

Listening to the World

Retreat Summary

January 7-9, 2019

Participants:

Board of Directors and Founders

Joy Roberts, Chair & Founder
Yeti Agnew, Director & Founder
John English, Director
Michael Barnstijn, Founder
Valerie Hall, Founder
Louise MacCallum, Founder
Douglas McMullen, Founder

Personnel

Shawn Van Sluys, Executive Director
Peggy Dix, Finance Manager
Elwood Jimmy, Program Coordinator
Siddhartha Joag, Managing Editor,
ArtsEverywhere
Curtis Walker, Communications &
Production Coordinator
Anna Bowen, Administrative Assistant
Carolyn Meili, Stonefields Foundation

International Advisory Committee

Frances Westley
Tim Brodhead

Guests

Stephanie Sobek-Swant, *rare* Charitable
Research Reserve
Peter Schuler, Elder, Mississauga of the
Credit
Dan Longboat, Trent University
Vanessa Andreotti, UBC Professor of Higher
Education
Naomi Johnson, Woodlands Cultural Centre
Paula Whitlow, Woodlands Cultural Centre
Carl Mika, Māori scholar, New Zealand
Rene Suša, UBC Post-doctoral fellow
Sharon Stein, UBC Assistant Professor
Dan McCarthy, Univ of Waterloo Professor
Dougald Hine, School of Everything (via
Teleconference)

In 2006, when Musagetes' founders convened a group of cultural leaders, artists, and other big thinkers to establish the first principles and conceptual parameters for a new philanthropic foundation, they emerged with a touchstone document (our Manifesto) that continues to be alive with new significance, interpretation, and understanding for us and our partners and peers. Each year, the Board, advisors, personnel, and invited guests assemble to reflect on what we have learned from our work, to discuss our latest insights into the Manifesto, and to look forward to the next 12 months (and beyond).

One of the core aspects of the Manifesto and our way of working is the importance of emergent design—an approach that embeds contingency, possibility, and openness in our programs and organizational philosophy and culture. The written summaries of our retreat conversations (of which this is the 8th report), building on the London and Barcelona Café reports (2007 and 2008, respectively), are a public record of the knowledge we have gathered over the years. In 2012 and 2013, our reflections focused on the nature of artistic creativity (a journey or quest for the profound, not knowing where it will lead) and its power to “instil in people the possibility of change, of hope...

the possibility of living with uncertainty, with the possibility of imagining something beyond present conditions.”

In 2014 this expanded to a closer consideration of the role art plays in social engagement. We wrote that art does more than offer a sense of belonging; it also raises awareness of incoherences and injustices. The following year, we applied this in some detail to finding a balance between imaginative thinking and rationalistic thinking, recognizing that the first principle of our Manifesto is the necessity to confront the fault lines of modernity and the primacy of rational thinking—to the detriment of the imagination—that underwrites contemporary Western culture. The 2014 retreat report marks the moment when Musagetes committed to a path of inquiry and learning that has great significance for the organization today: “Past centuries have shown us the limitations of using language to connect Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, but the arts offer new ways to explore this imaginatively through a shared human spirit rather than through reductive rationalistic thinking....Let’s walk together in the woods. Let’s find a common place for healing and reconciliation to begin. And then let’s invite others to that place.”

By 2016, the challenges and possibilities of finding that common place and shaping the invitation to walk together started to become clearer. We had already glimpsed this through projects such as People of Good Will (led by artist collective Postcommodity with the Guelph Black Heritage Society) and Disruptive Imaginings (a gathering of futurists, artists, and sustainability experts). However, to deepen our own understanding of positions of struggle in the face of modernity’s fault lines, and to shape an open invitation to join us, we launched a new program called ArtsEverywhere, which is both an online publication and a set of short-term projects that explore queerness, feminisms, Indigenous thought, Blackness, environmental/land-based learning, alternative education, economic dignity, and race relations. Our retreat report the following year stated, “Musagetes recognizes 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.”

2017 was also the year that we made our first—somewhat faltering—attempts to shift Musagetes’ own culture to reflect these aspirational statements of solidarity, new relationships, and living with uncertainty. But by 2018 we realized that the fundamental question we needed to ask ourselves was this: “Musagetes describes itself as a learning organization, but what processes of *unlearning* are necessary to decolonize our organizations and ourselves?” The report that year brought back to the foreground two principles that had guided us in the first few years of our program implementation in Rijeka, Lecce, Guelph, and Sudbury: that the embodiment of artistic possibility and the

presencing of ourselves in these experiments was central to our individual and organizational processes of learning, which we now realize needed to include processes of unlearning.

The 2018 retreat report includes one sentence in particular that set the stage for a radical new way for us to sit with the guiding principles of our Manifesto: "It is important that we discuss Indigenous ways of knowing and being in ways that acknowledge the limitations of representation (our language and identity) and make use of forms and modes such as rhythm and embodiment that gesture toward the imagination and the life of the spirit." Within a few weeks of that retreat, Musagetes began a new project, led by Elwood Jimmy and Vanessa Andreotti, that explores possibilities for bridging ways of knowing and being (later this shifted from "bridging" to "braiding"), with these two questions at the centre:

What are the *conditions of possibility* (bridging sensibilities and "containers") for ethical and rigorous engagement across communities in historical dissonance that can help us move *together* towards yet-unimaginable *wiser* futures as we face unprecedented global challenges? What are the protocols for ethical and respectful engagement with Indigenous senses and sensibilities (being, knowing, relationships, trauma, place, space and time) that can help us to work *together* in holding space for this (bridging) work?

Elwood and Vanessa developed frameworks for learning (cartographies) and a system of metaphors that move this away from an Indigenous / non-indigenous binary toward a consideration of "brick-like" and "thread-like" sensibilities:

Bricks stand for a set of ways of being that emphasize individuality, fixed form and linear time, where the world is experienced through concepts that describe the form of things and orders them in systematic hierarchical structures. **Threads** stand for a set of ways of being that emphasize interwovenness, shape-shifting flexibility and layered time, where the world is experienced through sensorial events involving movement, rhythm, sound and metaphor, and where every "thing" is a living entity.

By the end of 2018, this articulation was summarized by Elwood and Vanessa in *Towards Braiding*, a living document that sets the stage for Musagetes' commitment to becoming a "braiding organization." This document added two further questions that frame a new artistic program, designed and led by Elwood, in 2019:

What kind of socially engaged and community anchored Indigenous-led arts-based program can support this process in the long term?
What are the expectations in terms of responsibilities of the organization to the place/land and her traditional ancestral custodians from the perspective of the local Indigenous communities?

A fifth question they posed is one that requires each of us to sit with these questions, embody our intentions, and be present in generative ways through both the joys and difficulties:

How do we learn together to enliven these guidelines with (self-)compassion, generosity, humility, flexibility and rigour, and without turning our back to (or burning out with) the complexities, paradoxes, difficulties and pain of this process of healing?

The braiding research that Elwood and Vanessa conducted in 2018 and its continuation through the artistic program Elwood has designed and will launch this year provided the context for a large portion of Musagetes' retreat on January 7-9, 2019. What follows in this report attempts to capture the intentions and insights of those conversations. The document concludes with a look at what ArtsEverywhere is focused on now and what its intentions are for this year.

Braiding Ways of Being and Knowing

For descriptions of the braiding work, including definitions of transcendence, immanence, the threads/bricks analogy, and various methodologies, please read [Towards Braiding](#), which was a foundational document for the retreat conversation.

Over the course of the braiding research in 2018, Vanessa and Elwood struggled to find places where different ways of being and knowing can coexist, where we can develop a foundation for gestures toward the unknown—including toward unknown practices. Various communities work toward more generative ways of being, but these are either lacking sustainability or substance, or they are insular. This became the impetus for a “thread-based” artistic program that asks, how do we cultivate, nurture, and hold space for generative practices? What tangible programming could support artists and artistic practices that move toward more generative aspects of relationship-building? As dancer and philosopher Zab Maboungou talks about in her practice, a different production of knowledge is possible with the body—how do we enliven ways of being and knowing with the body?

Developing the sensibilities—the radar—for making necessary personal and organizational changes is a precondition for braiding; we can't just declare ourselves to be braiding ways of being without recognizing, as Sharon Stein (a collaborator on the braiding research) pointed out, that there is a lot of work to be done on the side of “bricks”. Vanessa defines this as exiled capacities—capacities that are exiled in (colonial) culture, which are not necessarily exiled in Indigenous communities. We need preparatory work on the “brick” side in order for the braiding to happen; this is what Elwood and Vanessa mean when they say that we aren't even at zero yet. *Intellectually*

people may have the desire to braid, but *affectively* they might still be invested in one form of knowledge and way of being.

Both Indigenous and settler groups have power, and both need to be moved. There is always potential for violence and harm (sometimes unintended), but the way people are invited into the work gently and openly offers some possibility to avoid ungenerative confrontations. By slowly introducing them into a space toward feeling safe, where everyone has each other's backs—a space for making mistakes without being served a life-sentence—braiding can become mutually transformative.

Frances Westley, a long-time advisor to Musagetes, asked about the possibility of scaling up braiding methodologies by training facilitators to apply it in various organizational settings. As Musagetes continues this work and gestures further toward braiding, it will be important to think about what makes a good “braider” or facilitator and how these skills and sensibilities can be transferrable. Elwood explained that this is one of the intentions for a series of “thread” residencies—place-based artist residencies in which we are not asking the artists to leave their home communities, but we are inviting them to elaborate on practices that gesture towards braiding and relationship-building. We hope their practices will inform our braiding work, and that we can support them in facilitating a broader “thread-like” presence for artists in the Canadian art system. Every braider will have their own way of doing it—the residencies offer support to the artists to explore this through their artistic practice. As Frances said, there is a need for this, and the minute it picks up, the demand for facilitators with the necessary training and sensibilities to do this will rise sharply. (Vanessa and Elwood are already experiencing this.) The program Elwood designed for 2019 addresses this by hosting several gatherings throughout the year, including the ArtsEverywhere Festival, at which braiding approaches and methodologies are discussed and explored through the body.

Musagetes enters this work with eyes wide open. What is the impetus for it? What external conditions are opening for this work? We may not be able to articulate it clearly yet—as Rene Susa pointed out, we may not be able to say yet, “this is how it should be done”, but if it comes alive we may encounter possibilities for new stories and a different way forward in the face of a growing crisis of culture and climate.

A Crisis of Culture and Climate

In his introduction to the braiding work, Elwood spoke about the importance of building the strength and developing the stamina to spend time with those whose views of the world devalue people and the nonhuman, placing material accumulation

above intrinsic worth. As he put it, “the vessel is very broken.” But how do we build up stamina and forge generative relationships over time? Bits of the answer emerged in an afternoon conversation at the retreat.

Elder Peter Schuler of the Mississaugas of the Credit told a story of the Windago, and through that storytelling, he embodied an Indigenous teaching that “stories are the original instructions.” All humans had them, but through colonization many stories have been wiped out, subverted, misappropriated, or dismissed as myths. We need to seek out these original instructions, sit with them to learn their teachings; often the teachings are simple (but not simplistic). For example, much of what is considered progress today can also be seen as a breakdown of society; we used to need community to survive, but now so much “progress” is based on individualistic notions of material wealth-accumulation.

Māori scholar Carl Mika elaborated further on the importance of original instructions (or first principles) to diminish Western culture’s pervasive insistence on certainty. Much of the debate addressing the crisis of culture and climate in the world focuses on certainty—of realities, of solutions, of possibilities, of alternatives, of futures, of linearity. We cling to certainty. However, the Māori have an idea of nothingness, of another universe that informs a tentativeness in how they talk about the world. If we can let go of certainty as a kind of comfort, then we open ourselves to learning from the original instructions. This learning is part of the work we need to do as individuals and as an organization seeking to braid together ways of knowing and being; it is part of the sensibilities we strive to inhabit.

Mohawk scholar Dan Longboat reminded us of late-19th century Métis leader Louis Riel’s teaching that people would sleep for 100 years and that it will be the artists who wake them up. The late John Mohawk (Haudenosaunee) said that the latest generations of Indigenous peoples have the capacity and ability to ask the critical questions; the ancestors were “just” trying to survive colonization, keeping the house warm, passing on the ceremonies—the fundamental practices that bolster all elements of creation. Now they can ask, what do the ceremonies, songs, dances, and words mean? Dan also referenced Jo-Ann Archibald, a Sto:lo scholar who says she never had an original thought: everything is in the ancestors’ teachings, which embody the immensity of Indigenous cultural systems. Such knowledge has the capacity “to call the thunders out of the sky”—a capacity so immense that suggests humanity can confront climate change too. The artists are the ones that will wake us up.

But when we are woken up after being asleep for decades and realize that our attachments to some relationships need to be released, how do we say goodbye? When

our way of being is facing an imminent crash (climate change) or a slow death (the collapse of modernity), how do we soften the crash or hospice the end? How do we work collaboratively to shape an invitation to new relationships? This is the work of “getting to zero” and beginning to braid. Dan McCarthy, a social complexity scientist, spoke of our need to deal with our shadows. If we don’t deal with our shadow sides as individuals, communities, and institutions, they will come back to bite us. There are aspects of modernity to which we cling, but much of it is killing all of creation. As we see with the rise of populism globally, the easy way out is to polarize and blame—binaries (us/ them) aren’t useful, but they pose as easy fixes.

In context of this conversation, we invited Dougald Hine, a social entrepreneur, to join us via teleconference for a closer look at what this all means in the face of dire and imminent climate change. How do we avoid the far side of despair with so much nihilism in our discourse? Echoing what Elwood spoke of, the space for these conversations needs to be held lightly where relationships can be formed and nurtured, where people have a place to not be alone.

Knowledge production in the conventional sense (rational thinking) is a half-finished state. It produces knowledge that can be held at arm’s length until it becomes unethical or untenable to do so; this sort of knowing can be the experience of loss or grieving. Climate change reactions are an example of this; grief for the planet has begun to take root in our consciousness, but where was this knowledge when the climate alarms first starting ringing?

Knowledge in another sense is about what happens when you immerse in it, when you bring it home in yourself. Illustrating this principle historically, Dougald traced religion from the 17th century when it began to place less emphasis on the mystical and unknowable, toward a greater pursuit of the rational (i.e. if one can explain gravity, then one might also be able to explain an invisible god). The remnants of the mystical were codified in written texts and hierarchies of power to imbue them with a rational sense of utility—a first glimpse of modernity. This shift in religion coincided with the rise of the arts as a refuge of the sacred, for explorations of the unknown. The arts became the place to represent things that didn’t fit within the authoritative structures of modern society. The artists became shamanic; the priests became patrons.

In religious structures, the priest and the shaman are not supernatural beings; they are humans that inhabit the edges of the human world. The mess the world is in is cultural right down to its roots. It is a consequence of stories we’ve been telling ourselves, stories that have been told and retold, that have shaped the world we were born into. If this mess is cultural down to its roots, the role of storytellers and culture-makers can be

deeper and more fundamental than what it is usually allotted. Joy Roberts, chair of Musagetes, noted that the imagination for settlers is a *quality* of mind, whereas for Indigenous peoples it is often an *ecology* of mind—a topic that Dan Longboat has written about.

Dan illustrated this with an example: when we talk about environmental refugees, are we building walls and barriers, or are we reaching out with an invitation? John Mohawk talked about pragmatism, which comes out of the minds of Indigenous peoples: “adaptation and resilience are within our ways of life.” Oren Lyons (Onondaga), at the forefront of international Indigenous discussions since the ‘70s, along with John Mohawk and Jose Barreiro, contributed to an anthology, edited by Akwesasne Notes, titled *Basic Call to Consciousness* (1977, 2005) which insisted that environmental knowledge had to be respected. The basis of education needs to shift from problem-based to integrative thinking, teaching the art of collaboration and cooperation. We need to be in survival or adaptation mode now. Al Gore, for example, in his second book/film, focuses on the need for spiritual change rather than political, social or economic change. We need to revitalize human spirituality in our schools to erase the notion that spirituality is silly.

Recentring spirituality is an example of what Dan McCarthy referred to (citing Keats) as negative capabilities—of being in uncertainty, doubt, or mystery without reaching for fact or reason. It speaks to hope on the other side of despair. Positive capabilities are skills, competencies, and technologies—all of which have proven less useful in confronting the crisis of culture and climate. As mentioned earlier, sitting with uncertainty is one of the uncomfortable but necessary practices at the core of gesturing toward braiding ways of being and knowing, of developing the sensibilities to undergo the personal and institutional changes on the other side of despair.

One place where we can find hope is in the upcoming generations. Louise MacCallum, one of Musagetes’ founders, spoke about how much she learns from hers and Michael’s 17-year-old son, Alexander. His generation knows a lot about the world—more than their parents’ generation—because they are exposed to so much. Louise acknowledged that while it bothers her that they dismiss a lot of the values she holds, she finds hope in that they are really smart—and maybe they need to reject what came before in order to turn things around.

Tim Brodhead, a long-time advisor to Musagetes, pointed out that there are not many examples in human history of our species’ ability to prioritize the long term over the short term. We start from the assumption that humanity is at the centre of the universe. People say we have to save the planet, but the earth will save itself. Over the course of

his career, Tim has seen many of the places he worked around the world now reduced to wastelands through civil conflict, ecological devastation, or industrial disaster. It has shown him that not every action should be assessed with a success/failure dichotomy; we do things because we believe they are the right things to do. A failure is not about achieving a certain outcome—most of our lives don't add up to determined outcomes. Rather, it's about continuing to live a good life that is moral, courageous, and realistic. Perhaps we should not worry about the planet or the survival of our species in the next 10-20 years; instead we should worry about what it is that we are doing to each other. We need just look at what is happening with global migration right now and magnify that by massive numbers of people further displaced by political upheaval, inhospitable climates, and so on. Our responsibility is to do what we *need* to do *now*.

Michael Barnstijn, one of Musagetes' founders, offered words that might stand here as a conclusion to this summary of our retreat conversations: "Sparking creativity in the arts is a good thing. Creativity is listening to the world, hearing the stories, curing our deafness. Can we open peoples' ears to what is already being said? I have no idea how to do that, but I have a willingness to listen."

ArtsEverywhere

A willingness to listen and a desire to listen together—for Musagetes this is connected to the question: listen to what? In 2016 when we created ArtsEverywhere as a forum for explorations and experiments addressing the fault lines of modernity, we asked ourselves, who are the people whose stories, projects, and ideas we wish to amplify, and who would we like to have amplify ours? ArtsEverywhere is based on relationships with people at the hearts of their communities, people who are experimenting, those at the centres of movements, and people with knowledge of many forms — these are the people we want to amplify, and who we want to have amplify ArtsEverywhere.

A central feature of ArtsEverywhere, *Curse of Geography*, is an ongoing series of narrative- and evidence-based artistic journalism created by teams of local producers, artists, visiting journalists, and local writers. The reports consider cultural contexts and artistic experimentation in relation to issues, urgencies, and ideas that are foregrounded in the communities from which the reports are produced, often in multiple segments released sequentially as trust is established and relationships are built. As Sidd Joag, artist, journalist, and Managing Editor of ArtsEverywhere explains, the *Curse of Geography* initiative is about tenacity and perseverance in the face of much adversity that often has to do with the geography of a place; the reports reveal that the impact of struggles are often diminished as a result of strong bonds within a community.

The *Curse of Geography* report from the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau weaves together a story of post-earthquake redevelopment initiatives tangled up in the politics of Chinese overseers, the life and rituals of the local monks, and a nomadic Indonesian performance artist, Arahmaiani, whose efforts toward positive social change and environmental regeneration alongside the monks have much to teach us about confronting entrenched social values. The report, written by Sidd, moves between these three threads, beginning with a description of arriving in Labuxiang, the assembling of devotees to meet a national spiritual leader, vignettes of daily life, Chinese government policies, Arahmaiani's performance in the valley, and projects to plant trees and reduce plastic waste.

Concurrent to the development of these reports and other content on ArtsEverywhere, Musagetes provides modest financial and conceptual support to local organizations and communities. The seed money is intended to do at least two things: to enable our collaborators to have time and space to contribute to ArtsEverywhere and to gesture toward the importance of reciprocity in journalism. This reciprocity is also embedded in our invitation to those in one community to help shape a report in another community as our efforts to entangle stories and exchange learning are core objectives of ArtsEverywhere. Over time we intend to do the difficult work necessary to attempt to engage the communities involved with ArtsEverywhere with the same sensibilities. The annual ArtsEverywhere Festival in Guelph is a place to nurture relationships between us and the people who contributed to the online forum and to deepen our connections in Guelph as our home community.

ArtsEverywhere amplifies the voices, ideas, and projects of emerging and established thinkers and practitioners in forms ranging from op-eds, concise essays, debate-style roundtables, and other writing on topics related to the arts, social justice, and society—but in a style that is accessible to a broad readership above all. Emerging writer and scholar Aylan Couchie's first essay for ArtsEverywhere is about Indigenous knowledge as being inseparable from the land, the nourishment of the body as concurrent with the nourishment of culture, and the purity of water as a central part of spiritual life. A recent roundtable by the National Coalition on Censorship brought together well-known artists, curators, and historians to debate the controversies around Sam Durant's sculpture, *Scaffold*, and Dana Schutz's painting, *Open Casket*—both artworks by white artists addressing painful histories in ways that sparked debate over who has the right to say what.

And so we continue on an uncertain journey...

The retreat report in 2017 was titled “Walking Together on a Foggy Road.” This prescient line was spoken by Vanessa Andreotti when she joined our team for the first time that January. Our discontent with modernity and a desire for new Indigenous/ non-Indigenous relationships was our common ground. This title acknowledged the fog through which we walk and the uncertainty with which we must be content, as the Manifesto declared: “Artistic creativity involves a journey, which artists are impelled to undertake, not knowing where it will lead or if and how they will arrive.” Let *this* be our North Star for a while.