

# Walking Together in the Woods

## Musagetes Retreat Summary

*Cambridge, January 2015*

Musagetes' Manifesto, written in 2006, continues to resonate with us and with many who encounter it. Its key message and guiding principle is the belief that the arts contribute to the transformation of our societies, our communities, and ourselves. Art enriches life and compels us to find greater possibilities for ourselves and the world around us. Art shapes a world that is inclusive, socially just, environmentally resilient, and aesthetically beautiful. It is the possibility to find joy even in dark, disenchanting times.

This year Musagetes' retreat focused on the transformative role of the arts as we continue to see dark and challenging times ahead globally.

We asked ourselves how we can further contribute to a movement toward broader and more meaningful public engagement in the arts.

### The Transformative Power of the Arts

Musagetes is an emergent organization. Just as the arts shape and reshape the world around us, so too do our artistic projects and collaborations shape Musagetes as an organization. That the arts spark new ways of construing the world is the common thread running through our projects, communications, and thoughts. Our work is a continual response to what we experience and to what we learn, like a snowball gathering layers with its momentum.

At times we glimpse evidence of the transformative power of the arts—we find great stories to point to—but measurement as a form of evaluation is a social construct. We need to create an alternate vocabulary and value system with which to discuss the immeasurable impact of the arts. We value

the arts as metaphor, poetry, inclusion, history, philosophy, and deep thinking. It's not that conversations about wellbeing, the creative class, and economic value aren't important, but these are secondary themes to the overarching desire for transformations sparked by art. Such a view eschews the categorization, replication, and predictability implied by measurement.

If our glimpses of transformations become more frequent, and if the stories are powerful enough, then *Musagetes* must become a medium for those stories to resonate broadly. We situate the stories within the broader context of societal and global urgencies and transformations. To do that meaningfully, we must think deeply and beautifully, to use the words of Robert Bringhurst. We must talk about the arts in ways that aren't reductive. We must explore and celebrate the complexity of the arts in their relation to philosophy and science, to the humanities and mathematics, to inclusivity and indigeneity, to urbanism and government. It is feasible in contemporary society to infuse and enrich conversations and discourses with the transformative power of the arts.

The value of the arts is not in answering questions, but in inviting people to ask them.

## Dark Times Ahead

The transformative power of art resonates for us because it addresses the widespread sense of alienation and threat in contemporary life. The 'malaise of modernity' that Charles Taylor wrote about has left our communities and societies at a loss for meaningfulness, grasping after bare-bones philosophical propositions, searching for solace in religion and consumption, and in extreme cases, finding a false sense of belonging among new communities of terror.

Across the globe, young people lack opportunities. Technology is being trumpeted as the driver of creativity and productivity, as the fuel for our insatiable consumption, and as the mechanic when things go wrong. Indeed, technology means that we require fewer people in the workforce but this hasn't synchronized with income distribution, leaving greater and greater numbers destitute. Outdated principles and perverse applications of liberal democracy have frustrated and disenchanted large portions of our societies. We need to ask the question: what are we living for? Not just for productivity, not just for consumption. *Musagetes* believes we must return to our humanity, to embrace anew all that makes us human, and to find a renewed empathy for each other and the world around us. Where will we be if we fail to do so? We are becoming more aware that crisis is a continual state of being. So it's better to learn how to navigate in the dark than hope for a big illumination soon.

Musagetes protects and supports artistic activity that engages critical discourse, challenges assumptions, and proposes something for the future. Too much contemporary artistic activity is entirely without impact. It has become confused with a mainstream that is larger than ever before. The market is more dominant than ever; it may boast very high-quality content, but the role of the arts beyond entertainment is at risk, especially in a system that is increasingly about high production values rather than about content and societal urgencies. Too great a portion of artistic production is only about self-expression and entertainment.

There's a growing recognition that we need a shift among non-Indigenous Canadians. We don't have a colonial past because we have a colonial present. The past centuries have shown us the limitations of using language to connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, but the arts offer new ways to explore this imaginatively through a shared human spirit rather than through reductive rationalistic thinking. Is a new perception of this emerging among youth?

Some of the most engaged, political work is coming from Indigenous and queer artists who offer alternatives to the modern malaise. Many institutions, systems, and practices are presented as givens, but we know that the empowerment of historically suppressed peoples can offer new ways of shaping the world. History shows us a pattern: that gaps between what we see and what we feel lead to violent upheavals, and in those moments all institutions are called into question. The wars and

atrocities of the last centuries are testimonies of this as we can learn from the important work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But we're falling back into the same patterns of behaviour that led to those injustices; it's happening again. Will we learn from the past? The arts can give us hope, but we need to renew trust—not out of guilt, but because we believe that artistic expression is humanizing; it instils a sense of hope. That is art's enormous power.

### Finding Hope through Greater Public Engagement in the Arts

When we look at the progression toward abstraction in the history of modern art, we notice that artists lead when people lack the vocabulary to see or describe something. First the Pointillists showed us that most of material is space, then the Cubists examined planes and perspectives, leading us to a new understanding of what art could be. Similarly, contemporary artistic practice is a pursuit for new possibilities and new understanding. Art exists in the space between perception of the world and a desire to transform the world. As Gabrielle Roy said: “How could we ever know each other in the slightest without the arts?”

Imaginative thinking is at the core of this desire for questioning, knowing, and connecting. This is most meaningful when such thinking is grounded historically, politically, and contextually—when it embodies the reality of a community or society

and exists in relation to multiple fields, sectors, and disciplines. This is not about issue-based art; it's about developing a deep understanding of a place, for example, by examining its ecology, economy, built environment, artistic production, and politics. It's about the all-encompassing themes of indigeneity and the environment influencing all of our projects. Grounding the work in this way invites people without an arts background into a conversation about art. The SenseLabs in Lethbridge were an experiment in this. We ask ourselves the question: how do we learn from radically different sectors and collaborate across disciplines to broaden public engagement in the arts?

Musagetes uses the 'container' metaphor to describe some of its initiatives. A container is a real, physical thing—a place, a production—into which we allow others to decide with us what goes in. The starting conditions for such containers are prophetic: they determine what the container will become over time. The Ammirato Culture House in Lecce, Italy and Publication Studio in Guelph (PS Guelph) are examples of such containers that invite the creativity of communities to combine in a self-determined, co-creative, and co-intentional environment. Collaborations such as these require four elements in order to be laser-focused rather than diffused like a sprinkler:

- Separateness—each person and organization has its distinct identity and unique contributions;
- Tuning—a process for emergence indicating incremental steps toward the goals;

- Action—a project that brings people together; and
- Reason for working together—shared values, urgencies, and desires.

With collaborations and partnerships of this nature, we can build a community of thought around the transformative power of the arts.

There is much contention and division in the world today. There is a great lack of empathy for others and the biosphere. More and more our contemporary societies are positioned in relation to enemies rather than partners and friends. We dehumanize those who spread hate and destroy the earth; in this contrary relationship we lose the ability to speak to each other. And when we don't speak, we lose the possibility for transformation. We need to realize the tragedy and poignancy of the environmental and economic situation: we're in mourning for what our greediness has lost us.

During the forestry roundtables after the highly contentious Brundtland Commission on global sustainable development (1987), when the conversation between industry officials and environmentalists broke down, the facilitator took them out for a walk in the woods. They discovered that despite the divisive conversation they had a common love for the forest. Artists have the capacity to take people into the forest to find common ground.

Let's walk together in the woods.