

## **A Letter from London: The Musagetes London Café**

The Musagetes Foundation is a public foundation incorporated in Canada by two Canadian arts philanthropists, Michael Barnstijn and Louise MacCallum. It takes its name from the god Apollo's title as supporter of the muses. The foundation's mission is "to be a catalyst for ideas and actions that make the arts more central and meaningful in peoples' lives, in order to promote healthier democracies and creative societies – to start sparks, cause explosions and make a difference in the world."

In March 2006, the foundation invited a small group of Canadian and international cultural leaders to a retreat in Quebec City to develop its mission. The participants created a manifesto that was endorsed by the foundation.

The manifesto asserts that the arts can restore a sense of meaning and shared belonging in contemporary society that has been largely lost because of our over-reliance on economic and utilitarian measures of value. It sees the foundation functioning as a hub to encourage and connect activist interventions that integrate the arts into daily life and advance human development through social movements emerging in countries around the world. It suggests that one way the foundation can operate is by convening "cafés" – meeting places to encourage solidarity and the free exchange of ideas among social, civic, artistic and cultural leaders and entrepreneurs and lead to concrete actions that make the world a better place.

In January 2007, the foundation organized a café in London, hosted by Jude Kelly, founder of Metal Culture and Artistic Director of the South Bank Centre in London. The café brought together a group of prominent artist-creators from the UK and cultural thinkers from Europe, the UK and Canada. The artist-participants included a choreographer, playwright, musician and songwriter, theatre director and producer, visual artist and filmmaker, stage designer, and multi-media artist.

The participants had in common an engagement philosophically and in their practice with extending the contribution the arts make to healthy democracies and creative communities. They have reflected the essence of their conversation in this letter from London, with the intent of sharing their findings with other people involved in artistic quests at the intersection of social change.

## A Letter from London

We were invited by the Musagetes Foundation to take part over three days in a series of conversations inspired by the possibilities contained in the foundation's dynamic vision of art and social change.

We talked initially about the roles of artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in particular about the forces that inhibit many, perhaps most, artists from taking a direct and active role in society. And we explored how these barriers marginalize artists and sustain the notion that the arts are diversions at the periphery of life.

About half way through our talks we recognized that our real subject was human rights - the right of all people to express themselves and to develop their full creative potential. This perspective moved us past notions of the artist as the uniquely gifted individual acting in isolation from the community into a recognition of what artists share with all human beings.

Then we talked about ways in which the Musagetes Foundation could transform its mission into a movement. We suggested several possible options for action to broaden participation and impact and ally the arts more closely with other progressive social movements. In the course of our meeting, we also looked at the Quebec City manifesto and commented on it (these comments are developed in a brief separate paper).

To convey the spirit of our conversations in this letter, we are quoting liberally from comments made by the participants.

### **Exploring the relationships between artists and social change - the tension between art as a private quest and art as engagement with social issues**

As individuals working in diverse ways to change life through and with the arts, we acknowledged that the engagement of artists with social change can take many forms. It can mean creating art intentionally expressive of a political or social aim; making art in collaboration with communities, to give them confidence in expressing themselves and taking charge of their lives; developing sites, venues and projects rich in opportunity for human growth; getting directly involved in politics; influencing regeneration and community renewal programs; supporting particular social causes - or any combination thereof. We recognized that all of these can be of great value.

We also acknowledged that not all art needs to be - or should be - politically or socially relevant, but we asked ourselves why, given the innate power of the arts, so few artists are involved in what one of us called "*work that transcends the personal and professional practice of art making.*"

Speaking only from the Western tradition (we recognized that the roles of artists are different in many other cultures), we identified these explanations:

- Cultural institutions are often concerned about marketing and audience development, to raise revenues and enlarge the range of their immediate impact, but rarely do they value and create opportunities for artists to engage

with the public in ways that answer to the public's desire and need for transformative experiences.

- As a rule, arts funding agencies do not encourage arts activism - often such work is not eligible for funding or is judged by artists' peers as inferior.
- Schools and universities educating artists often stress originality and excellence, in the context of individual competition and achievement, but do not develop the skills and abilities artists need to collaborate with communities - ideologically, they perpetuate the romantic notion of the artist as a solitary and special soul.
- The market does not necessarily reward - and sometimes actually penalizes - artists who step beyond the accepted conventions for creating and presenting art or who create art intrinsically linked with social change.
- Because artists engaged with social issues are a small minority, they are often in such demand to serve causes that their personal and professional lives suffer.
- Perhaps most important of all, there is a deeply rooted fear among many artists that their integrity will be contaminated by the way other agendas are positioned or the ways in which others "use" artists for their cause - that they will become tools for propaganda and cease being and being regarded as artists.

Yet we know intuitively that this separation sustains the marginality of the arts. Artists are rarely consulted on the large issues of political and civic life and are often considered entertainers rather than serious participants in the life of the community, and their lack of engagement with broader movements to improve human life and develop humane and creative communities maintains society's image of them as decorative but inessential.

*"If the arts are so powerful, why do they have such limited impact on society?"*

*"Is that one reason it's hard for artists to get to the big civic table - their fear of losing their being as an artist?"*

*"Our attitude is 'we don't do politics - leave it to the politicians.'"*

*"With Cape Farewell [a project in which artists created work on climate change in the Arctic] a critical question was - do I become a propagandist or retain my being as an artist while widening my impact?"*

*"Can we be allowed to say, 'I do this' and 'I do that', I make art and I help my community?"*

We believe that, in our globalized world, these attitudes are changing. As our societies become ever more diverse, we are increasingly in contact with other artistic traditions, many of which do not revere the solitary artist. Even the West is in

transition: the idea of the artist as single individual genius seems more and more outdated, and it has very little resonance among younger artists, many of whom are involved, notably through the internet and related technologies, in working directly with communities and in multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral arts practices.

*"The idea of the autonomous artist is dying in practice, if not in ideology."*

*"A whole lot of artists 'jumped the fence' a long time ago, and we need to connect with them – there is an online community of the young who do not 'own' their work."*

*"Many artists have escaped the conservatism of the arts community – there's a huge potential for change that is untapped."*

Furthermore, we believe this is a general transition which all professions are experiencing. Doctors, engineers, accountants, scientists, academics and many other people are trying to figure out how to marry professional achievement with a more direct and dynamic notion of citizenship. As one participant put it, *"The really critical question is how can we raise our young to be politically aware and active in contributing to social development, whatever career they choose."*

We discussed why it is that art can play a powerful role in enabling social change. While we know artists cannot change the world alone – and that is almost never their intention - they can have a transformative impact on the public that is supported by cultural animators and mediators who help create bridges between art and society. Accepting that *"art can be a catalyst, though we don't understand why,"* we added other words to describe the potential power of artists:

*As explainers of the world  
As agitators  
As facilitators  
As provocateurs  
As shamans and sherpas  
As canaries in the mine  
As giving vocabulary and form to ideas  
As providing images that move people  
As bringing possibility to people  
As connectors of people  
As creating metaphors that kindle action  
As 'moving' the message, making it vital and current and 'now'*

Our attempt to define what it is that art can do was perhaps best captured in this remark:

*"To send someone away from witnessing your art changed, able to express their ideas and wills – this is the marvel. Great activist art can empower your audience to do more. This is the most you can do - empower individuals with new perspectives."*

## **Making human rights central**

Inspired partly by our conversations to this point and partly by the reference one participant made to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,\* we recognized that the framework for our discussions should be the concept of human rights. The right to be creative, to express oneself, is a basic human right, something all people share. It is not confined to artists, though artists have the ability to invoke the right to creativity, to self-expression, on behalf of all people.

Also fundamental to human rights is knowing one another across cultural, racial, economic, national and geographic divides. Artists are skilled in knowing and conveying knowledge of the "other" – through their art and their active engagement, they can provoke rich and meaningful exchanges of knowledge and insight about other people.

We agreed that the human rights connection was the most powerful insight developed during our conversations because it provides a vision that integrates artists into the community, rather than separating them, and emphasizes what all human beings from all walks of life fundamentally share. It also moves the discussion from the immediate arts experience (the film now showing, today's performance, this evening's concert) to the long-term development of the arts as deeply rooted in communities.

*"How can we as established artists help contribute to the world, demonstrating how all people can explore their own creativity?"*

*"Make the content of human rights central. Our language is alienating if it stresses only the power of the artist."*

*"We can empower people and invoke each individual's ability to contribute - then empower people from their freedom of expression to move on to include symbolic expression. Human rights centres the discussion within people – that's its value."*

*"We should think about and invest in duration – not just the concert but the young people coming to the concert."*

## **Transforming a mission into a movement: from words to actions**

*"The challenge,"* one participant noted, *"is to transform the foundation's mission into a movement."*

It was clear to us all that, while this gathering has been rich and inspiring, the foundation will need to move from words into action if it is to have the genuine impact it seeks - "to start sparks, cause explosions and make a difference in the world."

We emphasized that the foundation is uniquely placed to accelerate the convergence of initiatives taken by artists and cultural activists engaged with social issues

precisely because it is a foundation, led by philanthropists, and is not a government, nor a political party, nor beholden to any special interests. This freedom gives the foundation strong potential credibility and authority.

While recognizing that the foundation will need to make choices and focus its future activities, we discussed a number of related actions it might usefully pursue:

- Support projects that integrate the arts with other progressive movements such as justice, equality, the environment, human rights, peace, etc. Gather and disseminate information about successful initiatives around the world that integrate the arts in social change, to expand knowledge, enable contacts and help inspire further actions.
- Support projects that counteract the tendency to isolate the artist from society, such as artists in residence projects in tough urban contexts, arts institutions that are exploring new ways in which artists can engage with the public, training institutions that are including skills and experience in interacting with communities in their programs, etc.
- Convene other gatherings in other parts of the world, with more diverse groups of people at the table, and develop means of connecting these “kindred” initiatives. Gatherings could be held in places where artists are particularly discouraged and isolated, or they could involve events where artists and leaders from another sector (politicians, scientists, medical professionals, etc.) can speak together to develop synergies and prompt action.
- Organize an event that brings together leading arts activists and human rights thinkers to delve more profoundly into the connections between arts for social change and human rights and to develop means to collaborate in improving human life and communities.

### **In concluding...**

At the conclusion of the conversations, we expressed our strong belief that the most exciting and fruitful approach to the question of how to better integrate the arts in society is a strong endorsement of human and civic rights and the kinships between artists and other human beings – their endless creative potential. We hope that this approach will be central to the foundation’s future initiatives.

We also expressed our gratitude to the foundation for a dynamic and inspiring encounter and our best wishes for a future full of promise and achievement.

Sincerely yours,

Jude Kelly, Billy Bragg, Simon Brault, David Buckland, Aaron Cezar, Siobhan Davies, Jocelyn Harvey, Keith Khan, Dragan Klaic, Kwame Kwei-Armah, Jordi Pascual, Louise Sicuro, Angharad Wynne-Jones

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• The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly of the UN in 1948, following World War II, as a “common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations”. Three articles from the declaration are relevant to our discussions:

Article 19: “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression.”

Article 27: “Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.”

Article 29: “Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.”