

The Unthinkable Experiment

Chapter Generosity

Anarchy, action, introspection, semantics: this edition of The Unthinkable Experiment (TUE) and the very interesting and creative thinking, as well as the actions undertaken by the three participating groups, seriously challenged the transdisciplinary team (TT). Reading and exploring your work even challenged the members of the TT to question themselves and the experiment existentially. Exceptional work, as this is ultimately the objective of TUE: young people give academics, artists, social thinkers, scientists, civil society, ... food for thought, by questioning things, by posing propositions, by provoking them where necessary or useful, by breaking the rules and exploring the boundaries, always with respect for the other.

Each group managed to do this in an entirely unique way, which the TT deeply admired. In each group, in a different form and context, similar elements recur: respect, vulnerability, creativity, hope and courage. The sequence of thought, action and dialogue also recurs throughout the different groups and participants.

Generosity is a multi-layered concept, and sometimes a rather general term, a word that covers many loads and is much broader than: 'I give you something and you are happy'. It is about meeting each other, about forming communities, about tolerance of each person's value, about a deep awareness of its pitfalls and therefore also about trust and courage.

Each group claimed a different identity. One with a story about diversity and the role of generosity and art, while others made theater and dance or worked individually to translate what generosity means to them.

Crucially and hearteningly, there was also room for fun, for humor, and for laughing out loud, even if the road to consensus was sometimes difficult or even impossible. The ultimate goal of TUE is to make the unthinkable thinkable. Could even Da Vinci have imagined that his unthinkable dream of flying would now be the most normal thing in the world? Where in the future the unthinkable touches reality, this is what you are working on.

The world is full of signs, we just need to look carefully and see them, to capture and to build a vision. A lasting vision that will stand the test of time.

Each year we write a chapter, a seed that contributes to a long-term vision of our world, using all the ingredients we find on our way. The community needs young people, older people, scientists, thinkers, artists, politicians,... the transdisciplinary, who take responsibility for authentically making the unthinkable thinkable.

How the groups want to finally share their thoughts with us and the rest of the world at the end of this TUE journey is entirely your choice. All we ask is to put it into a form (text, poetry, drawing, image, song,

video of a play or dance, etc) that we can keep in the Open University of Diversity's Library of Collected Knowledge, located at LABIOMISTA and online.

What follows in the form of an analysis with recommendations for follow up or ideas for further thought process, is not a manual, let alone a compelling path to follow. They are ideas of the TT that you might benefit from, a reflection on your own thinking and creations.

We wish you a fruitful 'creation phase' and thank you for your generosity.

Frans Steenhoudt

The Transdisciplinary Team

Moderators

And the initiators & organizers

Group 1 : Janus

Keywords: hospitality, complexity, "attentive", sharing, humbleness, building bridges, love/self-love, vulnerability, open dialogue, your true self, empathy, open mindedness, compromise, tolerance, nature, survival, attentiveness, courage

Methodology and key questions:

- Action/Anarchy?
- Can we use art to connect, and what is the role of empathy in this?
- Is generosity value based or value biased?
- How can generosity break down barriers?
- Can generosity be dangerous?

Group 1 demonstrates its interpretation of generosity through action: in addition to a short, theoretical approach, they cast their ideas in a video in which an art carpet by Koen Vanmechelen plays a leading role. Can generosity connect different worlds? Their proposition is clear: generosity can break down barriers; according to Group 1 it is able to bring different values and cultures closer together.

That they use art to make their statement is remarkable. The underlying question is also evident here: what can be the role of art in connecting people and communities? In doing so, art takes on the role of creative communication in an attempt to find a common language.

Despite the accompanying text, with which they tried to describe the contours of the concept of generosity, group 1 resolutely opted for action to communicate their thinking. That action came about following an evening of brainstorming, during which the boundaries of the imaginable were repeatedly reached and perhaps even crossed, questioning the desirability, necessity and decency of their nightly actions.

With their action group 1 opted for surprise and not simply for what was expected of them. They dealt with rules in an unconstrained way, diving into a mischievous anarchy with a smile and taking a calculated risk in the process, dancing on the narrow tightrope between respect for Vanmechelen's work and pure, unabashed provocation.

In the work they produced, they exposed themselves, made themselves vulnerable, each with her or his own background, both culturally and geographically. The bottom line of their statement was that art can indeed save the world, if presented with respect and not out of mere provocation. The latter was only possible because they did not brutally, inconsiderately force art on other cultural communities, but because they showed caution and respect. Their movements, demarches and words scanned the contours of the communities to ensure they were not being offensive. Art as a tool for open dialogue - not to impose ideas on others - but as a generous invitation to meet and come closer together. Moreover, art itself can be generous, it shows the 2 facets of a concept, it highlights a conflict... It opens dialogue.

It triggered the discussion of how and why this type of generosity is or can be possible, and how this interrelates with the concept of freedom. Where are the limits of this generosity? Is an ultimate sacrifice also generosity? Or must one dare to think of oneself in order to be generous?

The TT wondered whether the action of group 1 would have had the same effect or would have been possible at all if the context of the action had been different. Would it also have been perceived as a generous invitation? An image of a chicken in association with a mosque, could that not be experienced as insulting, as a provocation, as daring, as a challenge, as creating a feeling of unease or even as being downright dangerous? In this regard, the context of the action requires reflection. In all contexts, can other opinions and reservations count on our willingness to accept them, on our openness. How open and tolerant is the recipient? Some ideas seem incompatible but sometimes prove to be a necessary condition for opening doors for deliberation and conversation.

When we look at generosity as an act of "giving," we must realize that even that can involve a danger. Well-intentioned generosity can also be offensive. The TT thinks Group 1 can dig deeper into the boundaries of generosity and how they relate to notions of love, self-care, or diversity. To what extent is generosity a conscious action, and doesn't the purpose behind a generous gesture help determine whether or not it is about generosity? How can perception and intention be aligned? Do values determine perception or do they distort perception?

Is generosity always considered intrinsically humane? Can you find generosity across all cultures and communities? What about religion, politics, economics, society, are they generous? Is Pfizer f.ex. generous? Does generosity accept diversity? There is a paradox in generosity: it is easy to see the benefit when it comes to sharing love, knowledge or care. But it can also be used as a weapon. Moreover, as humanity and as Homo sapiens, we have not been very generous towards nature and we are now seeing the consequences of this for our planet.

Generosity & freedom, it can be healing but also destructive... how can we implement these concepts in our society?

ARTWORK: Janus
By Koen Vanmechelen

The intriguing gift of this group had a clear and straightforward message. Thinking the Unthinkable results from acting in the world and daring to do the unimaginable, opening a portal to what was once deemed impossible. In ancient times, this idea was embodied by Janus, the god of new beginnings, gates, transitions, duality, doorways, passages, frames, and endings of conflict. Generosity via art respectfully shared in a context once considered too antithetical can create a wormhole for the benefit of all Mankind. An unexpected door out of the cage we accept as our reality.

Janus, 2004

Tapestry

240 x 240 x 2 cm

© Koen Vanmechelen



Group 2: Legacy & New Generation

Keywords: giving, sharing, listening, spontaneous, context, love, individual versus group, movement, respect, vulnerability, equal versus unequal generosity, generosity as a weapon or tool, future

Method and basic questions:

- Visual combined with theater
- Theory and action
- courage and vulnerability

Agree to disagree

In the written text, the participants of Group 2 did not reach a consensus on one general definition of generosity. They decided to cast their different definitions of generosity into characters and to create a play. In this visual imagery, the transdisciplinary team discovered a wealth of messages and symbolism. The accompanying text simultaneously brings a strong theoretical framework and could potentially serve as a basis for all other groups of TUE, chapter II.

The importance of the setting: nature. The human being then enters the picture. In picking up a simple stone, generosity is given a physical form. Is the conceptualization of generosity a human act or concept? How does that impact generosity?

With the image of and interactions between the various protagonists, generosity takes on complexity and reveals the various layers of power that can emanate from it. Each character carries a distinct point of view. In the play we also see a persiflage on the way in which generosity is marketed by television today, as a show with a lot of boasting about 'how good we are'. The persiflage stands in sharp contrast with the authenticity of the message and true meaning of generosity.

A new dynamic emerges from the wordless choreography of the dancer. The dance creates a natural interaction between giver and receiver, dancing and seeking contact in a desire for connection. The dancer wants to do something with his body, to set an action in motion, with a clear motivation: to make a personal contribution.

The character who rejects generosity is ultimately at the center of the event and becomes the center of attention, around which all the other characters revolve. It is a visualization of a creeping danger that lurks in generosity, a danger of abuse of power and dependence.

The play culminates in a Babel-like confusion of tongues, with chaos and noise. From that confusion, a new balance must grow.

The play ends with the camera turning 180 degrees, symbolizing the possibility of change. There is hope in this reversal. Perhaps this is the serendipity of the accident?

In its comments, the TT emphasizes the maturity of the group, which clearly shows that the group members know what they have been thinking about, that they have realized that generosity is not always innocent and that it can be accompanied by undesirable concentrations of power. Nor have they failed to notice the power that lies in refusing generosity, and the generosity that can be hidden in

divergent opinions. Generosity can be selective: why are we so open to receiving war refugees from Ukraine, while those from Syria sometimes have to sleep outside for days on end to get anywhere near a government. Generosity can also lead to polarization. Does the media bear a responsibility here? Or are there other factors that play a role?

The TT wonders whether equal generosity is possible and if so, how it can be achieved. What role does the media play in that process? Lines of thought that could possibly be interesting additions to the thought process of Group 2, in which the seeds of a new way of dealing with charity are present.

Group 2 also highlighted the importance of authentic action, in which characters have difficulty connecting, except through the dancer who seeks and finds connection with each and therefore is actually the cement in the group. It is important to ask where the action that the dancer's movement entails comes from.

It reminded the TT of the Leonard Cohen song: There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Can we induce that movement through authentic action. Does generosity come from our ability or from our disability? Can we learn it from that same perspective? What about the woke movement and the tension between the individual and the system? Are we too quick to forget what it is to be generous as an individual precisely because there is a social security... Or do the social safety net and social security enable generosity and freedom for the individual?

The TT came up with some specific questions to ponder: can we institutionalize generosity and if so, how? Can governments be generous or do they erode generosity by undermining its authenticity? How can we guard against the solution becoming the problem? Can and should generosity be a central element in creating and designing our future society? Is it an element in sustainable governance?

Do we need a symbol for generosity? Why or why not? Is generosity a human concept or act, or does it also exist in a pure form in nature. Is it possible to achieve an equal generosity for all? Perhaps the context and structure of society can trigger generosity? Is generosity different from charity and can being generous trigger more generosity?

ARTWORK: Legacy & New Generation

By Koen Vanmechelen

Two of my works sprang immediately to my mind after having seen the mesmerizing act by this group. First, Legacy shows how complex even the act of being generous has become. How dangerous and imbued with power. Something which can lead to a Babylonian dispersal when only one element refuses to open up and connect. Yet, the movement germinates the transformation, expressed by the dancer's unpredictable actions, which cause unexpected wrinkles in time and space. A New Generation can generate hope by tilting the perspective, starting from authenticity and spontaneity. Yes, creating hope is an act of pure generosity.

Legacy, 2022

Mixed media on canvas (peacock feathers, neon, African mask, taxidermy, sword, gold leaf)*

200 x 150 x 7 cm

© Koen Vanmechelen

New Generation, 2022

canvas, mixed media (Indian powders, charcoal, egg shells, glass, grain, feathers), neon*

200 x 150 x 12 cm

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*all animals died a natural death



Group 3: Freeze

Keywords: benefits, generosity, for myself/for others, sacrifice, love, caring, good for others, sharing, giving without expectation, making change happen, being yourself, self-care, nature

Method and basic questions:

- Multilayered in-depth individual work
- Searching for a new narrative of connection
- Creative expression as language
- Has *Homo sapiens* moved beyond generosity ?

The work of Group 3 stands out because of its multiplicity of forms of expression, partly because each person has traveled his own individual path and decided to make his own contribution from a highly personal perspective. In that individual expression, a wide range of themes emerged: art, sciences, technology, religion, society and nature. Almost all of the contributions in the group touched on elements such as nature, vulnerability, health, well-being and connection.

It is impressive how the members of Group 3 were not deterred by deep analyses and dared to open up very vulnerable to the transdisciplinary team. The members of group 3 especially looked inward, deep inside themselves. They did not shy away from tricky themes and were very critical of the concept of generosity. Is generosity really as positive and innocent as it seems? From the works of this group we also read that in generosity there can be an element of aggression, of power. Have we been too greedy and eager in our drive for domestication? Have we gone too far in our conceptualization of generosity? And in the process, have we forgotten natural generosity or the generosity of nature itself? Has modern man in his technological world really made so much progress? Have we as *Homo sapiens* moved beyond authentic generosity? And what about the future - can technology be or be made generous?

The work raises questions about both the 'giver' and the 'receiver' and the 'receptivity' of generosity. Where does the balance lie? Should there be one?

In their search, we also encounter expressions of fear and guilt in Group 3: the fear of receiving. Receiving is perhaps also the direct route to a gnawing sense of guilt. That guilt is not only in the receiving, but also in the lack of generosity toward the planet and nature. Parts of their work are reminiscent of original sin from the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition, a generational accumulated guilt. Will this individual thinking and the reflection of the TT lead to connectedness, think the unthinkable, within group 3?

The diverse narrative of Group 3 drew our attention to overwhelming challenges such as climate change, social isolation, inequality, mental health, and (individual) guilt.

The chaos, the complexity of the world, and its many-armed relationship to the complexity of the individual and to the concept of generosity can sometimes push us into an impasse.

Although we also read, in several individual contributions, hopes and signals for a future connectivity. A search for and a belief in creativity to acquire knowledge, to understand things, to create a language and a new narrative that can connect.

The contributions of the members of Group 3 are of great authenticity as they touched the members of the TT deeply. They alerted the TT to the idea that generosity is often a very individual experience and that it is not always simple to undergo or apply it. In this sense, Group 3 differentiates itself from the other groups. Their approach required courage, boldness and a large dose of generosity.

Group 3 forced the TT to humility, made the TT question their own generosity, confronted them with their own vulnerability and forced them to also look deep into themselves. At the same time, it strengthened the TT in the conviction that places are needed to think long and hard and how we can create hope from them.

How can we think differently in the face of so many black clouds in the lives of young people? It raised questions about the sense and nonsense of TUE itself. At the same time, the stories contained a subtle invitation to expose ourselves as a project, to gently connect with group members, to share things within the team. How can we change something now, in full awareness of what we are doing, with a clear vision of what the future should bring? How can we strengthen the belief in ourself, in our self-worth, our value as a human being? To come out stronger as a group, a sustainable TUE community. To arrive at a society where fear is not the rule and you are not blown over by the dangers of generosity. How do we build a world together with all these elements of our society in a constructive and creative way, where we do not lose our faith in social engineering, even if it is unthinkable?

ARTWORK: Freeze
By Koen Vanmechelen

A frozen marble homunculus bears silver antlers on his head, accommodating an egg. This group's diverse, vulnerable, yet moving gifts suggest we need a Cosmopolitan Renaissance, a rebirth. In fragile times, there is an urgent need to connect with nature and others deeply. But doing that requires places shielded from the invasiveness of contemporary, uber-interconnected life. These sanctuaries create generous circumstances to explore the self and contemplate long-term actions and attitudes constructively and freely. Being generous can also be making, shielding, and harvesting precious seeds, giving them time to germinate, and releasing them into the world when it is ready.

Freeze, 2022
marble, silvered tree roots, silvered taxidermy chicken
136 x 75 x 68 cm
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