

Musagetes Guelph Café Report

Alissa Firth-Eagland

October 2013

Communities are beckoned into being.¹ They are multiple in the sense that many can overlap and exist simultaneously and they are specific in the sense that they respond to an expression, an opportunity, or a set of conditions at play.

On September 25 to 28, 2013 the Musagetes Guelph Café beckoned many temporary communities into being. While not all of the Café's expressions, opportunities, and conditions were intended to appeal to everybody, there was something for everyone.

The Café activities included a casual chat about Sudbury over a brunch listening session; sipping grape soda and snacking on samosas at the Guelph Black Heritage Society while listening to David James Hudson's spoken word poetry; proposing ideas for improvements to St. George's Square via Jenn E Norton's suggestion box; listening to live music in a school yard while watching some free-style breakdancing; and enjoying a burger at a BBQ

on the city limits. The engagements were critical, loving, honest, humble, and communicative. The impacts are elusive and challenging to measure but they may not immediately be felt. Instead they ripple out over time and place and this is precisely why they are valuable.

Over four days and 20 events, the Café was attended by over 700 artists, researchers, business owners, students, families, activists, municipal figures, cultural producers, and engaged citizens. The program was designed to ask questions about the complex issues of how culture is central and meaningful to people's lives in Guelph. Activities offered space for constructively provocative discussions and shared experiences of art and culture. It was agreed that the arts and culture in Guelph can be deeply meaningful, but a strong argument was made that they are not central to all peoples' lives. One participant asserted that:

1. We're inspired by how Publication Studio, a print-on-demand publisher based in Portland, writes about publics: www.publicationstudio.biz/about/.

“...care and attention and attendance have all dwindled. Fewer people read. Fewer people attend movies, and fewer people are talking about books on the streets. ...People can’t always afford to pay attention to art and culture if they are paying attention to how to live their lives. ...It is the job of producers of art and culture to amp up that appetite, and to make the metabolism of our audiences fire brighter and hotter.”²

Another pointed out that quantity is not necessarily the ideal way of gauging the impact of the arts and culture: “Sometimes you have a much more engaged audience of ten than you can have of 100 people who are just casually, passively there and not fully engaged.”³ We learned from our debates that the concept of centrality must be looked at geographically, ideologically, culturally, and socioeconomically. We began with the questions: How do we build strong communities with art? Are the arts and culture we have in Guelph central and meaningful to people’s lives? At the conclusion of the Café, we are also asking ourselves: For whom are arts and culture important? And where should they occur?

Our objectives for the Café were:

- To visit Third Places, alternative social spaces for community.
- To define and inspire future co-creations—some involving Musagetes and some independent of our work—that bridge communities and disciplines.
- To learn from music by articulating and tracking music production and presentation models from alternative to institutional efforts, and by engaging musicians and cultural producers in a conversation about the special characteristics of this craft which brings people together and offers models for supportive, co-creative production.
- To forge a stronger relationship with Guelph at spatial, community, social, and municipal levels, in the hopes of future co-creations between Musagetes, the municipality and the community.

An Iterative and Emergent Café Model

Previous Cafés have hosted deep conversations about the effects of artistic practices in cities. Musagetes’ Cafés in London (2007), Barcelona (2008), Rijeka (2010), and Sudbury (2011), brought together local narratives and external viewpoints on each city by inviting local and international thinkers and cultural producers to share their approaches.

Instead of just discussing art, inspiring examples can be enacted. Rigorous reflection and learning can be balanced with embodied, lived experience. To stride forward, we walk the talk. The design of the Musagetes Guelph Café emerged from previous iterations to include more artistic projects and draw in new audiences. Our benchmarks were:

- A strong visual identity promoting accessibility and a wide range of activities;

2. Representative from the “No” side of the Musagetes Guelph Café Debate “Are the Arts and Culture We Have in Guelph Central and Meaningful to Peoples’ Lives?”, Saturday, September 29, 2013, Guelph, Canada.
3. Representative from the “Yes” side of the Musagetes Guelph Café Debate “Are the Arts and Culture We Have in Guelph Central and Meaningful to Peoples’ Lives?”, Saturday, September 29, 2013, Guelph, Canada.

- More artistic programming (socially engaged projects, interventions, music, etc.); and
- More involvement from local participants in projects, debates, and panels.

This Café added projects within the social fabric of the city itself: a music tour to Kortright Hills, Willow West, and Two Rivers neighbourhoods and four commissioned projects by artists Paul Chartrand (Dunnville); Jenn E Norton (Guelph), Janet Morton (Guelph), and Postcommodity (Albuquerque/Phoenix/Santa Fe/Tulsa). We also invited a range of organizations to contribute and build on the Café in ways that were meaningful to them: Guelph

culture. At the GBHS, Hudson performed his moving piece *Another Unoriginal Poem About Police Brutality*, which took on a new meaning within this building which was a safe haven for the underground railroad. During a panel discussion called “Making the Third Place”, participants asserted that imparting a sense of ownership to those people making use of a given space is critical to building an effective *third place*, and this involves a huge amount of trust.

Co-creating Community

We established a solid foundation in five neighbourhoods—Brant, Willow West, Kortright Hills, Two Rivers, and our own neighbourhood—and brought a fresh mix of faces, new and familiar, out to each site. *All Over the Map* was a co-created, one-day travelling music tour exploring four neighbourhoods. The tour featured performances in unique locations throughout the suburbs of Guelph and helped build connections outside of the core of the city where most arts programming occurs. The tour was designed and programmed by Kazoo! (a local organization that strengthens communities in and around Guelph by presenting professional-quality experimentations with music and art) and the Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition (a network of neighbourhood groups, sponsoring agencies, and program partners that work at the grassroots level to meet the needs of children, youth, and families).

A Roving Open House for the Curious: Third Places

Black Heritage Society, Guelph Neighbourhood Support Coalition, Kazoo!, and PS Guelph.

The gathering was keenly public, legible, visible, and widespread. Activities were organized in atypical locations in order to foster and fasten together new communities. We aimed to both visit and to create *third places*⁴ during the Café: informal meeting places which are free, easy to access, and welcoming. We toured new sites for the arts in Guelph—all of which are different kinds of *third places*—such as the Guelph Black Heritage Society (GBHS) and PS Guelph which offered unique engagements with

4. In a conversation during the Café about Third Places in Guelph, panelists noted CFRU 93.3 FM campus and community radio, The Bookshelf, Ed Video, The Square, the Arboretum, intellectual potlucks, and city roads and sidewalks as important informal places for community.

What We Learned from Music

Folk, rock, punk, and hip hop shows took place in the neighbourhoods of Willow West, Two Rivers, and Kortright Hills. The tour drew out hundreds of neighbourhood residents: young women, artists, people of colour, the queer community, new Canadians, and curious families.

With a group of municipal figures, cultural organizers, artists, writers, and musicians from Guelph and Sudbury, we defined co-creation, described best practices and presented several of Musagetes' previous and current projects: *Nowhere du Nord in Sudbury*, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place in Sudbury*, and *Preuzmimo Benčić in Rijeka*. In a panel discussion, a definition of co-creation was offered by the group, paraphrased here:

Co-creations offer an opportunity for shared processes and learnings. The intention behind using the word 'co-creation' now comes from the fact that 'collaboration' has been folded into various industry and marketing jargon and its meaning has been drained, sanitized, and corporatized. Co-creating, in Musagetes' case, takes place in the form of artistic projects which are forged together between artists, community members, our organization and other organizations; and also in the form of encouraging and supporting environments which are set up for the production of co-creative work. Characteristics of co-creation include: dialogue, improvisation, and dispersion of ideas and resources across varied groups that might not otherwise be possible. Co-creating comes together without a preconceived notion about the end result but instead enables ownership.

We discussed how community is fostered through music by individuals, spaces, events, and moments. We talked about the conditions for local musicians and how their collaborative spirit and camaraderie fuels the network. The Café featured a collective sonic improvisation by the media art collective Postcommodity. Guelph community members collaborated with Postcommodity on developing a multi-media sound instrument and video game that can be played by groups of four people. The resulting interactive instrument, *Game Remains: Golden Horseshoe*, was performed live, first by the artists, then by their collaborators. Each performance resulted in a unique improvised soundscape. The artists describe their practice as a shared indigenous lens, and those present for the performances witnessed a type of contemporary music-making ritual drawing upon the history and tradition of the drum circle.

In their book, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, authors Fischlin, Heble, and Lipsitz describe the power of improvisation as it intersects with community: "In an era when diverse peoples and communities of interest struggle to forge historically new forms of affiliation across cultural divides, the participatory and civic virtues of engagement, dialogue, respect, and community-building inculcated through improvisatory practices take on

a particular urgency.”⁵ Improvisation is an aspect of collaboration we wish to harness further in our future work.

A Stronger Relationship with Guelph

We offered Guelph a clearer picture of Musagetes’ vision and values locally, nationally, and internationally. We engaged the City of Guelph at a deeper level. Thanks to our partners, we engaged new people and worked with new groups, such as the Cub Scouts, the gaming community, the experimental punk community, field naturalists, budding philosophers, and the QPOC (Queer People of Colour) community in Guelph. We co-created conversations, activities and artistic projects that amplify shared approaches and values.

Building upon what was established, we will incorporate new relationships, new formats and new publics into our artistic programming for 2014. Our working relationship with the art collective Postcommodity is such that we can learn a great deal from each other about language, rhetoric, and community engagement. For example, their use of the deep listening techniques of musician Pauline Oliveros into planning meetings with their collaborators is a method we can emulate.

Our public sphere—historically a safe space for participation in democratic debate—is rapidly diminishing as it has become a site for entertainment, corporate investment, and

surveillance. The Café was designed to stand in as a momentary metaphorical public space for participation and discussion about the meaning of culture and community building.

Conversation is the backbone of the Café model; venues, formats, timing, and guests are all essential to the setting and casting of a conversational moment. The artist and pedagogue Pablo Helguera has written that a well-conducted conversation relies on a carefully crafted dialogic structure to arrive at mutual understanding and learning without losing the balance between interlocutors. For this to succeed, it is important for the instigator of the discussion to know about the depth of engagement he or she is achieving with the audience.⁶

Different dialogic structures were consciously designed to achieve different results: informal social gatherings allowed for intimate conversations to unfold naturally, presentations and panels offered a range of perspectives on local issues, debates encouraged lively sparring within a safe space of respect, and live interviews at events tracked and articulated participants’ experiences. We hypothesized and learned that including various forms of conversations caters to a range of learning styles of different individuals, ensuring we tapped into many opinions throughout the event. We matched the content and topics to the right format. We did not shy away from debate, questions, and respectful conflict.

We argued at length about where power resides during the debate of the question “Of the many things that create a rich, critical, vibrant arts scene,

5. Daniel Fischlin, Ajay Heble, and George Lipsitz, *The Fierce Urgency of Now: Improvisation, Rights, and the Ethics of Cocreation*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 35.
6. Pablo Helguera, *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, (New York: Jorge Pinto Books, 2011), 46 – 47.

which contributes more, grassroots initiatives or big institutions?” Both institutions and grassroots initiatives were posited by the sides of the debate as fluid, flexible, responsive, enabling, mobile, inclusive, socially accountable, and culturally negotiable leaders which offer continuity. We need to expect more from both models and to encourage genuine collaboration and honest dialogue between the two.

Paulo Freire has written that before democracy becomes a political form, it is a way of life, characterized by shifting awareness: changing minds. He says that this kind of change cannot appear or develop except in debates examining common problems.⁷ Democracy relies on dissensus as much as on consensus. The Café included moments for both and did so consciously, as a way to gently direct conversations into the most productive areas.

Next Steps

The Café established a new type of publicness for Musagetes in Guelph. The activities and conversations galvanized a collective identity, presence, and sphere of action for the arts and culture in Guelph. Most importantly, the gathering highlighted that there were many missing voices from the margins, voices that could not be properly amplified because they were not there. Being present and being together is critical to the building of

community. The arts we have in Guelph are not central and meaningful to *all* residents— there is still much work to be done. Through legible, visible co-creative efforts, we can make the arts a more central and meaningful reality in more peoples' lives, in our communities, and societies.

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7. Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 29.