

# Musagetes Retreat Summary

*Toronto, January 10-11, 2013*

Last year Musagetes held its Retreat when the Occupy movement was in its cooling stage as the January weather made tents uninhabitable and the water in cookpots froze over. Then the student protests in Montreal — the Printemps d'érable, complete with pot-banging “casserole” protests — occupied much of 2012 with their mantra: “If you won’t allow us to dream, we won’t allow you to sleep.” This year, the Retreat was convened just as the Idle No More movement was gathering steam, drawing together aboriginals and non-aboriginals in communal spaces with common demands. With this context in mind, we began our discussions with a survey of what Musagetes is learning from its experiences producing socially engaged artistic projects in four cities. We began with a close look at how we work with artists; how we are present in communities; how we are embodying the Manifesto; and how we are addressing faultlines. Musagetes works in these four cities as laboratories: places to experiment, but

not necessarily as final destinations.

How does Musagetes act? In a document prior to the Retreat, Shawn wrote that when we work in a community there are both 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. We engage artists who are local to our communities to increase cultural production; and we engage artists from outside in order to understand better the community. We are neither inside the system nor outside, giving us 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. We look for places

where we can build bridges between the local and the global. Our projects involve aspects of research, relationship-building, dialogue, artistic inquiry, pedagogy and dissemination. These are the key principles on which Musagetes' actions are based.

We went on to consider Musagetes' experimentation with sense-making — a process of understanding how people make sense of the artistic experiences that they encounter. This was a logical development from our developmental research project in Sudbury where we recognized that a more specific set of tools are required to elicit insights from the participants (especially *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*). Musagetes' staff shared their plans for creating pedagogical tools in 2013, beginning with a series of workshops and continuing with sense-making exercises that will be fully embedded in artistic projects. The need for this deeper investigation is what is implied in the statement that "Musagetes needs to get more sophisticated, not to just *produce* art but to *engage* with art and artistic projects." Our pedagogical projects are designed to build a deeper, lifelong engagement with the arts for individuals who are all "sites of culture."

A methodology is emerging along with the patterns we recognize. Musagetes has a track record of doing artistic projects that are social, engaged, pedagogical, and inspiring, all leading to further creativity and production. Now we are in a position to tell our story to the world. Karl Marx didn't know immediately the significance of *Das Kapital*; change comes suddenly at times and in unexpected ways. Musagetes should acknowledge this, and

perhaps even relax a bit; a too-intense search for change can stifle the art.

This led us to the question, what is Musagetes' narrative? How can we amplify our experiences in the cities into a larger narrative about the centrality of the arts to our daily lives, in our communities, and in our societies, as the Manifesto states? We have touched on this during previous retreats but have never really formulated an answer. What we realized, though, is that we're not looking for change for change's sake; rather, a shift in perception sparked 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 won't lose sight of the importance of social activism and social change, but this element of our narrative parallels the 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.

We help artists to dream, to sketch what new communities can look like. But the Big Question is whether or not our communities and collaborators are equipped and motivated to work with us and to continue after we leave. What evidence do we have in Lecce, Sudbury, Guelph and Rijeka that we are achieving these lofty aims? How do we measure this? The answer lies, we believe, in the sense-making, pedagogical aspects of the work, something that will be a greater focus for us in 2013. That,

combined with an inspiring narrative (written in a short version and longer versions) and clear communications will truly realize the aspirations of our artistic programming. 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, empowering it to acknowledge the possibly latent, creative license of its members. It often takes an outsider to make this happen.

Put differently, how do we go from the radical idea to radical transformation? By acting as brokers, allowing radical innovators to operate in the cracks that form — as Leonard Cohen says, “there is a crack in everything; it’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, activist movements, 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. We could be looked to in the future as creating other choices to institutions. DodoLab experiments with this even while they occasionally work inside institutions such as the Royal Ontario Museum. 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.

One guest participant emphatically declared: “I blame Musagetes for renewed optimism.” *That’s* why we exist — to be a catalyst for renewed optimism, bringing the arts more centrally and meaningfully into individuals’ lives. Each of us is a mini-experiment; we’re trying to live the values of the Manifesto ourselves.

## Kit for Fieldwork

Our first toolkit (or "kit for fieldwork") in our pedagogical work will be a publication for *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* by Bik Van der Pol. The toolkit (June 2013) will consist of a video, vinyl field recordings, and workbook with 3-5 workshop designs, sense-making exercises, discussion questions, essays on the value of the arts, and interviews exploring the collaborative process. Imagine sitting in a park or café with students or an activist group with the toolkit, conducting a workshop on forms of imaginative mapping, inspired by the new map of Sudbury that we drew with *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*. Or imagine the toolkit as the required "text" for a course. We will simultaneously hone participants' powers of articulation and perception, and gain their insights on how they make sense of artistic works. Then we will explore how this connects to their activist potential while encouraging them to do it their own ways and have their own points of view. Perception is individualized, and cultural mediation is a process of democratization of the arts whereby each individual develops sense-making habits and aptitudes on his or her own terms. We are all hot-blooded and opinionated individuals.

## The Elevator Speech

In Classical mythology, Musagetes is the name of Apollo in his role as protector and promoter of the Muses. We strive to help restore the power of the imagination in individuals and we do it by calling on the Muses, so to speak, when we work with artists to transform their communities. As artists make visible new perceptions, viewers are inspired, see things differently and are themselves transformed. This inspiration combats the alienation and malaise of our times, filling voids with hope rather than with fundamentalism or materialism.