

Writing While Moving

Musagetes Retreat Summary

Montreal, January 2012

Summary

In January 2012 Musagetes convened its staff, Board of Directors, International Advisory Council and two guests, Matthew Stadler and Aaron Levy (full participant list in Appendix A). The group spent two days in Montreal analyzing Musagetes' work of the past year, what we learned from it, and how we communicate. Along the way we discussed how to articulate our theory of change, and what language and forms of communication we should use to connect our Manifesto to our programs. We believe *Writing While Moving* conveys our commitment to reflection and learning while experimenting with artistic actions.

What are we learning?

Four central concepts of Musagetes' Manifesto — emergence, publics, presence, and movement¹ — came up in discussions frequently during the Retreat. These concepts, set out in the founding document, relate closely both to what motivates the development of our artistic programs and to what we have learned from them. In other words, over the past five years, as we translated the Manifesto into a series of programs, we have gained a clearer understanding of how these concepts can be manifested in diverse cities, contexts and artistic initiatives. Looking back on 2011 in particular, these experiences guide us in facilitating the emergence of artistic creativity, the identification and even creation of new publics — a teasing out of new groups who find a common voice and engage with us — and the necessity to be

1. The Manifesto refers to these four concepts as follows:
 - **Emergence:** "Artistic creativity involves a journey, which artists are impelled to undertake, not knowing where it will lead or if and how they will arrive — a quest for the profound and true."
 - **Public:** "Musagetes is profoundly convinced that these attributes and values [of artistic creativity] do not rest only with artists — they are available to any person, community or society open to the arts and fully willing to engage with and explore them."
 - **Presence:** "[Artistic creativity] lives in the 'now' — it takes place in the moment."
 - **Movement:** "Transformative events/calls for action involve persuasion, movement, engagement, often through unusual combinations of people, sectors or activities."

present and face-to-face in order to achieve greater movement through unusual combinations of people, sectors and activities.

We are now ready to say:

Musagetes' approach to change — our belief in the power of art to be transformative — is one that depends on the development of meaningful relationships which then expand into multiple publics catalyzed by artistic creativity. New ideas emerge when publics — comprised of individuals, communities and organizations — convene, but this is especially true when publics form at the intersection of diverse conditions, disciplines and cultures. Musagetes' four city-based programs realize the power of art in social change through the formation of new publics through dialogue and artistic action.

How do we communicate?
What language do we use?

The discussion of communication delved more deeply into how Musagetes can attract others to engage the arts and create change. The form and content of the Manifesto were cited as deeply powerful, and we debated various forms of alternative publication for Musagetes to explore. A set of interrelated and recurring terms used by Retreat participants contributed significantly

to how we understand our programs, terms that in retrospect come directly – and reassuringly! – from the Manifesto, reinforcing the importance of this founding document. This language can be summarized as follows:

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1. Openings and Changes in Perception: Musagetes is concerned with artistic actions that shift perception and create openings for change to take place.
2. Emergence and Movement: Musagetes successfully enables multiple publics to emerge out of each artistic project. Now we must facilitate overlaps between these publics, and allow the accumulation of these relationships to produce a movement towards the change that is at the core of our mandate.
3. Embodiment and Presence: Musagetes embodies its values, its voice and its relationships by being present and face-to-face with its publics who are comprised of multiple profiles and who are formed through dialogue and direct engagement with artistic projects.
4. Going Public: Musagetes has begun to recognize that public space is actually embodied space — places where our bodies are present. Publication is the embodiment of the process of relationship-building.
5. Sense-making: Musagetes experiments with different ways of understanding how people make sense of what they experience. Sense-making is a one-to-one relationship when done with attentiveness and clarity.

Openings and Changes in Perception

Changes in perceptions are central to our work but we continually must ask ourselves when and where the work must go beyond perception. A change of perception is powerful because it can be picked up and radically acted upon. Musagetes is concerned with artistic actions that shift perception and create openings for change to take place. Musagetes makes space for new thinkers and new perspectives, and this is part of our working culture. We look to the recent past to measure what kinds of successful openings we hope to encourage in the future. During the Retreat, DodoLab spoke about how local youth in Sudbury feel valued because our invited artists come from afar. Youth — particularly young activist leaders — need to be cultivated to carry the torch forward.

Conversations during the Retreat turned often to the importance of historical contexts and points of view. During our discussion about the richness of diverse forms of publishing and of creating publications, we acknowledged that printers and printing presses were at the core of social change at various points in history and were leaders in changing perceptions and opening minds. This points to the interconnection between forms for dissemination and the circulation of radical thought. In recognizing the historical basis for these change models, Musagetes also sees potential for participating in a similar way.

Emergence and Movement

Musagetes believes in the power of movements to make positive change. Movements are choreographed through collaborations, dialogues and participation in artistic projects; through the emergence of newly empowered leaders; and through the formation of new publics. Specifically, a movement is an accumulation of the power of networked voices (publics) speaking up and taking action for positive change in our communities and societies — working together to overcome the alienation that results from the malaise of modernity.

The Retreat participants began to draft a narrative that stitches together performance, emergence and movement. It began with the question, “What is the transition that Musagetes’ work refers to?” Transition is not a state of being, but lies in the notion of moving towards something. There is transitional movement at the local scale (“What is in transition in Guelph?”) and in patterns that emerge at the global scale. By building up a network of relationships — being present — we begin to see global movement. Musagetes’ work cannot be a series of unrelated initiatives or unconnected events. We can’t be localists. The work must contribute to larger movements that are already underway. And so, the performative nature of Musagetes is manifested in the choreography of movement in the cities in which we are experimenting.

Musagetes champions emergence within the programs in many ways. Our process of building programs is inherently emergent as we respond to the specificities of each locale. But most importantly, we are interested in the emergence of new publics who are keen to be a part of the movement that we create. Over time, the network of voices expands, multiple publics begin to interact, new relationships form and the movement is propelled forward. One of the often-cited successes of the Occupy movement is that people of many socio-economic profiles are talking to each other, using new vocabulary and learning about varying experiences of the world.

Lecce); through the development of relationships; through a study of potential hotspots for change; and responding to our intuition that Musagetes' presence there would spark new relationships, new approaches, new possibilities, and new leaders.

The exchange of knowledge is considered in the design of Musagetes' projects. Too often artistic processes and practices are formulated as a one-way transfer of knowledge — from the artist to the viewer/audience. For Musagetes, the *exchange* is critical as artists work with communities whose knowledge — be it vernacular, academic or traditional — imbues the work with the potential for transformation. Participating in the knowledge exchange (through workshops, lectures, collaborative productions, etc.) requires physical presence. We are learning that Musagetes must embody its values, its voice and its relationships by being face-to-face with its publics who are formed through direct engagement with dialogue and artistic projects.

Embodiment and Presence

The concluding section of Musagetes' Manifesto is titled "Embodying Beliefs in Action: How Musagetes will operate." When the staff, Board of Directors, International Advisory Council and our guests convened to analyze what we have learned over the past year, the notion of embodiment was emphasized not only as a need for Musagetes' community to live by these values, but also to ensure that our programs create a shared, lived experience.

Going Public

Building relationships and shared experiences depends on the embodiment of the values set out in the Manifesto and our presence in face-to-face interactions. Musagetes has selected the four cities in which it works with much careful deliberation: in response to an invitation (as with Sudbury and

Musagetes builds publics and occupies public space in new and meaningful ways. We do not aim to build a collection of public art. We distinguish between commissioning art projects in the expanded field (e.g. outside the formal white cube and the proscenium) and creating opportunities for artists to participate in broader society. While these are both

valuable directions, we are engaged increasingly in the latter, which provides opportunities to push creativity and artistic practice into new territory for all.

What is typically considered public space is, in fact, state-controlled and highly surveilled space. Public space of this sort is only one kind of space that enables shared democratic usage. Musagetes has begun to recognize that public space is actually embodied space — space where we are present with our bodies. Public space requires a threshold, an invitation. At its greatest, one should feel welcome there.

If public space is embodied space, then that which is ‘public’ is actually a set of shared relationships. It is not about attendance numbers and audience size, but about the level of deep engagement. So how does Musagetes’ work go public? We see forms of publication as an important part of the answer. A publication is a public space that is portable. Each person who enters it, joins it. During the Retreat, Matthew Stadler talked about how the book technology is unparalleled in enabling individuals to share space democratically. This notion of portable public space is powerful and can be built upon, especially if we consider publication to be a process, not a final result. Publication is the embodiment of the process of relationship-building. This process of defining a set of relationships is linked to opening, movement and emergence because it happens over time and space. And it depends on our ability to speak with an embodied voice, one that is personal and human.

Sense-making

The emergence of new publics and their capacity to be part of a movement depends on their ability to make sense of their artistic encounters and experiences. The process of making sense starts with the actual formation of a public, where dialogue can illuminate, overcome alienation, and germinate new approaches to building community. As Musagetes designs and executes its programs, we give much consideration to developing tools to facilitate this sense-making process. Among these tools are publications, platforms for dialogue, interventions, and regular communication.

The Year Ahead

The programs in 2012 will give particular emphasis to this process of sense-making through the creation of publications that guide our thought processes while they enable a lived experience.

Musagetes currently has numerous long-term projects underway in four cities: Guelph, Sudbury, Lecce (Italy) and Rijeka (Croatia). These projects relate concretely to the concepts outlined above in ways that are deeply specific to their chosen site, community and city, and equally offer key learnings to our other chosen sites, communities and cities.

Guelph

In Guelph, Lucia Babina and Marjetica Potrč are developing the *Brant Academy of Shared Knowledge (BASK)*, which builds resources for low-income citizens in the Brant neighbourhood by offering a space for sharing knowledge, gathering and imagining alternatives. This project encourages an at-risk community to become an active public defining their own learnings and tools. Developing language for the project has been identified as a challenge: it is critical that communications are both accessible to neighbourhood citizens and reflective of the artists' conceptual underpinnings and philosophies.

We will foster an entirely different public with the work of SYN – Atelier d'Exploration Urbaine who will offer a four-week accredited course on activating underused spaces on the university campus. The way in which they embody the activist side of their practice – by cycling to, from and around the campus – has been inspiring to students who do the same, galvanizing a trust relationship in the early stages. DodoLab will also be more active in Guelph by staging a series of interventions that build on their *SWIFT* project. DodoLab's substantial role in Musagetes' programs contributes to our process of establishing relationships and exchanging knowledge about working in public with the public.

Emergence is a central component in some projects in Guelph. Adrian Blackwell's work in

St. George's Square, titled *St. George's Dragon*, will be a temporary multi-use structure for social interaction. The layered coil of interwoven seating is a project that Musagetes is negotiating with the City of Guelph as we address concerns about safety and our mutual interest in activating public space. Musagetes is learning to balance the needs of the artist with the needs of the City by being responsive, agile and actively inquisitive about details large and small.

Emergence is also occurring within the *Guelph Rural-Urban Program* by Cohabitation Strategies, a long-term research project exploring the relationship between the core and periphery of Guelph. This is a new way of working for Musagetes, bringing together multiple previously tested tactics into one large-scale initiative that involves university students and faculty, local and international researchers and artists, activists, and other engaged individuals.. This collaborative relationship with the School of Environmental Design and Rural Development is one of our strongest in Guelph and provides a professional model for cooperation, pooling of resources and defining roles. We consider it to be a 'hotspot'. In some cases, we are learning how to clarify relationships and collaborations on projects like the Big Ideas Lecture Series with CAKFA and the Improviser in Residence Program with ICASP.

Sudbury

In Sudbury, the collective Bik Van der Pol is engaging with a ‘hotspot’ of another sort: one that brings together a critical look at labour history, the effects of extraction, and the formation of alternative culture. Bik Van der Pol are working closely with local Francophone Producer, Mathieu Grainger, as well as the Anglophone/Francophone design firm, Bureau, to create a rock concert bus tour featuring local Sudbury bands who will perform on rock formations of their choice. The project will include a film that will act as a component of the whole art project, a documentation of the process, and a talking point for our developmental evaluation. The chemistry between the cast of characters (Musagetes, Bik Van der Pol, Mathieu Grainger and Bureau) exemplifies the energy we will look for, emulate and encourage in the research, creation, production and evaluation of our other projects. We are documenting the sense-making that is unfolding, and we have great hopes for changes in perception as local bands ‘catch fire’.

Sudbury will also feature a new collaboration between DodoLab & Smudge Studio (New York artists Jamie Kruse and Elizabeth Ellsworth) on a lab that will engage a wider diversity of youth out in the community at strategic public locations. This project connects two artist collectives who learned about one another during the Sudbury Café and are carrying forward emergent discussions. We are forming a new partnership with La Galerie du

Nouvel-Ontario for the co-production of a project by Rebecca Belmore. Belmore will visit Sudbury for a micro-residency in 2012 to explore locations for a performance in 2013. We will develop this emerging collaboration with great interest.

Miriam Cusson will create a site-specific theatre piece for the Algoma Tavern, a historic restaurant and bar in Chelmsford. She plans to tackle the ‘silos of culture’ — Anglophone, Francophone and Aboriginal — in creative and revelatory ways. As such the work will tell the complex story of Canadian identity in a completely new way. This project will cross pollinate publics and define a new kind of presence in Sudbury as it draws downtown Sudburians out to the periphery, while gathering local Chelmsfordians together at their local pub, to experience a new identification of place together.

Lecce

In Lecce, Cohabitation Strategies is working along with activists, philosophers, artists and writers to develop a collaborative project titled *Campagna Urbana* (a double meaning that refers to the country and the city; and to an urban campaign), examining and promoting Lecce citizens’ “right to the city.” This project consciously directs creative energies toward creating cultural alternatives to the histories and traditions for which the city is well-known. Our success in collaboratively forming the Ammirato Culture House exemplifies our emergent

approach as we enable the local community to define a collective, self-sustaining hub for artistic actions of their own.

Rijeka

In Rijeka, Matthew Mazzota is building an urban grass park for sheep on the historic pier, in a project titled *Pier Shear*. Mazzotta is orking with Rijeka-based artists to create artworks that reveal Rijeka's past and dreams for the future using raw wool gathered from nearby farms. There is great evidence that changes in perception among local municipal figures have already occurred as they welcome cultural acts at the historic port. This is a direct result of the previous work of Laetitia Sonami's project in 2011 which were enabled by the championing acts of Irena Kregar-Šegota. Sonami will continue building upon the relationships, connections and momentum she established to create a new series of workshops and public interventions.

Coming out of the Retreat, we are increasingly conscious of how central local relationships are in our Artistic Programs. As such, how we define collaboration and how local relationships are selected, fostered, defined and engaged from the very start is critical to our success.

APPENDIX A: 2012 Retreat Participants

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Board of Directors

Joy Roberts, President and Founder

Yeti Agnew, Secretary and Founder

John English, Director

Founders

Michael Barnstijn, Founder and Benefactor

Louise MacCallum, Founder and Benefactor

Valerie Hall, Founder

Douglas McMullen, Founder

International Advisory Council

Simon Brault is the CEO of the National Theatre School of Canada (Montreal).

Frances Westley is the Director of Social Innovation Generation at the University of Waterloo.

Tim Brodhead is the former CEO of the J.W. McConnell Foundation (Montreal).

Programs

Shawn Van Sluys, Executive Director, Musagetes

Alissa Firth-Eagland, Program

Manager, Musagetes

Andrew Hunter, Principal, DodoLab

Lisa Hirmer, Principal, DodoLab

Guests

Matthew Stadler is a writer, editor, and a co-founder of Publication Studio (Portland, Oregon).

Aaron Levy is the Executive Director of the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia.