Lines, Circles, & Webs: Musagetes' Evolving Approach to Philanthropy

In 2020 Musagetes prepares for a significant shift in its programmatic priority and ways of working, a further deepening of our unique approach to philanthropy. With the conclusion of our city-based programs in Rijeka and Lecce—the centrepieces, with Guelph, of our work for a decade—we are pausing to ask, "what have we learned, how did it lead us to this transitional moment, and how might it continue to inform what we and our partners do?"

With the intention of capturing succinctly the broad themes and supporting examples, this document sets out some key points for discussion. The points are organized according to three metaphors that correspond more or less to the characteristics of the observation.

The first metaphor is that of a line—a primitive function that delineates, conducts, connects, directs, borders, and leads. Lines are ubiquitous in our lives, communities, societies. Lines are physical, metaphorical, legal, social, artistic—they are designed to sustain the status quo, connect ideas, establish boundaries, demarcate desire. Musagetes' city-based projects explored lines in multiple ways—through arts-based and interdisciplinary research, collective observation as research, artistic creation, and activation of public space through site-specific interventions.

The second metaphor is that of a circle—a basic shape that contains multiple worlds, sacred and profane. It carries strengths of both the spiritual perfection of the circle and its metaphorical use in mathematical imagination. Circles expand, contract, contain, exclude, revolve, and anchor. The circle is the shape of gatherings, the encompassing of a place, a space for collective learning, the connection of all things, and a gesture toward ways of knowing and being beyond definition. The circle is the awakening consciousness and deepening awareness of social justice in its complexities and contradictions. As the city-based programs matured and we began experimenting in other projects (circles of learning, improvisation), we also expanded our circles of engagement to begin learning from many ways of being, knowing, and relating (such as Indigenous or Black or queer or improvised).

The third metaphor is that of a web—many lines interconnected and intersecting, conducting from point to multiple points such as at a gathering, in a community, or in an organized network. Musagetes' reflex is to convene—right from its inception at the gathering in Quebec City. We build networks and connect existing ones—from the newly formed Free Home University network and that of Bencic Youth Council to the interwoven networks of ArtsEverywhere, online and at the annual festival.

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One of the core principles of the Manifesto that resonated especially strongly in those early days of experimenting was the following: "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." It was accompanied by a declaration on how Musagetes would be required to act: "Musagetes will need to be eclectic, exploratory, catalytic, adroit, brave and humble. It may very well make mistakes, take roads that lead nowhere, and expose itself to being mocked. But if it does not take such risks, it will fail. This will involve inquiry, documentation, investigation, intellectual positioning; for example, clarifying and communicating the power, possibilities and results of artistic creativity."

One of the first expressions of artistic creativity as a journey was the Sudbury project in 2013-14 titled *Between a Rock and a Hard Place* by Dutch artist collective Bik Van der Pol. From an initial experimental performance of washing pollution-blackened rocks with large brushes, the artists and Musagetes went on a creative journey that ended with a one-day spectacle of 11 concerts on 11 rocks in 11 different locations in and around the city. It was a literal journey with the audience moving from site to site until the sun had set and the spirit of the place was affected by this humble and exuberant way to study a place, to sense its presence, to inquire into its being. But it was also researched for its power to shift peoples' thinking about the place they inhabited—to create a resonant space for thinking (Zwicky), to reeducate our eyes. **Learning**: The performative dimension of participatory art is a regular feature of interdisciplinary artistic projects that are created within Musagetes' programs.

A line that connects dots even while it traces a colonial political boundary, was the subject of an artist residency, culminating in a film and installation, by Rebecca Belmore. Titled "somewhere between a town a reserve and a mine is a line", the film features the artist walking that line literally, wearing a yellow safety vest. This was one of Musagetes' first experiences working with an Indigenous artist; it showed us the power and beauty of Rebecca's artistic practice and way of seeing the world, but it was not rich in learning how better to engage with Indigenous artists and communities. **Learning**: The line in this work showed us that the barrier between a town (modernity), a reserve (Indigeneity), and a mine (industry) is very real; it became a new line of inquiry for the foundation from that point on.

A line as a demarcation, setting a boundary, was the trademark of an early project in Guelph, called *One Square Mile*, which evolved into a larger participatory action research initiative called the *Guelph-Wellington Rural-Urban Program*. Designed to better understand the social, economic and cultural transitions in neighbourhoods and communities of Guelph, the project demarcated one square mile around downtown Guelph, extending into 5 other neighbourhoods as well. Through community workshops the project identified several themes to be explored within that

clearly demarcated space: densification of the downtown core, affordable housing, migrant seasonal workers, cooperativism, and food politics. We quickly learned that the boundary we defined was arbitrary and unproductively limited our research scope.This didn't require just a slight altering of the one square mile, but a rejection of it. **Learning**: Musagetes' work in Sudbury, Guelph, and Lecce simultaneously led us to recognize that to work in a place-based way in small urban centres, required us to include the surrounding rural region too—the interdependency is significant to the life and culture of the cities, and consequent to the way we, our artists, and collaborators sustain a presence there. At a meta level, we also recognized the value of working translocally—by experimenting in multiple locales simultaneously we expanded our scope of learning.

A line is not just a mathematical construct; it is an artistic mark made with intention. Musagetes' first pedagogical experiment was the SenseLabs, based on Sudbury's Between a Rock and a Hard Place" but first conducted in Lethbridge, Alberta. The SenseLabs took a group of participants on a collective creative journey over several weeks. As a concluding project, the group conceived of a bold performative mark to make across the city: elaborate tea ceremonies set up on a sprawling 20 metres of red fabric in highway medians, traffic circles, city parks, parking lots, undeveloped and abandoned lots, under power lines, and on landfills. **Learning**: The deliberate creation of an artistic mark is a way to focus attention, which in our contemporary world is a significant asset. Sustained attention opens up our artistic or imaginative thinking to transcend barriers (in society, in our mind, physically, emotionally) and opens us to new ways of relating and seeing the world.

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One of the core principles of Musagetes' Manifesto that has an affinity to the circle as a metaphor for some of our work is the following: "Artistic creativity recognizes that something beyond the rational exists; it offers glimpses of the (non-supernatural) sacred. It gives spirit a connection outside itself; while it originates in the self, it aims to create work that enters the common space of humanity." The embodiment of the circle is observed in a description of how Musagetes will act: "To this end, Musagetes' image of itself is that of a gathering place such as a café — a place where people come in, connect and interact and then move on, taking their knowledge and experience elsewhere, while other people arrive to begin other conversations — in a potentially continuous cycle of new experiences with new people. To that end, Musagetes' work will include: Fellowship/solidarity — creating communities of concern; giving a sense of solidarity to people doing similar work around the world in bringing the values of artistic creativity into human and societal development."

The circle is a literal or metaphorical shape of gatherings. Musagetes' earliest action was to convene artists, thinkers, and other people with ideas and approaches that might shed light on possibilities for implementing the foundation's new declaration in 2007. Convening quickly became a key mode of engagement in places to which we were invited; bringing people together at the Rijeka Café set the tone for our decade of engagement with the artistic community there and helped to establish a deeper understanding among the local communities of what we hoped to do there, and for us to be more familiar with the cultural landscape of that place. **Learning**: Being present face-to-face is an essential ingredient in strong relationships, which are foundational to the kind of work we do. Sustaining communities of engagement requires a feedback loop that enables continuous emergent design.

A circle encompasses a place. While Rijeka's waterfront is defined by a line—the 2-kilometre water break pier— it is also a place encircled by strong geographic elements. The city is nestled in a small area of land along the edge of the sea, hugged from behind by small mountains that give the city a dramatic upward slope. At a micro-scale, we observed this condition of being encompassed in a generative way through the creation of Althea Thauberger's film, *Preuzmimo Bencic [Take Back Bencic].* Over seventy children aged 6-12 years improvised their performance over months in an abandoned factory; the closeness they felt to that space and the conditions created for them as artists set the stage for them to create the Bencic Youth Council, which has become a second home for many of the children who are part of it—along with their city, home, school, friends, and neighbourhood, it's another circle in their lives at a crucial formative stage. **Learning**: The stage on which we conduct our experiments is the same stage on which our

collaborators and partners live their lives; the ethical imperative is important for us to watch keenly, but the stakes are much higher for the communities we engage. This is the first circle of responsibility that encompasses us.

The circle is a place where learning and sharing take place. It is the sacred form of the natural cycles of life, and for many Indigenous peoples it is the shape of their governance, ceremonies, and relationships. When Musagetes invited Postcommodity, an artist collective from the American Southwest, to do a multi-phase project in Guelph, it was the first significant initiative to expose us to the complexities of working across ways of knowing and being. The artists collaborated with the Guelph Black Heritage Society to develop a project titled *People of Good Will*, which explored the history of Black migration via the Underground Railroad to Guelph with the assistance and hospitality of Indigenous people along the way. **Learning**: To work with Indigenous artists and their communities, we must leave space for their self-determination outside of the constructs of the Western art system, outside of the norms of our colonial institution, even while finding generative ways to work relationally. This was our first glimpse of the challenges that have been and will be faced as we move towards braiding. We chose to sit with the difficulties, and the artists chose to stick with us, resulting in a profound coming together of diverse communities in Guelph.

The circle is a space for collective learning. Free Home University (FHU), as a long-term, decentred educational experiment, combines intersecting circles of people with diverse bodies of knowledge and asks them to integrate lines of inquiry—from migration and agriculture, to queerness, collectivity, and revolution. The often messy, ever-shifting, and **Learning**: The boundaries of the system under consideration (an imaginary line, as Dan McCarthy describes it) need to be identified before the edge can then be nudged, intervened in, contested, or otherwise modified. The space between where the line was and now is, is fecund experimental space for Musagetes' philanthropic intentions.

The circle is how we often sat at sessions of Free Home University (FHU). As a pedagogical experiment lacking a clear structure, defined themes, or common languages, FHU sessions often raised difficult questions and confrontations on issues of gender, race, class, power, and representation. Musagetes' own position as the philanthropic entity underwriting FHU, even while being present in many of the sessions as co-learners, made some participants uncomfortable. **Learning**: The ungenerative responses and behaviours that we observed and/or manifested ourselves—a refusal to listen, to sit in discomfort, and to be open to others—showed us the importance of developing what Vanessa and Elwood call practices of disidentification and affective engagement.

The circle contains multiple ways of being and knowing. Queer City began as an inquiry into urban environments through performance by queer People of Colour, particularly in the periphery of São Paulo where Black folks live. It evolved into a broader inquiry into the economic injustices of the contemporary city and the strategies employed by many to resist and transform it (e.g. through community organizing and housing occupations). However, the soul of the work continued to be artistic performativity and queer sensibilities that push at the edge of the status quo or kick it to the curb with 8-inch satin heels. **Learning**: The arts remain constant as the mode by which our inquiries are made (the questions we ask) and the

methodologies applied (the actions we take), even as—or especially as—our furtive steps become more confident strides toward a fuller engagement with multiple ways of being, knowing, and relating.

The circle is a form that lends itself to improvisation. We can define improvisation as co-creative artistic activities between people, between people and non-human beings, or between people and their environment, in ways that are responsive, spontaneous, ephemeral, and personal. Musagetes' partnership with the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation has shown us on how improvisation can break down the distinctions between life and art, as a practice that is connected to the political and social life of communities. Learning: Improvisation is a characteristic of Musagetes' program design, centring emergent, responsive, and often ephemeral ways of working.

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As Musagetes wrote about its intention to experiment, to take risks, and to convene, it also explicitly mentioned its desire that the lines of inquiry and circles of engagement would be amplified into a web or movement of transformative action: "Its major strategy will be connecting people, sectors and activities to ignite or provoke change—involving persuasion, movement, engagement. While ensuring Musagetes' independence and clarity of purpose, we will also work with other partners to widen and strengthen the circle of those dedicated to change through the transformative power of artistic creativity."

One circle becomes several circles, and a network is born. Free Home University (FHU) uses a provocation, "How Do We Want To Live", to invite people from many circles to experience life in common within the specific context of the Puglia region. From that immersion in collective learning, they return to their communities and at least four have started their own schools for alternative education. In addition, FHU is a very active part of the Ecoversities network, which shares practices and methodologies, and encourages arts-based alternative education worldwide. **Learning**: Some of our programs intend to influence a new generation of leaders who will champion the transformative power of the arts. We have observed this take unexpected forms that, in turn, have influenced Musagetes' thinking and intentions.

Networks can form through the written word. Publishing has been a thread through Musagetes' work from the earliest insistence on documenting the foundation's journey (e.g. retreat summaries, essays) to the opening of Publication Studio Guelph, the creation of the Eastern Comma Writer-in-Residence with rare Charitable Research Reserve, and various publications from the city-based programs (e.g. GSG biannual magazine - *From the Citizens to Their City)*. Recently FHU has been invited by Archive Books in Berlin to publish a series of books on radical pedagogy and alternative education. FHU's new website (www.fhu.art) is also gearing up to be an online space to keep people connected to FHU after the gatherings/sessions. Most recently, the success of the Towards Braiding book has shown us the important role of publishing in Musagetes' work. **Learning**: Despite the social media world we live in where information comes in tiny morsels to be quickly gobbled up, there is still an important role for publishing, publications, and the written word in creating "publics", as we phrased it several years ago.

ArtsEverywhere is an obvious web/network. It tells stories of transformation through the arts, reveals efforts toward social justice globally, and offers concepts and methodologies that may be of use to others doing similar work. But ArtsEverywhere is also a place to connect people experimenting with the creation of networks or hubs. For example, we are sparking a deepening interest in what we are calling "artistic journalism", and approach to journalism and storytelling that combines the journalists' insistence on veracity, relevance, and objectivity with the artists' imaginative expansiveness, creativity, and technical skills (e.g. illustration). All of this is based

on their shared curiosity and ethical imperative to do no harm. The ArtsEverywhere Festival is a face-to-face embodiment of ArtsEverywhere for our home community network to engage more fully in Musagetes' global work; it also becomes a hub for our speakers and guests to interact outside of the online space. **Learning**: Networks are hard to build and even harder to sustain or grow, but documenting what we try and what breaks through enables us to design with more clarity and greater success. For example, the Fellowship for Artistic Journalism is meant to be a way to mentor new writers, but we realized that the invitation for proposals attracted a new readership. It also provided us with a treasure of story ideas and potential future writers globally. We could also take the temperature among writers for whether or not the artistic journalism approach resonated with them.

Towards Braiding, which will be discussed more fully on Day 2 of the Board Retreat, is Musagetes' most recent program—and a large part of the future of our work. The learning from the programs described in this summary will continue to inform how we enter this work and widen the tent to invite others in.