

Retreat Summary 2017: Walking Together on a Foggy Road

This year Musagetes celebrates the 10th anniversary of the launch of its Manifesto. Beginning with the principles set out there, we have been on a journey, putting emergence and co-creation at the heart of our processes and protocols. Learnings from our experiments have, in turn, allowed us to elaborate on and augment these principles.

Each January, Musagetes' board, advisors, and staff gather at a retreat for two days to reflect on our past work, think critically about our emergence, and make sense of the learning we collected along the way. But now, ten years on, we ask, what is Musagetes' North Star? What sense can we make of our journey along a sometimes foggy road -- and where is it leading? In 2017-18, we will attempt to answer this question through deeper study and application of our core methodology. There are many options open to Musagetes and perhaps, to be effective, we need to choose one. Is our North Star a protocol for effectively entangling relationships globally? Or a movement to broaden institutional reform through the arts? Or a perpetuation of widespread inquiry-based living? Or an alignment of entangled knowledge production? Or leadership in situating the arts at the centre of social and political processes? Or a medium, through ArtsEverywhere, for all of the above? Alternatively, is it the entangling of all these things (protocol, movement, perpetuation, alignment, leadership, medium) that is our strength, and our goal, then, is to articulate clearly where they are leading us?

Musagetes' early program design (2009-2013) emphasized a long-term immersion in a few cities (Guelph/Kitchener-Waterloo, Lecce, Italy, and Rijeka, Croatia) that have been going through a form of transition—economic, political, social, demographic, or ecological. This embedded approach established our experimental mode, foregrounded artistic practice and research-based inquiries with local communities, and investigated the role of public space, community dialogue, municipal processes, and economic justice in sparking some form of systems change. By 2014, this shifted toward foregrounding social justice issues and centring community decision-making in Musagetes' projects. Musagetes began tentatively and modestly to recognize that its work needed to open up to other ways of knowing, being, and relating beyond just Western notions of artistic creation and knowledge production, to avoid reproducing the inequities and injustices that comprise the status quo. Over the past two years, Musagetes recognized that some of the most powerful disruptions of our flawed systems and institutions come from positions of struggle, from those who are on the front lines and those in solidarity with them. In early 2016, we launched two new inter-related programs: the ArtsEverywhere online platform (ArtsEverywhere.ca) and a rhizomatically expanding series of Global Projects in São Paulo, New York, and across Canada.

We are quite clear now what comprises the minimum characteristics of our methodology:

- The questions we choose to ask—the lines of **inquiry** we sustain—are the backbone of our methodology. In Musagetes' work, lines of inquiry guide artistic practices and processes, community-led projects, city programs, ArtsEverywhere, and our international projects. Through inquiry, we reveal possibilities for new, revived, or reclaimed forms of, for example, policy and pedagogy that in turn initiate institutional reform. How do we apply the learning acquired through inquiry to the design of our administrations, organizations, relationships, and protocols?
- Yet inquiry alone isn't enough. Musagetes' methodology is underpinned by the role that narrative, form, and aesthetics play in shaping an inquiry through **artistic creativity**. The nexus of inquiry, pedagogy, and artistic freedom brings critique, mystery, disruption, surprise, and joy to an inquisitive life.
- Musagetes has always been preoccupied with the role of **casting** in its work—the process of selecting with whom to engage and collaborate, and whose discourse to deepen. However, our methodologies for experimentation focused, until recently, on the “what, where, how, and for whom.” With an emerging focus on systems of oppression, forms of struggle, and celebrations of difference, the question of “who” contributes to and influences our work has surged in importance.
- We believe in the capacity of art to cause shifts in power. We work in **solidarity** with those in struggle and we work to influence those in positions of power. Our projects are developed variously by and with people who are migrating, with Indigenous peoples and their allies committed to processes of reconciliation, with people for whom gender is not binary, and with artists who confront directly the recent surge of fascist politics.
- Musagetes removes itself from the centre of the inquiry, gathering, project, or struggle to leave space for those who are most directly affected to determine for themselves the rhetoric, priorities, and paths forward. Our most impactful projects are the ones where we most effectively **decentre the organization**, even while remaining in solidarity, contributing to the inquiry, and helping enlarge the tent.
- The decentring of the organization does not lead us to apathy or complacency; it does not absolve us of responsibility; and it does not diminish our capacity to learn or apply our learning. Instead, it positions Musagetes to be a steward for the **entanglement** of inquiries, projects, and communities around the world. Entanglement shapes a global sharing of knowledge, powerful alliances, and movements toward broad systems change. Examples of this are coming into focus now regarding alternative land use/economies and non-binary gender activism.
- Musagetes strives to adopt an **intersectional lens** in all its work. Our projects, inquiries, and communities are interwoven in order to make space for many ways of being, knowing, and

relating, while acknowledging the intersecting patterns of race, gender, class, sexuality, age, and colour. We foreground the multiple dimensions of our constructed identities and the need to position the privileges of each of us, the organization, and the broader field of philanthropy.

- One of the crucial ways by which our work can become more intersectional and interconnected is through the **role of reimagined pedagogy and policy in institutional reform** and the formation of new and autonomous constituencies. This forms the basis for most of the projects we are part of.

In societies facing so much potential rupture, we believe that the arts are a mode by which we can retain what is good (an expression of resilience) and reject what undermines the possibility of a life that is deeply free and socially just. We need artists at the table, facing the urgencies of the current political moment, alongside policymakers, economists, scientists, philosophers, and social theorists. In its capacity for political and social critique, artistic inquiry leads us to greater epistemic openness—an exploration and embracing of multiple ways of knowing and being in the world. Musagetes itself has been transformed by the generous and diverse communities that have engaged with us. We enter this work humbly and modestly with a desire for continued learning and growth, building on the foundational work we have undertaken and relationships we value with several communities in struggle—such as with those who are displaced and migrating across geopolitical realities; with Indigenous peoples in Canada with whom we strive to reach conciliation after centuries of genocide and injustice; with those who resist the reductive codification of gender as a binary linked to physical attributes; and with those who struggle against the injustices of racialization and racism.

Embracing the gift of learning through inquiry that these communities have offered us, Musagetes sees value in telling its own story of ongoing transformation and emergence through greater epistemic openness. It's one example of institutional reform that might be useful to others. If a key role of Musagetes is the stewardship of a web of projects—some initiated by us, some in partnership, and some by those aligned with us and with whom we align—then can ArtsEverywhere be both a medium for dissemination of the learning and a tool for further connecting projects, inquiries and communities? In this way we can avoid being captured by one urgency, community, idea, or place, while experimenting with emerging forms of inquiry in solidarity that entangle us in each other's struggles, stories, and learning. As G. Spivak suggests, we might understand our mission to become part of that invisible, yet present, transition from being "global agents to planetary subjects"—an embodied position that puts the planet and all of its lifeforms at the centre in opposition to the disembodied tropes of globalization (its ideologies, economies, and geopolitics). This shift may show us the possibilities for a new kind of philanthropy that Musagetes can model.

One such embodied entanglement—simultaneous to the work of solidarity—weaves traditional knowledge into the core of our institutions, organizations, and communities. Through relationships with Indigenous peoples, we understand traditional knowledge not as a static or lost form of knowledge, but as the perpetuation of knowledge that comes from Indigenous experience of the world. As Richard W. Hill cautions, such knowledge must not be monumentalized and appropriated as reductive symbols of “pan-Indian” spirituality and ceremony. Instead we work to centralize Indigenous knowledge respectfully and reciprocally as a way of knowing the world beyond the status quo. Hill’s suggestion that Indigenous intellectual heritage be treated as a set of active tools rather than merely preserving and monumentalizing a few widely recognized symbols of Indigeneity, resonates powerfully with Musagetes’ sense that the broader transformation of our cultures and societies has much to learn from contemporary Indigenous thought and traditional ways of being.

We are on a journey of learning, following the path of our methodology. It’s a foggy way, but as the mist lifts, we glimpse possibilities for radical change. Through the mist we see the North Star, faintly. Dear Reader, we invite you to join us in 2017 as we navigate our way to greater clarity of what our methodology, learning, and entanglements might yield.

The 2017 Retreat was attended by Tim Brodhead, Frances Westley, Simon Brault (day one by conference call), Michael Barnstijn, Louise MacCallum (Founders & Benefactors), Joy Roberts (Founder & Chair), Yeti Agnew (Founder & Director), Douglas McMullen (Founder), Valerie Hall (Founder), Shawn Van Sluys (Executive Director), Elwood Jimmy (Program Coordinator), Peggy Dix (Finance Manager), Curtis Walker (Administrative Assistant), and our guests, Stephanie Sobek-Swant (rare Charitable Research Reserve), Richard W. Hill (Indigenous Studies, Emily Carr University), and Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti (Education Studies, UBC).