musagetes

What is needed now? Musagetes' thoughts on curatorial discernment, community relationships, improvisation, and artistic-ecological inquiries

The complete participant list is included at the end of the document. Participants are referred to only by their first names in this text, unless their job title is relevant to the context.

In June 2026, the Musagetes team, board members, founders, and invited guests gathered for two days of conversation, reflection, and shared inquiry. The retreat was an opportunity to pause and consider the organization's evolving practice: to look back on the relationships, programs, and artistic inquiries that have shaped Musagetes over the past two decades, while asking what they might reveal about the work that lies ahead.

Over two days, participants revisited projects, shared artistic practices, reflected on enduring partnerships, and considered how Musagetes might continue to fulfil its mandate of making the arts more central and meaningful in people's lives and communities. Again and again, the conversations returned to a common practice: discernment. This did not mean discernment as certainty or decision-making alone, but as the patient work of recognizing emerging possibilities, accompanying artists and communities over time, and remaining attentive to the changing conditions in which artistic practice unfolds.

Three inquiries gradually emerged from the conversations. Together, they formed a constellation, much like the North Star we referred to at our retreat a few years ago, each orienting us to a different dimension of Musagetes' practice.

- The first inquiry asks how Musagetes recognizes what is needed now. Curatorial discernment is not simply a matter of choosing which projects to support. It involves cultivating the relationships, attentiveness, and conditions through which meaningful artistic practices can be nurtured.
- The second inquiry asks how artists and organizations like Musagetes should work in relationship with communities. The conversations, during which several artistic projects were shared, expressed the importance of showing up with care and humility.
- The third inquiry asks how we practise in conditions of uncertainty. Through conversations about improvisation, participants reflected on the capacities that artistic practice develops—listening, responsiveness, care, openness to risk, and

the ability to remain in relationship when circumstances cannot be fully predicted or controlled.

- The fourth inquiry asks how Musagetes should continue its long-standing commitment to artistic practices that engage the land, ecology, climate change, and the more-than-human world. These conversations explored not only what artists make in response to climate change and the polycrisis, but also how artistic practice itself changes when it is grounded in relationships with place, biodiversity, and land.

Together, these inquiries share a commitment to artistic practices that are grounded in curiosity and experimentation rather than certainty, relationships rather than transactions, and sustained attention rather than immediate resolution. Throughout the retreat, the conversations repeatedly returned to the importance of creating the conditions in which relationships can be deepened even when they are difficult, and inquiries can transition when they have run their course.

This retreat summary does not attempt to document every presentation or conversation. Instead, it traces how understanding deepened together through dialogue, reflection, and shared experience, offering a synthesis of the inquiries that continue to orient Musagetes' work.

Curatorial Discernment: ***How do we recognize what is needed now?***

The retreat repeatedly returned to the question that has guided the programming by Elwood Jimmy, curator of Indigenous programs, for the past few years, and has informed much of Musagetes' curation: *What is needed now?* We reflected on this not only as a curatorial question, but as an ongoing practice of discernment that asks how the whole organization can recognize the artistic practices, relationships, and inquiries that deserve its care and accompaniment. Discernment requires listening before acting, remaining open to complexity rather than seeking immediate certainty, and recognizing that meaningful artistic work often begins long before it becomes publicly visible. It asks not only what deserves support, but what kinds of relationships, inquiries, and conditions allow transformative work to emerge.

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Throughout the retreat, participants reflected on the importance of creating space for insights to surface rather than rushing toward conclusions. Rather than beginning with predetermined outcomes, Musagetes' practice has been to remain attentive to what is emerging and to ask how it might be accompanied with care.

This understanding found one of its clearest expressions in a conversation about "holding space." Reflecting on the Thread Residency programm, Elwood described one of its primary purposes as "holding the space and creating the conditions where something can emerge—not the solution, but something that get us closer to solutions." Rather than pushing artistic practice too soon toward the production of work, Musagetes emphasizes the importance of cultivating the circumstances in which new relationships, ideas, and possibilities can develop over time.

This emphasis on conditions rather than outcomes echoed an early lesson that has remained with Musagetes since its formative years. Recalling early advice of Simon Brault, Elwood and Doug reflected on the importance of "good casting"—choosing carefully who to work with, not simply because resources are limited, but because "the most powerful thing you can do is choose to work with the right people, some of whom will surprise us." Curatorial discernment, in this sense, is less about predicting success than about recognizing people whose work opens unexpected possibilities.

Participants returned repeatedly to the idea that accompaniment is itself a creative act. Musagetes' role is not to support only projects with a clear set of outcomes or deliverables (those can be important too), but to remain alongside artists and communities as ideas evolve, relationships deepen, and practices mature. This often requires patience and a willingness to resist pressures for immediate visibility or measurable outcomes. Some of the most significant transformations occur gradually, through long-term relationships that create trust, reciprocity, and the freedom to experiment.

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The discussion also challenged conventional assumptions about scale and impact. Reflecting on some of Musagetes' most meaningful experiences, Elwood observed that transformation is not measured by the size of an audience: "if there's only five people there, those five people were meant to be there." What matters is not the number of

participants, but the quality of the encounter and its capacity to open new ways of seeing and relating.

By the close of the retreat, discernment had come to be understood as more than a curatorial question. It had become imperative as an organizational practice of responsibility and care. Joy Roberts, Musagetes' Chair, reflected on the ways that Musagetes' team worked together throughout the retreat, observing that their openness to one another's ideas was shaping and improving our programs in real time. "It's not just work in the traditional sense," she observed. "It's more like a life practice."

Seen in this light, curatorial discernment is not simply about deciding what Musagetes will support. It is about cultivating the relationships, attentiveness, and conditions through which artistic inquiry can continue to surprise us. The question, then, is not only what is needed now, but also what conditions make it possible for the work that is most needed now to emerge?

The Joyfulness of Making: ***How should artists and organizations work with communities?***

Reflecting on fourteen years of collaborative practice, in part as the Kwentong Bayan Collective, Althea Balmes and Jo Simalaya Alcampo traced how their understanding of the artist's role has changed through sustained relationships with migrant care workers and other communities. One of their earliest lessons was simple: artists have to show up. As Jo explained, "you have to show up and you have to spend time in order to build trust and relationships." Although their initial research through academic sources, films, and media accounts showed the extent of exploitation and victimization of care workers, spending time with the communities of care workers revealed something more complex: care workers were also advocates, organizers, and active makers of community.

"You can't just go based on research," Jo reflected; "you need to actually have relationships to understand the complexities of a community." This emphasis on relationship-building was echoed by Marva Bailey Wisdom, co-director of the ArtsEverywhere Festival, who spoke about her experience as a festival ambassador reaching out to often-overlooked communities.

These experiences also changed Jo and Althea's understanding of who should speak up. As their work entered galleries and other cultural spaces, Althea and Jo increasingly created opportunities for care workers to speak directly from their own experience rather than having the artists speak for them. They extended this principle to their role as facilitators, too. Jo reflected that they could not be facilitators without emotions. Being vulnerable and acknowledging their own grief allowed them to participate in the spaces they were creating and became a form of accountability that helped deepen trust.

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As care workers began creating and performing their own stories, Althea and Jo moved increasingly into supporting roles through drawing, sound, projection, and facilitation. Althea described this as "learning how to be a good support"—listening, collaborating, and recognizing when someone else should occupy the centre. The artist's role was not always to lead or offer solutions, but sometimes to amplify what communities were already saying and doing.

Their recent work has added another lesson: the need to slow down. In *Pillow Talk*, Althea's contribution carries the Tagalog phrase *dahan-dahan*—slow down. Drawing from her experience of injury and the pressures of continually doing more, she described it as a reminder that "it's okay to slow down," that she does not need to respond to everything, and that she can listen to her body. Jo's work similarly turned toward everyday practices of rest, nourishment, breathing, and bodily attention. Care for others requires learning how to care for oneself.

A thread running through the conversation with Jo and Althea was the joyfulness of making. Althea recalled realizing through the Liberation Jeepney project at the Toronto Trans March that "art making and art activism can be joyful." Liberation Jeepney was a collaboratively designed and collectively transported artwork that brought political expression, Filipino histories of resistance, community participation, and life-giving playfulness together. Artistic practices responding to injustice need not be defined only by struggle; they can also create spaces for pleasure, imagination, connection, and collective possibility.

Althea and Jo's reflections offered a grounded understanding of artistic practice learned through relationship over time: show up; listen to direct experience; practise

vulnerability and accountability; know when to step back; slow down; and make room for joy.

Improvisation: ***How should we practise in conditions of uncertainty?***

Improvisation has long been woven into Musagetes' work—not only through its longstanding partnership with the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI), but as a way of approaching artistic practice, collaboration, and community. When introducing the conversation about improvisation, Shawn reflected that improvisation had helped Musagetes blur "the line between art and daily life," shaping not only its artistic partnerships but also the way the organization develops programs and relationships over time.

Rather than asking how artists improvise, the retreat conversation explored a broader question: What does improvisation teach us about living and working together in a world that cannot be fully predicted or controlled? Drawing on the history of IICSI's Improviser-in-Residence programme, IICSI Director Eric Fillion invited participants to think about improvisation not only as an artistic practice or methodology, but as "a valuable lens for understanding how individuals, communities, and institutions have navigated uncertainty in the past and continue to respond to changing conditions today."

Improvisation is not the absence of structure. It is the capacity to remain in relationship when the structure is no longer sufficient. Eric's presentation suggested that this capacity can be cultivated—not only through artistic practice, but through the ways institutions create space for collaboration, experimentation, and shared learning.

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Eric described his role as creating "the best possible conditions" for artists while "learning alongside the community" as a critical observer, emphasizing that artistic inquiry flourishes through accompaniment rather than direction. In this sense, improvisation echoed one of the retreat's recurring insights: meaningful and generative work emerges not from controlling outcomes, but from creating the conditions in which relationships and possibilities can develop.

Rather than seeking to eliminate uncertainty, Eric suggested that improvisation "does not eliminate indeterminacy, it operates through it," combining "a determination to care" with "a disposition for play." Improvisation cultivates the capacities needed to respond creatively and responsibly when certainty is no longer possible.

Eric extended this insight through his reflections on archives, referring particularly to the archive of research-creation that the field of improvisation has compiled over the last two decades. Rather than describing archives as repositories that preserve artistic work, he imagines them as living resources that continually generate new creative possibilities. The archive, he explained, should remain "reimagined, reinvented, reactivated," becoming "interactive and generative" rather than "a mere collection of boxes or files." He observed that "an archive of art that does not inspire the creation of new art is an archive that has failed to discharge perhaps its most important function."

As the discussion unfolded, the participants began connecting improvisation to other conversations throughout the retreat. Curtis reflected that a common thread running through many of the presentations was the willingness to embrace risk—not as an end in itself, but as a necessary condition for learning, experimentation, and trust. Whether through Elwood's long-term relationships with thread residency artists, Lisa's reflections on the "subterranean nourishment" that sustains creative practice, Anna's experiments with sound-based artists responding to the polycrisis, or PS Guelph's publishing projects, participants recognized that artistic work requires creating conditions in which people feel safe enough to take risks. Part of Musagetes' responsibility is to be an institution in which that safety is assured as much as possible.

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Concluding the discussion on improvisation, Eric described the upcoming Improviser-in-Residence, Sarmen Almond, a Mexican musician, as someone whose work foregrounds improvisation "less as a fixed method than as an embodied practice of relation, of listening and of encounter."

Throughout these conversations, improvisation came to be understood as a relational practice. It cultivates the capacities needed to live and work in uncertain times: listening

before responding, remaining open to surprise, caring across difference, creating together without knowing in advance what will emerge, and developing the confidence to take meaningful risks. He reflected that improvisation begins with developing "a kind of literacy of the ear"—learning to listen differently, to hear and respond with greater care and attentiveness.

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The enduring question, then, is not simply how artists improvise, but what capacities does improvisation cultivate that our communities increasingly need?

Anna Bowen's Wet Sounds program is, in part, a response to that question, but with a greater emphasis on sound than on improvisation. She described sound and listening as deeply relational and communal, and, therefore, as culture-shaping and meaning-making. "Sound can be a location of the exercise of power, who has access to what, what is allowed to be heard, what is recorded, what's considered legible, and by whom." The inquiry at the heart of Wet Sounds asks what capacities—of listening and relating—have been diminished or lost as result of a colonial exercise over the power of sound. What underlying places of disconnection and reconnection through sound and listening are possible?

Land, Ecology, and the More-than-Human

Musagetes' relationship with land, ecology, and the more-than-human has been central to its work for many years. During the retreat, we reflected on how ecological concerns and the climate crisis have shaped Musagetes' thinking—and how they might continue to evolve in response to a rapidly changing world.

This inquiry was explored through several presentations and conversations that illuminated different dimensions of ecology-related practice: the *Making on a Tilting Planet* project, Stephanie Sobek-Swant's reflections on the role of the arts at ***rare*** Charitable Research Reserve, and Justine Richardson's presentation on the University of Guelph Arboretum. Together, they suggested that artistic responses to climate change cannot be separated from broader questions of relationship, responsibility, and the ways people learn to inhabit places with greater care and

attention. We asked: how should Musagetes continue this work of relating to the land in a time of accelerating crises?

Throughout the conversations, participants returned to a shared recognition that the climate crisis and other ecological crises are changing the conditions under which artistic practice unfolds. The question is no longer simply how art responds to the climate crisis in the creation of artistic work, but how living in a time of crisis transforms the ways artists travel, observe, collaborate, and imagine. It's a question of discernment for artists, too.

Long-term practices are a kind of "subterranean nourishment"—often invisible, but essential for sustaining the creative and relational conditions from which new work emerges.

Lisa Hirmer's reflections on *Making on a Tilting Planet*, along with artists Jamie Kruse and Elizabeth Ellsworth, observed that climate change had prompted an even larger question than *what* artists should make: How does living in a time of ecological crisis change *how* they make it? Rather than presenting climate change as a theme for artistic production, the project explores how ecological conditions reshape artistic practice itself. Artists spoke about slowing down, working collaboratively across disciplines, remaining attentive to uncertainty, and developing forms of practice grounded in long-term relationships rather than immediate outcomes. Lisa also described these practices as forms of "subterranean nourishment"—often invisible, but essential for sustaining the creative and relational conditions from which new work emerges.

International travel, artist residencies, and cultural exchanges have long been understood as essential to artistic life, yet climate change calls many of these assumptions into question. Rather than offering easy solutions, the artists described the value of creating spaces where such tensions could be lived with collectively. Their monthly online conversations had become, in Lisa's words, "almost like a support group for artists" as they worked through these questions together.

What emerged was not a call for artists to produce more work about climate change. Instead, participants reflected on how ecological realities are already transforming the rhythms, ethics, and material conditions of artistic practice itself. This shift resonated deeply with Musagetes' broader commitment to creating the conditions for inquiry rather than prescribing outcomes.

Stephanie Sobek-Swant's presentation on the ***rare*** Charitable Research Reserve offered a complementary perspective. Rather than positioning conservation as a scientific or technical challenge, she explained how ***rare*** sees it as a relational one that recognizes the interdependence of ecological health, the health of communities, the role of education, and Indigenous stewardship. The question ***rare*** asks—How do we want to live?—underlies decisions about land stewardship, governance, conservation, education, and community, while inviting deeper reflections on the relationships we nurture with the land we inhabit.

Ecological relationships often begin with experience rather than expertise.

Participants recognized a strong affinity between this way of thinking and Musagetes' own approach to artistic practice, such as in the curation of the Question Mark Butterfly artist fellowships. The work begins by creating the conditions for meaningful relationships to develop over time. Knowledge is generated not through expertise, but through sustained encounters with the land among artists, researchers, educators, Indigenous knowledge holders, and local communities.

Rather than serving primarily as a means of communicating scientific knowledge, artistic practice creates opportunities to ask different kinds of questions, to notice what might otherwise go unseen, and to cultivate forms of attention that are different from technical or scientific expertise. At ***rare***, the arts do not simply illustrate ecological knowledge; they become partners in its creation.

Justine Richardson's presentation on the University of Guelph Arboretum extended these ideas through the lens of *place*. She described the Arboretum not only as a protected landscape or a botanical collection, but also as a place where conservation, research, education, community engagement, and artistic practice intersect. Its mission —to foster both the conservation of biodiversity and a deeper connection to nature— creates opportunities for forms of inquiry that are collaborative, interdisciplinary, and rooted in lived experience.

One of the most compelling aspects of Justine's presentation was her observation that people connect to the Arboretum in many different ways. Some come to study plants or wildlife. Others come to walk their dogs, to grieve in the memorial forest, to celebrate a wedding, to conduct research, or simply to spend time outdoors. As she said, people

can love a place deeply without necessarily knowing the names of every species within it. Ecological relationships often begin with experience rather than expertise. The Arboretum is also site where art happens, as we saw with Douglas Ewart's *Crepuscule* (2016), a collaboration with IISCI and Musagetes. The Arboretum is a place that continually invites new relationships—between artists and scientists, students and community members, Indigenous and Western ways of knowing, and human and more-than-human communities.

When artists invite us to experience the land, nature, and the more-than-human world through an artistic process, they are showing us that art changes the quality of our attention.

These three conversations also challenged conventional distinctions between artistic practice and ecological practice. Rather than treating the arts as a means of communicating environmental issues, participants described artistic inquiry itself as a way of learning to perceive differently. Artistic practice is a means of cultivating inquiry, curiosity, attention, and the capacity to remain with complexity rather than seeking immediate solutions.

When artists invite us to experience the land, nature, and the more-than-human world through an artistic process, they are showing us that art changes the quality of our attention. In this way, artistic practice becomes not simply a response to crisis, but a way of learning to perceive and inhabit the world differently.

The question for Musagetes, then, is how artistic practice can continue to deepen relationships between people, place, and the land at a time when those relationships matter more than ever.

“From now on, this is the way I will walk.”

Musagetes' inquiries are not questions to be answered once and for all. They are questions to be lived with and revisited as we continue to discern, learn, and improvise together. The conversations throughout the retreat offered not a roadmap for the future, but a way of orienting ourselves within it.

Musagetes has often spoken of its North Star—its enduring commitment to making the arts more central and meaningful in people's lives and communities. A North Star is not a destination, but a point of orientation, helping us find our bearings on continually

changing terrain. These inquiries remain with us as a constellation by which we orient our collective work:

- What does curatorial discernment mean for Musagetes? What is needed now?
- What conditions make it possible for the work that is most needed now to emerge?
- What capacities does improvisation cultivate that our communities increasingly need?
- How does living in a time of climate and ecological crisis change not only what artists make, but how they make it?
- How do we want to live?

In the retreat's closing moments, Peter Schuler, an Elder of the Mississaugas of the Credit, and an adviser to Musagetes, shared a line from a Mississauga teaching that says, *"From now on, this is the way I will walk."* The invitation is not to know the way, but to continue discerning how we want to walk in this world.

Participants

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Lisa Hirmer, artist/curator (and researcher for Eramosa Institute)
Jo SiMalaya Alcampo, artist & community organizer, Kwentong Bayan Collective
Althea Balmes, artist & community organizer, Kwentong Bayan Collective
Eric Fillion, Director, International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation (IICSI)
Justine Richardson, Director, The Arboretum
Elizabeth Ellsworth, artist, smudge studio (via Zoom)
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