musagetes

A Degree of Distinctness: exploring the power and possibilities of artistic creativity

Musagetes' Retreat Summary, July 23-25, 2024

When Musagetes' team gathers each year to reflect on our work, we often refer back to the founding document (our "manifesto") that launched the foundation in 2007. Over the past few years we have evaluated how our programs are guided by principles such as emergent and responsive program development, attentiveness to relationships, generative ways of being, and openness to as-yet-unimagined possibilities. This time of deep reflection helps us adjust our thinking and our work.

With the developing, interconnected crises of climate, biodiversity, reactionary politics, and fragmentation of communities (which we refer to as the "polycrisis"), the faultlines of modernity, referred to in the opening observations of our manifesto, continue to be the touchstone of our programs, bringing new urgency to "…the possibility of living with uncertainty, with the possibility of imagining something beyond present conditions." Accordingly, the depth of learning and "unlearning" that informs our work has a lineage in the programs, gatherings, conversations, and experiments in which Musagetes has been immersed for the past few years.

At Musagetes' retreat in July 2024, we grounded our conversations in a clause near the end of the manifesto:

> "Musagetes' work will include *definition*—involving inquiry, documentation, investigation, intellectual positioning; for example, clarifying and communicating the power, possibilities and results of artistic creativity."

This opened a space for us to reflect on the organization's ethos, deepening conversations about being in relation—with others, with the land and waters, and with the inquiries that shape artistic practices. The retreat used a set of hypotheses to outline what makes Musagetes' work distinct—what defines it. Participants recognized that our

approach to hypotheses is metaphorical, not hewing to the scientific use of the term. The hypotheses with which our recent work has been engaged can be summarized briefly as follows:

- If we recognize that artistic creativity and inquiry are closely entangled with the urgencies and complexities of our communities and societies, then we can better understand the transformative potential of the arts through the issues with which it engages.
- If we more fully explore non-Western conceptions of creativity and the imagination, then we might open new possibilities for collective action toward wiser futures.
- If we hope to navigate the complexities and volatility of the polycrisis, then we need forms of education—in part, through the arts—that more deeply explore the nature of unsustainable and extractive relationships, systems, and ways of being.
- If artistic practice, even in intangible or invisible forms and phases, can be a generative tool for inquiry, then our relationship to the environment, the land, and the climate/biodiversity crisis should be in the foreground of our work.
- If participation in artistic creativity, research, and education can spark action toward positive transformation, then making the inquiries, stories, and conversations available to wider audiences can amplify the message that artistic creativity seeks to make.

These hypotheses and the discussion that ensued, focussed on the intention described in the manifesto for the organization to be experimental, and exemplified Musagetes' commitment to creating spaces where relationships and questions are nurtured, paradoxically also holding space for the undefined and ephemeral.

Letting go of colonial expectations

Musagetes' work strives to embody a commitment to letting go of colonial expectations, a theme that resonated deeply during the retreat. This involves unsettling hierarchical structures and extractive practices rooted in systems of control, productivity, and certainty. Instead, the organization fosters an openness to different ways of being, a

principle that is foundational to our various artistic inquiries and experiments. Participants reflected on the importance of holding space generatively for difficulty and difference—to stay with the discussions and (un)learnings without relationships breaking down—recognizing these as opportunities for transformation rather than obstacles to be overcome.

Curating with discernment, care, and attentiveness to relationships—whether with people, place, or the inquiries themselves—remains central to this ethos, echoing Elwood Jimmy's approach in the Indigenous Otherwise program. The thread residencies are designed to be a flexible and responsive incubator that supports the ongoing development of wiser and more generative practices that artists do not always have the time or resources to cultivate within an extractive and product/market-driven colonial art system. Elwood's curation nurtures ways of being that emphasize the interwovenness and shape-shifting flexibility that threads evoke. It also encourages the notion of layered time in which the world is experienced through sensorial events involving movement, rhythm, sound and metaphor, and where every "thing" is a living entity. The invitation to the artists is not to produce more objects for consumption by the art system, but to be in a generative process grounded in relationships with each other and to the land.

The discussions at the retreat showed how this approach to curation has influenced all of Musagetes' programs, including the Question Mark Butterfly Artist Residencies, the Eastern Comma Writer-in Residence, and the Long Dash Festival, which are all part of Musagetes' partnership with ***rare*** Charitable Research Reserve. In these programs, as well as the ArtsEverywhere Festival, artists are less engaged in *critique* of the polycrisis, and more attuned to exiled capacities—senses that have atrophied because of our overemphasis on those few that are accepted and rewarded in colonial structures. These capacities can move us to show up differently to responsibility and accountability in navigating colonial harms and entanglements. Our work with the Gesturing Towards Decolonial Futures (GTDF) collective has been influential in this work.

The protected niche spaces of education and artistic inquiry

The participants discussed the role of education through artistic inquiry, which is at the heart of Musagetes' mandate. Although we have an uneasy relationship with the baggage that comes with education shaped by modernity's excesses, Musagetes approaches it not as skill-building or mastery, which often reproduces systemic harms, but as a process of developing discernment and accountability through artistic inquiry. This understanding of education, intertwined with artistic practice, challenges colonial logic by prioritizing learning as a relational and contextual process rather than a pursuit of individual expertise or control. During the retreat, this perspective was woven into conversations about the role of inquiry in resisting extractive practices and fostering deeper relationships with place and community.

A key aspect of Musagetes' work is the cultivation of intentional environments and networks designed to nurture delicate processes of artistic inquiry, which often involve encounters with the unknown and the unsayable. We think of these as "protected niche spaces."[1] Within these spaces, artistic inquiry is not simply about producing outcomes but about exploring what emerges when we experiment with the boundaries of what can be perceived, felt, and expressed. In Kira Cooper's and Dan McCarthy's research, they observe the capacity for protected niche spaces to foster inner transformations by creating sanctuaries for contemplation and connection amidst the complexities of the polycrisis.

These spaces also honour the relationships between the ephemeral and the tangible aspects of artistic and community-based practices. The ephemeral lies in the intangible connections fostered through the work, inviting us to grapple with difficult questions and encounter the limits of our understanding. This is an invitation toward a readiness for organizations and individuals to co-create with the unknown, with each other, and with the specific places and contexts in which our work unfolds. Artists approach their

[1] Cooper, K.J.; McIntyre, D.G.; McCarthy, D. Cultivating Pearls of Wisdom: Creating Protected Niche Spaces for Inner Transformations amidst the Metacrisis. Challenges 2024, 15, 10. https://doi.org/10.3390/challe15010010

practice not as an act of mastery or control but as an opening to what emerges when they are attuned to the many facets of their inquiries, their practice, and their communities.

Lisa Hirmer, an artist who has been part of the Thread Residencies and the Question Mark Butterfly Artist Fellowships, participated in the retreat and offered an illustration of how artistic inquiry is entangled with the intangible. During her time on the lands at ***rare***, she observed that each week is its own micro-season within the four seasons of the year. She shared how the process of paying attention, which is at the heart of her practice, might not have a visible or tangible outcome immediately, but it is a vital part of shifting our relationship to the ecologies we inhabit. Eventually, the months of close observation of the land became the basis for a body of work comprised of cyanotypes of melting ice—a poetic documentation of a fleeting process.

Making the inquiries visible when they're ready

Lisa Hirmers' example of documenting a process also drew our conversations toward the importance of making public, or making visible, the results of the artistic inquiries we're engaged in. This is encompassed by the concept of "definition" referred to in the manifesto. As our programs play an important role in protecting the niche spaces of inquiries and practices that are emergent and ephemeral, we also emphasize the value of inviting others into those spaces through forms of documentation, publication, and gathering. The Publication Studio network, The GOAT PoL, and ArtsEverywhere.ca are distinct avenues for publication that draw work from various sources and reach different audiences. The ArtsEverywhere Festival, the Long Dash Festival, and the Big Ideas in Art & Culture lectures, and the Big Ideas in Improvisation lectures have distinct but complementary mandates to invite our communities to learn from/with the inquiries and contribute to their development. By sustaining the protected niche spaces in our residencies and fellowships, we provide the conditions for these multifaceted relationships to take root, allowing the intangible aspects of inquiry to flourish and inform broader communities of practice.

Assessing our openness to entangled, emergent processes

The poetic questions raised during the retreat—such as Nora Bateson's question, "What is the edge of a deer?"—invite us to dwell in the liminal spaces between the tangible and intangible, the known and the unknowable. These questions challenge our colonial desire for autonomy, definition, clarity, and control, instead calling for an embrace of messy complexity and volatility. They remind us that the ephemeral aspects of creative work—the process and the inquiry—can be more vital than the tangible outputs or products. The edge of the deer is not its coat and not even the forest; it extends to the vast network of inter-dependencies—the relationships—that make life possible within the planet's metabolism. For example, Musagetes' resistance to mechanistic approaches to assessment aligns with its commitment to fostering these relationships. Assessment, in this context, is not an external imposition but a practice embedded in the stories, questions, and relationships arising from the work itself. Inquiry is not a linear path toward a replicable end but an open-ended process of discovery, connection, and being open to what unfolds, even when the destination remains unclear.

The retreat underscored Musagetes' vision of art and learning as practices of ethical engagement and collective transformation. It was an invitation to reimagine what it means to navigate the intersections of creativity, community, and inquiry. Through its work, Musagetes gestures toward futures that resist colonial logics, cultivating practices rooted in trust, relationships, and the radical potential of staying with the trouble. Musagetes nurtures an openness to the possibilities that emerge through artistic inquiry.