

MUSAGETES circa 2011

Musagetes was launched in Montreal in January 2007 with the release of our Manifesto. Since then our International Advisory Council, Board of Directors and staff have been hosting cafés, building networks and developing programs. Now, in 2011, we are reflecting on what we have learned and setting our course for the next five years. We overwhelmingly agree that the Manifesto continues to be the touchstone for Musagetes' development — a touchstone that both captures an historical moment and requires from us intermittent supplementary statements, like this one.

The Manifesto had an immediate impact in Montreal, not just on those who were directly involved, but on many others who encountered it online, via social media and by word-of-mouth. Some discovered it at a moment when inspiration and enrichment were most needed. For others it touched a chord in their search for meaning in a confusing world.

With the financial crisis of 2008 and the questioning of contemporary global capitalism, the Manifesto has only become more meaningful. There is now more malaise—and more opportunity—than ever, moving individuals and organizations to search for measurements of success beyond the GDP. When the faultlines of society threaten an already precarious world, when the political landscape on so many continents abounds with cynicism, at such times of personal alienation and global malaise we believe that art answers and liberates. There is a greater need than ever for the joy, the delight, the surprise and the power of the arts to lead in radically transforming society.

The gift of the artist is to reveal the essence of things and to reach the heart. Artists expose our individual and societal pathways of desire—pathways shaped by time, by beliefs and values—and reflect these back in new forms. Disrupting the predictable, the artistic process is a powerful transformative agent, able to depart from too great a dependency on rationality, order and instrumental reasoning.

Artists devote their lives to creation, but creativity is not limited to artists; it is embedded in all of us. Artists inspire hope and spark our urge to create, to make our mark. Musagetes takes this to heart and vows always to be a creative organization itself: to be thoughtful, risk-taking, and concerned with the quality of process.

Starting with a belief in the power of empathy, innovation, and the power of the human spirit, Musagetes recognizes multiple models of artistic creation. For societal transformation to occur, the creative process has to be allowed to go as far as it can; it will be short-changed if the outcome is envisioned in advance. But we also believe that artistic practices only have integrity when aesthetics are approached with intention.

Musagetes works in communities where the potential for positive transformation is greatest—places where a transition is already under way, and where socially engaged cultural mediators, artists and institutions are collaborating to bring it about. We offer to become partners, designing multi-year artistic programs combining action and dialogue. These programs cut across all elements of society, involving leaders from sectors as diverse as social services, business, agriculture, politics, architecture and mobility.

Societal and cultural shifts are incremental and emergent, based on adaptation to new conditions. While we know that we will eventually have to leave the communities in which we are engaged, our emphasis is on long-term engagement and on building networks that will survive. We learn from these experiments, take that knowledge to other places and provide a forum for dissemination.

The faultlines of society are both global and specific, but the power of the arts is universal; therein lies the steadfast relevance of our mission, and our persistence in its realization. We work across continents



and political affiliations, across cultures and languages, across sectors and disciplines, and across forms of knowledge within and among the sites chosen for our programs.

The foundation for Musagetes' work is not to be found in institutions—political or otherwise—but in the passion and concern of artists who feel the urgency to transform the troubled contexts in which they are immersed. Musagetes is a catalyst and enabler—we are a learning organization seeking to elicit universal truths about the transformative power of the arts.

Our Programs: What the process of transforming society looks like for Musagetes

Musagetes has chosen to work simultaneously at both a local and global scale. Our programmatic experiments in specific locales inform our understanding of how the arts can transform society. We encourage and then study the interaction of artists, the impact of interventions in public space, the design of participatory and collaborative practices, the integration of artistic processes into diverse disciplines, and the sustained proliferation of artistic production. These five elements form the backbone of our program decisions, and are at the forefront of our minds when we evaluate the consequences of our work.

To engage deeply in a neighbourhood, community, city or region, Musagetes must gain a tangible and intuitive understanding of the specific context. This is achieved only through collaborations with individuals and organizations—collaborations that are based on trust, coinciding values, a mutual belief in the best of human potential, and even a touch of affection. Only with that foundation do we earn the right to work in these places; and only from that foundation can we define our objectives, build our networks, and design the local program.

In addition to establishing a strong collaborative team, we seek to understand the local context through methods of **research** that include forms of urban investigation, artistic workshops, active observation and sociological or anthropological study. This contextual research provides the background for all artistic programs (**experiments**), interdisciplinary and cross-sectoral dialogue (**cafés**), and measurements of impact (**evaluation**). Such research considers social dynamics, spatial mapping, environmental issues, exertion of and infringement on rights, alternative systems (especially political and educational) and, of course, cultural mapping.

The research basis for each locale is not necessarily distinct from the launch of a program of artistic initiatives. This year in **Guelph, Ontario**, our own backyard, Musagetes launched a long-term project with 1mile2 (one square mile), a series of artistic investigations into the built and natural environments of downtown, as well as explorations into Guelph's alternative economies, public spaces and social dynamics. This fall, Musagetes and the University of Guelph will partner to integrate this program of visiting and local artists into an extensive creative research initiative throughout 2012. Written documents, video material, and artistic products (performances, installations, etc.) will comprise the evidence of our most extensive contextual research-undertaking to date.

Leadership from Musagetes is integral to the design of every local project. In **Lecce, Italy**, the initial part of the research phase consists more substantially of building a collaborative team of cultural leaders, establishing a fundamental model for cooperation, and securing contributions from governmental bodies. The lack of a physical hub for socially engaged artists was identified very early in our research as a priority to ensure the sustainability of the work after Musagetes' concludes its multi-year project there. Thanks to government cooperation, Musagetes and the collaborative team (dubbed *Gruppo Musagetes*) acquired a 16th-century villa that was once a school of philosophy focussed on the social dimensions of culture. Now surrounded by residential complexes, the Ammirato Culture House (named after the leader of the school, Scipione Ammirato) will be our hub for a program of dispersed initiatives in the Salento region.

The most advanced of our projects—in **Rijeka, Croatia**—has given us our first taste of what artistic interventions can do to activate public space. Once the heart of Yugoslavia's industrial economy, Rijeka now has extensive abandoned industrial sites, many of which were recently made accessible and are in



the city centre or along the seafront. Musagetes convened a Café in June 2010 to discuss the role that artists could play in this particular post-industrial context, a role that could address the current economic hardship there. In April and May 2011 Musagetes and the City of Rijeka hosted artists Laetitia Sonami and Matthew Mazzotta in residence for two months; a second two-month residency with Sonami and Mazzotta will take place in April and May 2012. Sonami's sound installation on the two-kilometre waterbreak pier incorporated interviews with residents, by residents, along with a sound portrait of the city. Mazzotta's installation will be realized in 2012 with the introduction of a sheep farm and wool sculpture on the pier. Both works radically transform the public's experience of the pier and mediate our view of the city. Collaborations with other artists and participation by the public were central to the design of their projects.

Our long-term engagement in **Sudbury, Ontario** builds on the discussion about industrial heritage, knowledge economies and cultural identity that was begun in Rijeka. The initial phase of our work here was led by **DodoLab**, an artistic practice that was created collaboratively by Andrew Hunter, Lisa Hirmer and Musagetes. DodoLab engages thoughtfully in communities where issues of adaptability to changing conditions are of preeminent concern. DodoLab allows ideas to emerge from their active "wonderment" and then translates this into group activism that is at once serious and playful. Building on the work of DodoLab, our research phase will continue with an artistic intervention by Bik Van der Pol, a Dutch collective. They propose to clean a sample of sulphur-blackened rock located in the centre of Sudbury for the duration of a week. Although they realize that cleaning this small area will not solve the dilemma of global exploitation of the earth, the cleaning of this rock emphasizes a certain responsibility to exchange one labour for another. Musagetes' Sudbury Café in September 2011 will be designed with special relevance for Aboriginal, francophone and youth communities.

Musagetes has selected artistic practices that happen outside of cultural institutions to be the priority for our programs. Instead of the tangible object resulting from practice, we are interested in artistic intent as manifest in process. As René Derouin asserted, process can be 95% of the artistic practice, followed by an event (or activity) that would otherwise not take place. The constant shifting and emergent state of local contexts necessitates a practice that is iterative, emergent, responsive and self-reflective. These values are embedded in Musagetes' Manifesto and have become some of the key criteria on which we base our decisions.

Musagetes' four location-specific concurrent programs function as case studies for our macro-level program which consists of **communication and dissemination**. The local programs demonstrate how transformation can be sparked through full artistic engagement as individuals, as communities and as societies. We learn from our experiments, take that knowledge to other places and provide a forum for informed debate. In 2011, we will be developing a more comprehensive communications platform, including a new website, to ensure an exchange across our programs and among our collaborators. We have also embarked on an effort to capture our decisions and some commentary on why we made them.

To accomplish informed and meaningful communications, we are diligent about self-reflection and evaluation in order to make explicit our tacit knowledge, to make us conscious of our decision-making process. Our first experimentation is an intensive, three-year developmental evaluation of the Sudbury program to be led by an external researcher. Unlike other forms, developmental evaluation will extract the most meaningful learning at points where it can influence the ongoing design of the program. In an entirely transparent process, Musagetes will be making public the final report.

Our most important learning happens when we meet to share stories and knowledge, to debate concepts and ideas, and to evaluate successes and failures. At the end of 2011, the members of Musagetes' Board of Directors, International Advisory Council and staff will meet again.