact on the environment there, visible in the pitted, charred, and eroded black rock throughout Sudbury.

One day in August 2012 the black rocks of Sudbury became performance stages for classical, electro-pop, punk rock, and experimental music. Eleven performances, 11 hours, and about 450

people. This was the second stage of *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*: a huge, collaborative remapping of the city, linking rocks and music. What happened that day was what Heidegger called an “unconcealment” — the black rocks, the music, the social interactions, the rain, the water-logged piano, and the scrubby bushes became the revelation of beauty. And at the end of the day, after the music stopped and the sun set on the rocks, an “eloquent absence”²⁹ was born — an absence that poignantly rose from the knowledge of what could be.

The creative process of *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* was deeply social. Besides Bik Van der Pol, the team consisted of producers, writers, musicians, designers, technicians, videomakers, promoters, and, of course, the participants, who trekked from site to rocky site. Art is emancipatory when it is fully democratized. Pablo Helguera, a New York-based artist and pedagogue, writes that emancipation is glimpsed when the project’s “participants willingly engage in a dialogue from which they extract enough critical and experiential wealth to walk away feeling enriched, perhaps even claiming some ownership of the experience or the ability to reproduce it with others.”³⁰ The sense-making exercises that our researcher, Jamie Gamble, led with the concert participants aimed to elicit tacit meanings produced at the moment of the experience, to articulate them and make them more explicit. We make sense of our experiences — especially artistic encounters — when we engage in dialogue with ourselves and with others. This is the core design principle for Musagetes’ pedagogical projects — the SenseLabs — as set out in the forthcoming publication of *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*.

Pedagogy: SenseLabs

Between a Rock and a Hard Place was a composite of multiple forms of artistic production in three parts:

- first, it was an action of performance-as-research during which artists and community collaborators worked side by side to wash a black rock next to the Kingsway in Sudbury (June 2011);
- second, it was a one-day concert series, comprising 11 bands, 11 hours and 450 participants (August 2012); and
- third, it is a publication taking the form of a kit for fieldwork — a pedagogical tool — and a documentation of the concerts (July 2013).

Bik Van der Pol, Musagetes, and the community of collaborators in Sudbury undertook the pedagogical portion of this project as an experiment to understand better how people make

sense of their encounters with art and their participation in artistic creativity. Sense-making is the process by which individuals perceive reality and make meaning from those perceptions. As stated earlier, the arts enable an “unconcealment” of reality, an unmasking of the sensible — of that which can be sensed and therefore perceived.

Paulo Freire, in his seminal theories on pedagogy for the oppressed, stated that pedagogy is a process of restoring the humanity of both the oppressed and the oppressors — “the restoration of true generosity.”³¹ Writing in the 1960s in Brazil, Freire experienced first-hand the inhumane oppression of peasants and recognized that the revolution could only be attained if literacy was a reality for everyone. In Freire’s theory, which he put effectively into practice, renewed consciousness through literacy could disengage the oppressed from their oppressors’ mindset. They recognize their own yearning to be free and are then poised to bear the mantle of humanizing themselves and their inhumane oppressors. “Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion.”³²

Although the conditions of 1960s Brazil are quite distinct from the conditions of Sudbury, Guelph, Rijeka, Lecce, or most other North American or European cities, Freire’s theories of pedagogy still have significant resonance in these places. Although we might not use the terms “oppressed,” “oppressors,” or “oppression,” we do live in the malaises of modernity, as Charles Taylor describes our contemporary condition. We live in an era of intense alienation, individualistic centring on the self, and less concern for others in society. We fill the emptiness of our spirituality with religion, shopping, and excessive busy-ness. We live in a world where the 99% have lost their voice, where neoliberal forces have devastated the environment, undermined social justice, and left aesthetics to institutions and the market. The contemporary malaise alienates people from their own inner reality and deprives them of a sense of shared belonging to a community. Musagetes’ SenseLabs are designed to identify how the arts reveal beauty and ugliness to us, how we sense and interpret those signs, and how we can further use artistic processes to transform that which we perceive to be unjust, destructive, and unloving — that which is dehumanizing. Pedagogy, then, is the process of collective discovery of what humanity contains and how we can do something about its healing.

The process of collective discovery is fundamental to shaping movements for change. In 2011, the Occupy movement launched its first occupations in downtown New York City. Artists and activists were the initiators of this. By mid-2012, Occupy had become less visible,

leaving many to say that it achieved nothing. But Occupy is still alive — *sans* tents and cookpots — as an organized form of radical pedagogy with The New School at its centre. The 2012 Printemps d'érable, complete with pot-banging “casserole” protests, was initiated by students in Montreal who occupied much of downtown for months with their mantra: “If you won't allow us to dream, we won't allow you to sleep.” The most recent Idle No More movement is still gathering steam, drawing together Aboriginals and non-Aboriginals in communal spaces with common demands throughout Canada and beyond. Each of these movements, to only list three, was either initiated or sustained by artists.

Musagetes’ pedagogy, in the spirit of Freire, is designed with the following characteristics at the forefront of our consciousness:

- an emphasis on dialogue — articulating perception and determining meanings through conversation;
- an approach that enriches the individual and builds community, creating a sense of belonging;
- an open exploration of concepts, ideas, identities, and representations; these are chosen and defined by the participants themselves;
- an acceptance of all subject matters of our humanity;
- a recognition of the unequal distribution, mutual dependency, and multiple uses of various forms of knowledge such as traditional, academic, social, and practical knowledge; and
- a mélange of all of the senses, physical abilities, and learning modalities that make the pedagogy useful in many contexts.

The facilitator of the pedagogy is not the proprietor of knowledge. “People do not go through the process of developing consciousness (*conscientization*) by having things explained to them, but rather by engaging in dialogue about their lives and the lives of others.”³³

We recognize the role of love in our humanity. Bringhurst said it most concisely: “The vocation of every human is to be a human being. When we succeed in that vocation, what we make and do is typically *humane*.”³⁴

The *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* concert series drew an alternative map of Sudbury. The map made prominent and memorable eleven black rocks that were previously nondescript, nameless, and mundane. The act of performing music on these natural stages endowed them with special significance — it made the sites specific. Two aesthetics merged on that mythic day:

the contemporary music culture of Sudbury and the blackness of the rocks that are so much a part of Sudbury's subconscious. Generations of artists, designers, and architects have been influenced by these rocks. Trekking from blessed rock to godforsaken rock on bus and bike was a cartographic performance, drawing an allegorical map of ways in which we experience the world and coexist with our fellows humans and all the species of the earth.

The act of mapping is one of exploration. We map in order to discover. In a pedagogical sense, the exercise of mapping is a process of gradual elucidation (clarifying where we wish to go) and articulation (stating how we will get there). In creating the map of the concert series, Bik Van der Pol and their collaborators recognized through observation and conversation that the black rocks are culturally and aesthetically significant for communities in Sudbury. Therefore they wished to draw attention to specific rocks that could tell a story when linked together through diverse forms of music. The rocks became legendary.

Maps are fictions, designed to construct and transform reality. Sometimes this has devastating results, such as we see with the long battle for Aboriginal self-government in Canada. The political boundaries of city, province, state, and nation are colonial fictions with no import for Aboriginals. They have their own maps. The Idle No More movement struggles to bring these maps together into one "sheet of the world." But maps can also construct new positive realities, providing alternative ways to imagine the world.

Mapping is the thread that links the four SenseLabs we are designing, forming a pedagogy aimed at revealing that which is discovered through the process of exploration. They are designed as a series of four labs to be completed successively over variable periods of time, like Russian nesting dolls. The labs sequentially progress from individual exercises to collective projects; from inquiry and observation to analysis and representation; from walking and talking as forms of inquiry to writing, drawing, and performing as forms of articulation; and from private perception to public action.

The SenseLabs begin with walking, talking, and reading as forms of inquiry, beginning to give significance to particular thoughts, ideas, and objects, and eventually progress to forms of articulation in writing and performing. The SenseLabs gradually intensify with a collective map-making project, using collaboration as a way to build a community of engagement, making concerns public. Finally, they culminate with a performance to bring the work into public

consciousness, releasing the transformative potential of heightened individual and collective perception.

Expanding the Definition of Aesthetics

Understanding projects like *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* within the context of art and social history requires an expanded definition of aesthetics. In the introduction to this lecture I talked about how beauty is present in both that which is revealed and that which is invisible: a notion based on an Aristotelian belief in “mimesis,” that art imitates nature, revealing new truths to our perception, and on a Platonic belief in contemplation whereby we are in the right frame of mind to receive the truth. Where then does a socially engaged project such as *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* fit in a discourse on aesthetics? Not only is there a formal lyrical aesthetic in the music, the black rocks, and the juxtaposition of Industry and Nature but also in the social processes inherent in developing the project and bringing people together to experience it. For Claire Bishop, who in 2012 published a seminal book titled *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, projects such as *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* create a situation or experience to be engaged in by participants. Contrast this with the artist-object-audience paradigm that dominated most of art history in the 20th century.³⁵ Bishop refers to the fall of Communism in 1989 as the pivotal moment in art history, when European art began to shift substantially towards participatory art and socially engaged practices that depend heavily on theatre and performance in a discourse of amelioration (social change) and negotiation (community engagement).³⁶

To do this, she invokes the critical theory of Jacques Rancière, who provided in the mid-2000s a new understanding of aesthetics in the sense of “aisthesis”: “an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason, or morality.”³⁷ In other words, “a mode of sensible perception”³⁸ or what Musagetes calls “sense-making.” Evidently, Rancière has influenced the design of our SenseLabs and our approach to creative radical pedagogy.

Bishop identifies a misconception at the heart of socially engaged practices, one that Musagetes also continually resists — that is, “the tendency for advocates of socially collaborative art to view the aesthetic as (at best) merely visual and (at worst) an elitist realm of unbridled seduction complicit with spectacle.”³⁹ The aesthetic, in fact, is present in the situation created, the social interactions enabled, and the *experience* of the spectacle itself. Or, as we will see with the Ammirato Culture House in Lecce, the aesthetic is in the processual, the visual, the textual,

the social, the political, and the accidental. “Art is perceived both as *too removed* from the real world *and yet* as the only space from which it is possible to experiment: art must paradoxically remain autonomous *in order to* initiate or achieve a model for social change.”⁴⁰ For Rancière, the autonomy of art (its removal from an end-means relationships) and its heteronomy (the blurring of art and life) create the tension that makes socially engaged artistic projects so meaningful. The beauty of it all is that aesthetics remain the representation of the imagination whether it *is* merely visual or profoundly social. What Rancière adds is that it must also be political.

Ammirato Culture House & The Importance of Social Spaces

We often refer to the “realm of the imagination.” I describe it as the realm of our fantasies, wants, and desires, but this is a realm with only one subject, *ourselves*, thinking intensely and beautifully. Human sociality resides outside of the imagination, in physical space and in conjunction with *experience*. And thus the aesthetics of beauty and experience exist in blissful unity.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place showed how powerful the social can be in art, providing new ways of understanding our paradoxical human relationship with nature, industry, and culture. That project explores alternative ways to make a site specific, how to create a lack that sparks the desire for more art. One of Musagetes’ projects in Lecce, Italy experiments with these elements in another way, responding to a political and cultural context that is exceedingly different from Sudbury’s.

Lecce is a small city in Salento, near the point where the Adriatic and Ionian Seas meet. It is a place where illustrious High Baroque architecture meets the simple lines of Fascist design; where 500-year-old olive trees grow next to fields of solar panels; and where the light at noon can only be described as transcendental. But it is also a place of enormous economic challenges, environmental devastation, social alienation, and diminished civic pride. In other words, its problems are a microcosm of the concerns facing our globalized world.

The Ammirato Culture House is a social space at the crossroads of three neighbourhoods in Lecce. It was established in early 2012 by Musagetes, Loop House (a sound-art residency), and numerous artists and organizations. Housed in a 16th-century villa that was once an Enlightened philosophy school led by Scipione Ammirato, the Ammirato Culture House has given new significance to Ammirato’s name for the school — The House of the Transformed,

that is, a school based on the belief that the arts transform our lives and societies. Now, 400 years later, the heavy stone walls are once again housing these beliefs.

Within this context, the Ammirato Culture House is a platform for research and reflection by a collective of artists, activists, scholars, producers, cultural associations, and individuals who are collaborating on projects that aim to build a community of critical engagement with art and ideas in Lecce. As a social centre we aim to establish a strong neighbourhood identity with new possibilities for social, artistic, and civic engagement — ideas that will arise from the dreams and needs of the inhabitants.

As an example of this, Musagetes invited a Bolognese writing collective called KaiZen to conduct a workshop on collective writing with community participants. The literary characters that took shape during the workshop were based on prior research that documented the stories and the lived experiences of people in the nearby Santa Rosa neighbourhood. Each character was conceived as a composite of real people and then fictionalized as a novel. Through this process, the writers — thinking intensely and beautifully — elevated the inhabitants' experiences to the realm of the imagination, creating an imaginative space for individuals to find themselves in the work, and thereby to feel a sense of belonging. As Thomas King says, we are the stories that we tell about ourselves.⁴¹

We are still at the advent of building the Ammirato Culture House into what we intend it to be, but so far we have made substantial inroads into the neighbourhoods; built political support among the local government; created a weekly program of social gatherings; and designed a collaborative artistic project to be launched over the next few months. We're calling the project *Quartiere Ammirato*. Most importantly, we have created a space for conversation, for as Pablo Helguera says, "conversation is the centre of sociality, of collective understanding and organization."⁴²

With social spaces such as Ammirato Culture House, which can be considered an artistic project in itself, Musagetes nurtures the imagination and then creates an environment in which the imagination finds its creative outlet. It is a place to have experiences as a participant, not a place to be set apart by onlookers. You *belong* there, you don't just visit.

Conclusion

There is poetry all around us. We found it on the black rocks in Sudbury, we find it in the streets of Lecce, we find it on the pier in Rijeka, and we find it in the neighbourhoods of Guelph. We see eloquent absences everywhere, the potential of everything. Don McKay says it best: “The poetic frame permits the possible to be experienced as a power rather than a deficiency; it permits the imagination entry, finding wider resonances, leading us to contemplate further implications for ourselves.”⁴³ Musagetes believes this is true. And we strive to create the conditions for everyone to experience the possible.

There is a war going on. As Bringhurst writes, “It is the war between those who think they belong to the world and those who think the world belongs to them.”⁴⁴ One person recently said that she blames Musagetes for her “renewed optimism.” That’s why we exist — to be a catalyst for renewed hope, bringing the arts more centrally and meaningfully into individuals’ lives. To quote Tim Lilburn: “A rejuvenated comprehension of longing, I believe, is the one way home for us.”⁴⁵

Biography

Shawn Van Sluys is the Executive Director of Musagetes, an Ontario-based international philanthropic foundation that works to make the arts a more central and meaningful reality in peoples’ lives, in communities, and in society. Van Sluys was previously the Executive Director of the Canadian Art Museum Directors’ Organization. He started his career at the Southern Alberta Art Gallery and the University of Lethbridge Art Gallery. He took a BFA in Art History & Museum Studies at the University of Lethbridge in 2005.

Endnotes

- ¹ Robert Bringhurst, "The Persistence of Poetry" in *The Tree of Meaning*, Gaspereau Press, 2006, 44.
- ² Don McKay, "Great Flint Singing" in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, Gaspereau Press, 2011, 55.
McKay is a renowned Canadian ecopoet, co-founder of BrickBooks, and an educator in Newfoundland. He has won the Governor General's Award for Poetry and the Griffin Poetry Prize.
- ³ For an extraordinary exegesis on contemplative desire, read Tim Lilburn's *Going Home*, House of Anansi Press, 2008.
- ⁴ There are moralistic, colonialist, homosocial, pragmatic, religious, economic (Marxist), and numerous other readings of the text but these are secondary to the point I am making here.
- ⁵ Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1963.
- ⁶ Northrop Frye, "The Singing School" in *The Educated Imagination*, House of Anansi Press, 1963, 31.
- ⁷ Northrop Frye, "The Keys to Dreamland" in *The Educated Imagination*, House of Anansi Press, 1963, 61-62.
- ⁸ Don McKay, "Ediacaran and Anthropocene" in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, Gaspereau Press, 2011, 15.
- ⁹ Jan Zwicky, *Lyric Philosophy*, 1992 as summarized by Adam Dickinson in "Lyric Ethics: Ecocriticism, Material Metaphoricity, and the Poetics of Don McKay and Jan Zwicky" in *Canadian Poetry Press* Volume 55, University of Waterloo.
- ¹⁰ Robert Bringhurst, "Poetry and Thinking" in *The Tree of Meaning*, Gaspereau Press, 2006, 139-140, 143.
- ¹¹ In 1967, French novelist Marcel Tournier published *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique*, a philosophical novel in which Tournier places Robinson Crusoe in an explicitly erotic relationship with the island.
- ¹² Musagetes, *Manifesto*, 2007.
- ¹³ Alberto Manguel, "The Bricks of Babel" in *The City of Words*, House of Anansi Press, 2007, 67.
- ¹⁴ Refer to my lecture at the University of Lethbridge titled *Originality in a Derivative Culture*, February 16, 2007.
- ¹⁵ Catherine Ross's *Stella Mere* was curated by Joan Stebbins for the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, 2000.
- ¹⁶ Musagetes, *Letter from London*, 2007.
- ¹⁷ Alberto Manguel, "The Voice of Cassandra" in *The City of Words*, House of Anansi Press, 2007, 26.
- ¹⁸ Alberto Manguel, "The Tablets of Gilgamesh" in *The City of Words*, House of Anansi Press, 2007, 34.
- ¹⁹ Charles Taylor, "Three Malaises" in *The Malaise of Modernity*, House of Anansi Press, 1991, 4.
- ²⁰ Robert Bringhurst, "The Persistence of Poetry" in *The Tree of Meaning*, Gaspereau Press, 2006, 45.
- ²¹ Northrop Frye, "The Singing School" in *The Educated Imagination*, House of Anansi Press, 1963, 30-31.
- ²² Benedict de Spinoza, *Ethics*, Prop. 17. Quoted by Charles Esche in *Imagine Resistance*, published by Russian collective Chto Delat? / What is to be done?
- ²³ Musagetes, *Manifesto*, 2007.
- ²⁴ *The Bride Stripped Bare By Her Bachelors, Even* is a work by Marcel Duchamp, 1915-23.
- ²⁵ Musagetes, *Manifesto*, 2007.

- ²⁶ Cultural mediation: broadly defined as the democratization of culture.
- ²⁷ Robert Bringhurst, "The Polyhistorical Mind" in *The Tree of Meaning*, Gaspereau Press, 2006, 31.
- ²⁸ Don McKay, *The Muskwa Assemblage*, Gaspereau Press, 2008.
- ²⁹ Don McKay, "Great Flint Singing" in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, Gaspereau Press, 2011, 55.
- ³⁰ Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Educated Art*, New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011, 13.
- ³¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: Continuum, 1984, p.28. Translated by Myra Bergman Ramos from the Portuguese manuscript in 1968.
- ³² Friere, 31.
- ³³ "A Freireian Pedagogy for the ESOL Classroom" in *Radical Education Handbook*, 2011, 30.
The workbook was initiated by the Radical Education Forum with members of the sound-art and political collective Ultra-red.
- ³⁴ Robert Bringhurst, "The Vocation of Being" in *The Tree of Meaning*, Gaspereau Press, 2006, 54.
- ³⁵ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, Verso, 2012, 2.
- ³⁶ Bishop, 23.
- ³⁷ Bishop, 18.
- ³⁸ Bishop, 27.
- ³⁹ Bishop, 26.
- ⁴⁰ Bishop, 27.
- ⁴¹ Thomas King, *The Truth About Stories*, House of Anansi Press, 2003.
- ⁴² Helguera, 40.
- ⁴³ Don McKay, "Ediacaran and Anthropocene" in *The Shell of the Tortoise*, Gaspereau Press, 2011, 15.
- ⁴⁴ Robert Bringhurst, "The Persistence of Poetry and the Destruction of the World" in *The Tree of Meaning*, Gaspereau Press, 2006, 40.
- ⁴⁵ Tim Lilburn, *Going Home*, House of Anansi Press, 2008, 3.