

THE MUSAGETES FOUNDATION CAFÉ IN BARCELONA

The Transformative Power of Artistic Creativity:
Embedding Its Values
In the Agenda of Human and Social Development

May 30-June 2, 2008
Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona

The Musagetes Foundation is a public foundation incorporated in Canada by arts philanthropists Michael Barnstijn and Louise MacCallum. It takes its name from the god Apollo's title as supporter of the muses. The foundation's mission is "to be a catalyst for ideas and actions that make the arts more central and meaningful in peoples' lives, in order to promote healthier democracies and creative societies – to start sparks, cause explosions and make a difference in the world."

In March 2006, the foundation invited a small group of Canadian and international cultural leaders to a retreat in Quebec City to develop its mission. The manifesto created by the participants and endorsed by the foundation asserts that the arts can restore a sense of meaning and shared belonging in contemporary society that has been largely lost because of our over-reliance on economic and utilitarian measures of value. It sees the foundation functioning as a hub to encourage and connect activist interventions that integrate the arts into daily life and suggests that one way the foundation can operate is by convening "cafés" – meeting places to encourage solidarity and the free exchange of ideas among social, civic, artistic and cultural leaders and entrepreneurs, leading to actions that make the world a better place.

In January 2007, the foundation organized a café in London, hosted by Jude Kelly, that brought together a number of prominent artist-creators and cultural thinkers from the UK, Europe and Canada who had in common an engagement with extending the contribution the arts make to healthy democracies and creative communities. In their

Letter from London, the participants suggested that the most fruitful approach to the integration of the arts in society would be a strong endorsement of human and civic rights. Since that time, the foundation has been engaged in a number of pilot projects and partnerships that promote the arts and social action and has identified the environment and intercultural understanding as key elements of its work.

From May 30 to June 2, 2008, the foundation convened a café at the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB), organized by Jordi Pascual and Robert Palmer, with distinguished artists, arts activists and cultural leaders from Barcelona and elsewhere in Europe and Canada. The foundation was interested in hearing new perspectives on the themes of the manifesto, particularly from Catalan- and Spanish-speaking regions, and invited participants to advise it in grounding the ideas of the manifesto in specific actions to advance its mission.

The participants were Jordi Pascual, Robert Palmer, Pau Alsina, Simon Brault, Judit Carrera, David Casacuberta, Francesc Casadesús Calvo, Anna Guarro, Jocelyn Harvey, Susana Noguero, Nina Obuljen, Rosa Pera, Marta Pérez Marin, Lorenzo Pignatti, Joan Roca, Olivier Schulbaum, Lidia Varbanova, Enrique Vargas, Frances Westley, and the Musagetes Foundation team: Michael Barnstijn, Louise MacCallum, Yeti Agnew, Sunshine Chen, Valerie Hall, Douglas McMullen, and Joy Roberts.

This report is a record of their major conclusions and insights.

REPORT FROM THE BARCELONA CAFÉ

The Barcelona café was organized around four major themes – *Artists in Society; New Technologies, Social Innovation and Cultural Impact; The Role of Culture and Design in Creating Public Spaces; and Artistic Creativity and Communities*. It concluded with a session dedicated to *Envisioning the Future*, an opportunity to reflect on how the foundation could most effectively carry out its mandate.

This report summarizes the broad conclusions and “big picture” themes discussed at the meeting, the major observations articulated in the four theme sessions, and participants’ suggestions for future action. Frequently, direct quotations from the café are introduced to convey the clarity and beauty of the conversation. A video presentation concludes the report, recalling special moments and insights from the café.

SUMMARY OF BROAD CONCLUSIONS/BIG PICTURE THEMES

The café began with a discussion of the central themes of the Quebec City manifesto and a video and oral presentations by the Musagetes Foundation team. These highlighted the foundation’s intention to “think globally and act locally” and its desire that art and culture be “central, not peripheral” to society.

“All over the world,” as one of the Barcelona participants said, “people are talking about transforming the relationship between art and the public, working to breach the gap between culture and the daily lives of the public.” The goal of the café was to address these questions:

What can we contribute to this movement, as individuals and collectively? How can we encourage the development of conditions for a deeper and more vital partnership between culture and communities in strengthening humane, democratic societies? Where

should we "put our energy"? What advice can we offer the foundation on this subject?

In considering these questions, participants raised several large themes over the three days of discussion.

Community Engagement and the Creative Context

The participants embraced the passion and insight of the manifesto (a "rich and strong document") and agreed with the emphasis on human rights in the Letter from London. To these preoccupations, they added a focus on the context in which art is created and communities are engaged. For some this meant a sense of place, of landscape. For others it included a wide range of social, economic, cultural, political, geographic, demographic and temporal realities. "Communities transform over time and thus context is ever-changing." All work with communities requires understanding context in its fullest manifestation.

Public Space

True public space is a vital means for facilitating meaningful engagement with the community and strengthening democracy and pluralism. Almost everywhere, robust public space is in decline, increasingly privatized by corporations and governments. The new technologies contribute to the development of virtual public spaces that can create room for genuine communication and democratic dialogue.

The natural and built environments can foster and encourage human creativity and socio-psychological health – or do precisely the opposite. The ultimate test of the success of public space is the quality of the life of citizens and the harmonious and peaceful co-existence of people from diverse backgrounds.

The Role of Cultural Institutions

Cultural institutions have a powerful role in encouraging (or discouraging) community engagement in cultural practices. They can act as connectors, interlocutors and mediators. On the other hand, they can be indifferent to their surrounding communities or to new ideas and voices. For cultural institutions to serve communities and cultural development, they must themselves be supple, responsive and inclusive.

Cities and nations can also be “over-institutionalized,” with resources largely devoted to buildings and venues and little room and flexibility to support the new and emerging, including new artistic voices.

In Barcelona and many other cities, there is a strong tension between tourism-oriented and citizen-oriented institutions, and some cultural institutions have become largely devoted to visitors.

Cultural Power and the Involvement of Civil Society

Where does cultural power in a city or community reside? If culture is solely the responsibility of the state or of governments and business, civil society is likely to be ignored and citizens' voices muted. To engage communities in culture, we must actively encourage the participation of civil society in all aspects of policy development and cultural decision-making.

Barriers to Artist-Community Engagement

Barriers to engagement include the isolation in which artists often work, resources that are locked up in institutions, and closed circuits of communication (one-way monologues). A vital issue is opening up creative processes to encourage real engagement with citizens. Communication that is limited to community leaders or those “normally consulted” is a type of “concealed elitism”. True community engagement requires far more democratic and inclusive processes.

Importance of Cultural Mediators

Since many artists do not wish to work directly with communities or lack the ability to do so, it is valuable to cultivate the skills of cultural mediators, people (usually not themselves artists) who help mediate between artists and communities, introducing, explaining and acting as “meaning-builders”.

Positive Social and Technological Trends

Social developments that favour decentralization and self-organization and self-direction are potentially very valuable in the work of engaging communities in cultural development. So too are changes brought about through technology, such as the possibilities for two-dimensional communication in which the audience becomes an active co-creator.

The increasing interest in social innovation and its relationship to human creativity is another positive trend – the cultural sector can learn a great deal from the social innovators’ emphasis on systemic resilience and adaptability.

These trends, as well as the practices of many young artists, act as counter-forces to over-institutionalization and favour horizontality and flexibility.

Commitment for the Long Term

Facilitating community engagement in cultural development has important repercussions for the evolution and strength of democracy and intercultural relationships, but it must be acknowledged that the process of engaging the community is often a very long-term undertaking, requires full community participation, and often demands new and unfamiliar skills from artists, producers and cultural institutions. As one participant phrased it, we need to “think long-term to act short-term.”

The Importance of Process

As one participant noted, "Part of keeping creativity alive is to focus on processes, not institutions." A strong theme in virtually all the presentations made about various community cultural projects was that the process in which the community takes part is as important as the final cultural product. The process of engagement and empowerment enriches the community's life and strengthens its ability to make other (non-cultural) changes, to improve the conditions in which it lives, to determine its own destiny.

KEY OBSERVATIONS FROM THE THEME SESSIONS

"Artists in Society"

This subject was introduced and moderated by Simon Brault. Presentations were made by Anna Guarro on the role and impact of the Centre de Cultura Contemporània de Barcelona (CCCB) on the cultural life of the city, by Enrique Vargas on art as the pursuit of meaning and signification, and by Francesc Casadesús Calvo on the need to support creativity, especially that of young artists. An open discussion among participants followed the presentations.

- Why, despite the vast number of professional artists and cultural projects in virtually all parts of the world, is culture so marginalized in many societies? If one reason is that the cultural community tends to operate in isolated and self-perpetuating systems largely dissociated from the general public, how can we open up these systems and encourage real engagement between artists and citizens to transform society?
- Organizations like the CCCB represent a breakthrough - allowing analysis of contemporary urban culture and maintaining connections at the "street level". To avoid the banalization of culture, cultural institutions need a high

degree of rigour and must engage in real communications, not one-way monologues, with their audiences.

- What we have in common at this meeting is our shared desire to “make a difference, to be a signifier”. Our subject is really about how we transform relationships so people are united in the same space. “What is a city made of? Not stones and streets. What really supports a city are the invisible threads that tie people together.”
- As is the case in some other cities, many agents, both global and local, “sell” Barcelona and put a strong emphasis on attracting tourists. This trend is well-known: it leads to narrowing the opportunities for risk and leaves little space for artistic experimentation. The cultural community of a city, and its young artists in particular, need places where they can create and perform work, both in and outside cultural institutions. In Barcelona, the cultural community has been very successful in its lobby strategy vis à vis the local government.
- Immediately following the Franco regime, there were very few cultural venues in Barcelona - artists largely worked “in the streets”. Over time, all levels of government built cultural institutions, and an Arts Council of Catalonia is now being created. Yet Barcelona faces serious challenges - little participation by civil society in cultural development, resources disproportionately devoted to institutions, and a tendency to favour tourism over service to residents. There is a special need for “intermediate scale projects that link dialogues across neighbourhoods” and encourage the participation of civil society, as the local plan for culture argues.
- An important issue is how cultural power in a city is configured. If culture is solely supported by the state or by states and corporations, it does not belong to the people and is fundamentally unhealthy. Since “no institutional power

will ever empower a counter-power," we need self-organization, self-direction, going beyond closed systems into real and meaningful dialogue across society.

- The newly planned Arts Council of Catalonia should ideally be more than a subsidy body; it should actively engage civil society in culture and become a meeting point for all those who are committed to making culture the cornerstone of a developed city.
- The media can be encouraged to promote artists whose creative ideas supplant commercial values and emphasize the role of creativity in daily life.
- "How to create fertile ground for lasting exchanges among citizens" is a major issue, to which other sessions also addressed themselves.

"New technologies, social innovation and cultural impact"

Pau Alsina introduced and moderated this session, with key presentations by David Casacuberta on art and technology and by Susana Noguero and Olivier Schulbaum on their work as arts producers and software developers with Platoniq.net.

- The role of technology is socially constructed, and, when properly used, technology can mediate relationships between artist and audiences.
- Art seen as social innovation is a long-term investment with return, not simply an expenditure. Social innovation is possible when culture is valued as experience and engagement rather than entertainment.
- Technology can facilitate the restructuring of culture and the creative process. Through technology, the public no longer simply "receives" the work of art but can actively modify it and

thus function as the work's co-creator. Users become active participants and producers. The important power shift brought about by such two-dimensional communication makes technology an exciting ground for community cultural development and transformation.

- The "marriage" of art and technology is not itself transformative. Transformation is possible when the technologies are employed to empower communities and to facilitate social action.
- The work of Platoniq (www.platoniq.net) illuminates how social innovations developed through the net are also reaching out to influence events outside the net. In this work, an open environment is essential; decentralized structures are faster and sounder than centralized ones; and art exchanges are freed of "gatekeepers" and the costs they incur.
- The emergence of "copyleft" is a revolutionary and necessary change, given the futility of preventing copying and the importance of maintaining public domain. The net can be a powerful tool for democratization, making culture much more broadly accessible than ever before.
- Concerns about art and technology projects include their possible instrumentalization by commerce; the need to avoid making internet systems ends in themselves; and the "digital divide" - the radical inequality of access to technology, particularly among the poor and marginalized in both developed and developing countries.

"The role of culture and design in creating public spaces"

Frances Westley introduced and moderated this session, with key presentations by Lorenzo Pignatti on his work as architect in the regeneration of a major public space in Rome and by Judit Carrera on

the history of the Raval neighbourhood in Barcelona and the role of cultural institutions in its transformation.

- Two central and related questions are: how does the natural and built environment encourage human creativity and socio-psychological health, and how in turn does creativity shape that environment? A small but influential body of work suggests that some particular environmental conditions are conducive to children's play and adult creativity and that the human brain is geared to be stimulated by complex, diverse and colourful environments.
- Public spaces are uniquely important for the quality of life of citizens. Even in Europe, where public space is much more widely available than in North America, it is increasingly being privatized.
- Public space is a place for ritual, relaxation, temporary events, social encounters, the unpredicted and unpredictable. It belongs to the community, and because communities are composed of people with conflicting needs (residents, businesses, visitors, heritage officials, etc.), those who work on preserving or revitalizing it, such as architects and designers, are frequently called up work with the community to enable it to resolve its conflicts. Such work is intensive and long-term.
- Public space can also be seen as the real or virtual space where citizens meet, talk and question the power of the state. Such space embodies democratic principles – the equality of all citizens and freedom of expression. Ideally, public space allows people who do not know each other and are different to meet, learn about one another, and become one community.
- The use of public space to stimulate imaginative play and ideas among children and young people is a particularly powerful tool for creative development.

- Cultural institutions can play an important role in rejuvenating and transforming neighbourhoods and contributing to the quality of life, an increased level of economic and social activity, and the peaceful co-existence of diverse peoples. But they are seldom uniquely responsible for regeneration, playing an important role in alliances with other policy and investment forces (social housing, rehabilitation of buildings, educational and health care improvements, business development, etc.).
- There is need for a balance between “emergent spaces” (where people gather naturally) and newly-planned projects. Frequently it is useful to enhance naturally appealing spaces or to engage a local architect, one deeply familiar with the community, to design a more successful and creative environment.
- Taking the public engagement process seriously means real consultation with the affected communities, including with those who are often not consulted, before and during the project, and engaging them in evaluating it after the fact.

“Artistic creativity and communities”

This session was introduced and moderated by Nina Obuljen, with key presentations by Joan Roca on his experiences with cultural initiatives in suburban communities and by Rosa Pera on her work as an independent curator creating non-traditional exhibition spaces.

- Major questions raised by this topic are: what considerations does an artist require before he/she develops a project with a community, and how are artists trained (or not) to work with communities? The subject is directly relevant to human and cultural rights and access to a diversity of cultural choices.
- Suburban developments and estates were typically developed for poor people, and suburbs pose critical challenges for cultural activists. Here culture cannot be considered a “stand-

alone" affair - it is closely linked to housing, education, health care, and relationships among people, often people of diverse backgrounds and ethnicities. The challenges include breaking down barriers between "low" and "high" culture - work that is very long-term and often succeeds best through projects of "intermediate scale".

- Can we "claim the museum as a public space"? The opportunity to create a new art centre, as yet unbuilt, provokes new possibilities for community involvement and participation. Starting with global topics (big issues such as gender, science, violence, control, etc.) and approaching these topics through local realities encourages citizen access to critical reflection.
- Not all artists are interested in or skilled at working closely with communities and perhaps we should not expect this of everyone. Mediators, people who are not artists themselves but can help explain art to the public, can be vitally important. In France and Quebec, a great deal of attention is being paid to cultural mediation, "the missing link in attempting to democratize culture." Mediation is not about marketing – it is about citizen engagement.
- Artists have wished to reach audiences from time immemorial, but in the last 200 or so years we have looked chiefly to cultural institutions to facilitate this relationship. Are our cultural institutions, many created in the 19th and 20th centuries, still appropriate today? And is technology a truly new means of connecting culture with the public, an attempt to democratize culture, or only a variation on the old?
- We need to work actively with young people to help them understand the power of mediators in bringing art to communities and influencing cultural development.
- Whether we are talking about institutions, agents or processes, what we need to facilitate community engagement in culture is

flexibility, resilience and suppleness. “ We need membranes, not walls.”

ENVISIONING THE FUTURE: SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION

This session was co-moderated by Robert Palmer and Jordi Pascual. The Musagetes Foundation team graciously invited the café participants to suggest possible next steps in the foundation’s journey - how it could convert the concepts of the manifesto into realized actions. Participants recognized that the foundation “is now at a choice point,” with “limitless possibilities” in the manifesto, and will need to focus its content and determine its direction.

Evaluating the Cafés

Now that the foundation has convened two cafés in addition to the Quebec City meeting, participants suggested that it should “assess the value of the café as a fertile ground for fostering relationships between people.” Meaningful as they are at the time to those taking part, do the cafés simply occur and then disappear, or can they become gatherings that actually “introduce cultural energy to a city”? To that end, some participants thought that, if the cafés are continued, it would be valuable to add to the mix of participants people who represent civil society and policy-making, including people from outside the cultural sector. The cafés should “connect people in actions around a cause after they take place.”

Clarifying Goals

One participant, with the agreement of others, suggested that the foundation should define its goals clearly. Does it “want to raise consciousness about the value of the arts and culture, or to create social change through artistic/cultural experiences?” These are different objectives, and they are unlikely to be achieved through the same means. At this point, one participant commented, “there has been too little delivery of actions to understand what the manifesto means.”

Participants particularly stressed the need to explore:

- the relationship between the foundation’s discourse (including the manifesto and the materials generated by the cafés) and its actions in supporting various cultural projects, and
- the relationship between its global ambitions and its local community activities.

One participant suggested that the foundation use a graph in which the four “legs” represent discourse, action, local work and global outreach, and define the precise intersections where it wishes to focus its efforts.

Participants emphasized that a larger-than-local role (whether national or international) requires very substantial resources and a great number of effective connections and networks as well as a powerful capacity for communication, participation, comparative analysis and dissemination. The Musagetes Foundation alone cannot create significant movement but it can play a catalytic role if it is well and deeply connected to other networks and partners active on behalf of similar goals.

Moving from Concepts to Action

A number of participants suggested that it is now time for the foundation to move to strategic and directed actions that

operationalize what is still largely a series of concepts – “to deliver tangible real life actions, in the streets”. A variety of specific recommendations were suggested:

- The foundation should work aggressively to generate alliances and connections because it is currently operating too much in isolation.
- The foundation should ask itself if an organization in one small region of one small country can make the differences the manifesto envisages.
- To the values of the foundation and its people – openness, generosity and kindness – the foundation should add an ability to deliver, the capacity for leadership and risk-taking.
- The foundation should clarify how its work locally relates to its mandate for social change and its national and international roles.
- The foundation has two possible options – to put aside the manifesto and develop a mission statement and business plan; or to consider the manifesto and subsequent cafés as inspiration to guide its planning and interventions.
- Supposing that the second option is chosen, the foundation should develop a strategic vision for the next five years that is linked to the manifesto.
- The foundation should support a limited number of projects and organizations truly emblematic of the transformation foreseen in the manifesto, whether they are local, national or international. It should evaluate the projects it currently funds and those it might fund using three criteria: the quality of their leadership and vision, the transferability of the experience to other places, and their potential impact in realizing the content of the manifesto.
- The foundation should be involved in “soft, persistent advocacy work,” engaging decision-makers and civil society.
- While maintaining its spirit of openness and generosity, the foundation’s board and advisors should be enlarged, to increase its range of experience, diversity and credibility; and
- The foundation should professionalize the organization and partner with the most informed experts and organizations.

CONCLUSION AND THANKS

As the café drew to an end, participants expressed their deep gratitude to the Musagetes Foundation team for the “rich and fluid exchanges” of the meeting and its atmosphere that “allowed us to share and develop our collective thinking, to find people with spirit who share our dreams with intensity.”

Michael Barnstijn and Louise MacCallum in turn thanked the participants for sharing their experiences and wisdom with others and their frank and generous advice to the foundation. They expressed particular thanks to the café organizers, hosts and moderators and, wishing all participants well, promised to “stay connected” in the future.