

New Possibilities: Individuals Finding Meaning in Art

Musagetes Retreat Summary

Wakefield, January 2014

What Musagetes Believes About Art

Bik Van der Pol's 2012 concert series on black rocks throughout Sudbury—*Between a Rock and a Hard Place*—resonated with each participant as a poetic celebration of music and the northern landscape, and as a consideration of the sublime and complex mining infrastructure that dominates the collective identity of this place. In interviews with individuals who experienced the concerts, we discovered that the imaginative openness that art encourages begins with the individual but quickly connects to the ways that we collectively shape the world:

“We were invited to that beautiful nowhere to glimpse what has been created by and for the youth of Sudbury to act out their years in whatever ways they can come up with.”

Another participant that day said:

“I hope to embark on an adventure of rediscovery, to see this city as I would like it to be.”

As we saw with *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, Musagetes connects individuals to the poetic, contemplative nature of the arts and to the exigencies of places, cities, and societies. We encourage people to find meaning in art in their individual ways, renewing and reinventing their worlds through a widespread embracing of the arts. In other words, the combination of criticality and poetry in artistic work sparks our individual and collective imagination of what is possible, of what can be changed. Then we see momentum towards the betterment of our selves, our communities, our societies, our cities, and ultimately our humanity.

The Meaning of Art for Individuals

We know that art creates a space for thinking differently. When people encounter, participate in, and co-create art, they explore and interpret their feelings, memories, longings, and responses to their environments. Something happens in this personal exploration—something that is powerful and instinctual. Our lives are a continual succession of deep engagements with the world; these experiences can disrupt our existence, transform our sense of self, and contribute to our perception of coherence and resilience. The arts play a fundamental role in mediating our individual life experiences, making artistic creativity central to healthy, empathic, social, and conscientious ways of living.

As Carl Jung said, “People want to make of their life a destiny.” The imaginative frame of the arts gives individuals a sense of control over and hope for their future; they can see beyond the immediate challenges of their lives and the conditions of their communities to what new possibilities might take form. The arts are the engines of such imaginative, creative engagement with the world. For Musagetes, the central question that we aim to answer with our artistic experiments is this: What meanings do individuals make from their experiences of art? What do they do with that meaningfulness, that sense-making? We’re striving to create a community of destination—a community about the future, about where we are going together. This

is a community comprised of individuals who find meaning in art and who together have a collective consciousness of the world.

2

Musagetes believes that if we make these inquiries over a prolonged period, we will be able to answer the question of how the accumulation of these meanings can lead to new collective awareness of the world. That is where new possibilities emerge for our communities, cities, societies—for our humanity. There is not one way to make sense of art.

Our artistic projects exemplify that art can exist and be interpreted in many ways—not as something to consume or merely hang on the wall—but as authentic experiences that contribute profoundly to our lives. Musagetes documents and researches this to tell the stories of how essential art is to our humanity.

Collective Consciousness of the World

Musagetes’ objectives are not merely about *engagement* in the arts, but about meaningful *experiences* that raise consciousness of the world. We are interested in enabling relationships with art that produce deep meaningfulness for individuals. We’re not simply advocating for more art to be made; we believe it always will be an essential part of our humanity. Musagetes’ intention is to transform life through individual experiences of art rather than to change the world by embedding social

and economic activism in art. The experiential and activist approaches are complementary, but Musagetes focuses on the former. The change we wish to see is something subtle that has great consequence: to spark a collective consciousness of the exigencies of the world. But *how* the world actually changes is not Musagetes' to determine. Musagetes won't change the world by itself, but we can show individuals, through the arts, that they have the power to change things themselves.

The creation of communities of individuals who find meaning in art is an essential way of rousing the collective unconscious—of provoking a new awareness of the longings, memories, and feelings that shape communities, cultures, and societies. As art intervenes in time and space, it renders the collective unconscious into a condition of consciousness, into an understanding of the conditions of the world. Creating consciousness is inherently an act of possibility and contingency that channels individual sense-making into a collective drive towards change. It's the moment of transformative individual meaning-making that Musagetes documents; the resulting changes in the physical world are for policy-makers, activists, and social organizations to enable, facilitate, and study.

To illustrate the relationship between individual sense-making and collective consciousness, we can reflect on *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* in Sudbury and on Laetitia Sonami's and Matthew Mazzotta's interventions on the waterbreak pier in Rijeka. The decommissioned pier was a new public space at that time but had existed in the collective

imagination for over a century. With the artistic interventions, in the context of Rijeka's social and economic conditions, the pier became a space for metaphorically and poetically seeing the city anew. These place-based projects in Sudbury and Rijeka are powerful combinations of poetry, urgency, and criticality. But in the Sudbury project we studied individual experiences of the work over the course of the day of concerts; in Rijeka we reflected on collective consciousness because the site we chose to engage—the pier—was already magnified in the collective imagination.

Coherence and Disruption: The Resilience of Cities

Musagetes refers to its multi-year, city-based programs as *experiments* into the transformative power of the arts. While we care deeply about the places in which these experiments take place, we also recognize that the entire world could fall within the scope of such research. We have chosen the four small cities—Rijeka, Sudbury, Guelph, Lecce—with careful attention and respectful humility: the specific contexts of these places are central to the artistic choices we make and the learning that we document. We value complexity over reductionist thinking, knowing that our individual and collective adaptability to changing conditions—to new possibilities—depends on how open our imaginations are. This will move us closer to resilience.

Having worked in our cities for 3-4 years each, we understand better the particular complexities of each place. We recognize that each city is at a different stage in the cycle of adaptive change, a theory of resilience that tracks change from a coherent condition of equilibrium to disruption to the reemergence of equilibrium. To illustrate this in the context of economic conditions in two of Musagetes' cities, we can compare Rijeka and Sudbury. Rijeka is at the stage of reorganizing its systems, struggling to find an equilibrium between the need for a new identity and the urgency of establishing a new economy. Sudbury maintains its status quo in relative equilibrium as the global demands on its industries (health care, mining, engineering) remain stable.

Over time, systems can become so coherent as to become ossified, repressing the arts in attempts to maintain the status quo. Artists creatively disrupt that coherence, sparking new coherences through various means of reorganization—individual perceptions shaping collective consciousness of exigencies. An important consideration for Musagetes is this: can we make a difference in cities that are coherent as well as in cities that are experiencing turmoil and transition?

Resilience is a system's capacity to adapt to new conditions without becoming stuck in one state. A coherent system like Sudbury's that is maintained through the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources will only become resilient if a disruption doesn't plunge its most vulnerable members into poverty. A system like Rijeka's that has been mired

in a desperate state of reorganization for almost two decades will only become resilient if its new coherence balances economic needs with ecological and humane sensitivities instead of oppressive neoliberal abuses. In all cases, the key question is this: our systems need resilience, but against what, to what end, and for whom? Achieving resilience is not about establishing utopia. A sense of control, belonging, and meaning is what lends us greater resilience, a greater capacity to survive. This is what art offers. Participation in and co-creation of artistic projects gives people a sense of coherence and agency.

When Musagetes selects new cities for our programs, we will research and document the cities' baselines of conditions, using models of resilience as one analytical tool. The capacity and enthusiasm of our collaborators is important but for long-term engagement with a place we must deeply understand what is needed, how to address the need, and how to influence others who have greater capacity to address that need. Only when we are needed are we relevant; sometimes the need is simply a will to change.

Art can't only illustrate a quest for resilience; it has to shift consciousness towards it. This consciousness is greater than social engagement, more than just a sense of belonging—it is an awareness of incoherences and injustices, of that which doesn't make sense to the betterment of our humanity in its relation to the world and to other beings. In building resilience, Musagetes' approach offers a platform for artists and activists to work.

Continuing the Work

In the context of Musagetes' preoccupation with sense-making, collective consciousness, and resilience, we will advance our work by focusing on these three elements:

1. Musagetes will inquire into and document individual relationships with art and the production of meaning by designing experiments based on 'in-the-moment', lived experiences of art—"the lived realities of human experience, the contingencies, the seeming trivialities, the emotions, subjectivities, and uniqueness of life in all its manifestations, while at the same time uncovering the epistemological dimension, addressing how we make sense of the world, how we construct our knowledge."¹ If we can be precise in our observations, we will also make an enormous contribution to understanding resilience through art.
2. Related to our research into sense-making is the pedagogical dimension of our work. Not only are our artistic projects examples of poetic and critical engagement with the world, but we also develop approaches and tools for individuals to participate in creative processes. Ours is an open pedagogy that is embedded in artistic projects and sense-making research.
3. Over the years we have learned many things from our experiences. Now we see patterns and themes emerging that cut across our work in all of our cities. We will continue

to document this process, but to do so more precisely within the frame of resilience theory and sociological observation. We intend to describe Musagetes' process in greater detail. One way to do this will be to present our knowledge through written texts.

5

1. Edgar Morin, *On Complexity*, (Cresskill NJ: Hampton Press, 2008), xviii.