

## The Unthinkable Experiment - Chapter Generosity 'Agree to disagree... together'

The two days of understanding, agreeing and differing with our group at La Mouseion were characterized by differences. As we started to think the unthinkable around the concept of generosity we bumped into a very broad spectrum or rather forms of understanding. The concept of generosity is in its natural form subjective. Every context of generosity is everytime a context, which means that generosity is a context-sensitive matter. In our understanding of the concept we agree to disagree. To visualize our disagreement we challenged ourselves to find a somewhat definition of our personal understanding. Lower in this portfolio you find them written down. Surprisingly the definitions all together, as a bundle of seven, made us reconsider our disagreement on the matter since we found a **common base** in them.

As an occasion where you could think the unthinkable, we challenged ourselves to find a somewhat pure, context-free, universal understanding of generosity. In hermeneutics some say that it is impossible to find a pure form of something. Every word contains again the question leading to another collection of words and meanings. So here we conclude that the only pure form of generosity is to be found in a language, we all share the verbal and written expression of generosity. Finding other meaningful universal information on generosity seemed impossible for us. So we did the unthinkable and tried to define or rather express our disagreements and differences in a non-textual format.

We'd like to remind the reader of this portfolio that our working group was very inspired by Koen Vanmechelen's artistic ideology. We understood La Biomista as an epicenter where conceptual art gets brewed. We tried to use this approach in our unthinkable experiment. But also us, young people new to the use of conceptual approach in art, bumped on the problem with the existence of something. What do we deliver with this unthinkable experiment?

Although we followed our instinct and not a specific methodology, it is possible (in retrospect) to see the different stages of our work:

- I. **Brainstorming** : linkage of the concept of "*generosity*" to other words, concepts and contexts to create space for a broad and open discussion.
- II. Translation of context-sensitive examples of generosity to a **multidimensional scale** which projects the interactions between the different, -according to us- key components of generosity.
- III. Sharing of **individual definitions** of "*generosity*"
- IV. Creation of **different characters** which embody forms of generosity in today's society. The characters are based on testimonials of generosity in our lives
- V. Writing of a **play** illustrating our different conception of "*generosity*"

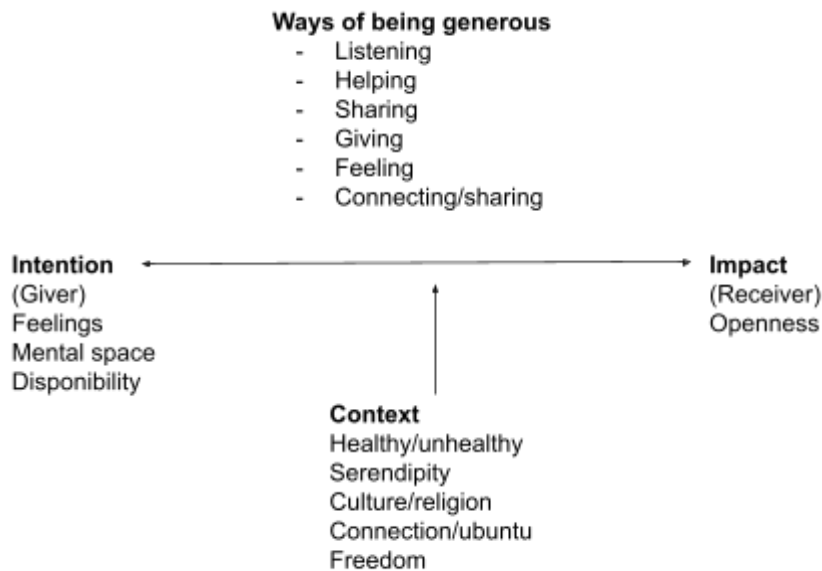
I. Brainstorm session in which the goal was to link generosity to other words, concepts and contexts to create space for a broad and open discussion.

Perspective, context, connection, sacrifice, respect, giving, openness, non-reciprocity, humble, unconditional, transaction, unforced

“Being generous to yourself becomes selfishness when you take something from others”

“Being generous to others becomes sacrifice when you take too much from yourself”

II. Translation of context-sensitive examples of generosity to a multidimensional scale which projects the interactions between the different, -according to us- key components of generosity.



III. Sharing of individual definitions of “generosity”

**What generosity means to us :**

7 persons with different perspectives on generosity. After mindmapping, brainstorming & giving examples of situations where generosity plays a substantial role in our daily lives, **we agree to disagree** and we agree that there is no universal definition of generosity. (because of its subjective and context-sensitive existence) Although we found it useful to share our personal definitions of generosity, since it gives an idea of what is essential to the concept for each of us.

- *‘To freely give away to someone something you own without expecting reciprocity’*  
**Marjeline**

- *'Something you do to show your feelings so you can express yourself to the other which creates a healthy feeling (in the context of dancing)'*

**Stan**

- *'A form of meaning which emotionally stimulates people in very broad ways. It is context sensitive, and subject related. Finding a pure form is impossible, though it is in all of us (maybe in a linguistic form)'*

**Waso**

- *'Giving with full dedication and having an open mind about possible consequences with the risk of getting nothing or something different than expected in return.'*

**Jade**

- *'Generosity is abundance; energy colliding in on itself, two cups filling one another and spilling over a pile of dirt. What do you think might come out of it?'*

**Clara**

- *'A conscious state of being that possibly produces emotional or physical impact, intended to be beneficial. Its magnitude, form and interpretation depends on an interaction of an infinite amount of both individually and socially produced contextual factors.'*

**Sien**

- *'A conscious state of being present, open and connected in an unconditional way'*

**Nathalie**

After sharing our definitions we found them to be **complementary** and we can find elements in every definition that we all believe in.

It also did rise some **questions**, that we weren't able to discuss due to the short amount of time:

- How did generosity evolve through time? Are we 'less' or 'more' generous than before?
- Can you be too generous towards others? And if so, does it cause an effect of declining responsibility within the other? (cfr. victim - perpetrator - helper triangle)
- Can we go further than generosity on an ego- and ethnocentric level? What does generosity mean on a world- or even cosmic centric level mean?
- Can you think about a collective form of generosity ?
- What is the difference between altruism and generosity ?
- Can you think about generosity without any form of "*transaction*" (in exchange of being generous, you receive the feeling of being generous. So if generosity is about non-reciprocity, does it exist for real ? Or, can you accept that generosity is, in some way, always about reciprocity ?)
- How can generosity be a central element in the design of future societies? How can we by reevaluating the concept of generosity redesign metropolises and places where more people will tend to live together?

**IV. Creation of different characters which embody forms of generosity in today's society. The characters are based on testimonials of generosity in our lives**

To give more context about the play we wrote, we described each persona in a nutshell. There are plenty of different ways to express and experience generosity; we feel that these are only a few examples of a more diverse spectrum.

#### **i. The Invisible One (Jade)**

“Niets bestaat dat niet iets anders aanraakt” (Jeroen Brouwers): the invisible one does not know how to give or receive generosity, and therefore stopped existing in the eyes of others. They have been forsaken by society as a whole; in order to protect themselves from loneliness, they had to build a shell around themselves - forgetting how to be generous in the process.

When they witnessed someone else becoming invisible, they immediately felt relieved as they were not alone in this predicament anymore. By showing mercy to Waso's character, something they had never been on the receiving nor giving end of before, they learned how to be generous again. Both characters were then able to rejoin society together.

#### **ii. The one who draws generosity from nature (Clara)**

This character does not know how to receive generosity from others but instead feels nourished by the generosity of nature which they share with others. They do not care if or how the receiver perceives the beauty of rocks, flowers, insects,... they present. They are blessed by serendipity - the faculty or phenomenon of finding valuable or agreeable things not sought for (Merriam-Webster).

#### **iii. The one who doesn't understand the concept of generosity (Marjeline)**

This character seems incapable of grasping the concept of generosity. They mix generosity up with close concepts such as sacrifice, solidarity, altruism,... They are looking for some sort of holy, unyielding definition of generosity which makes them both unwilling to receive and unable to give.

Their stubbornness prevents them from embracing generosity as it comes; they have a rigid understanding of what generosity should or should not be in order to serve a higher moral purpose. Because they are so close minded about whatever they think they are looking for, they reject other people's ideas and acts of generosity.

They are unable to grasp the joy that others seem to get out of giving and receiving generosity, which leaves them feeling secluded. They were finally enlightened when the other characters reached out to them and shared their many definitions of generosity. This gracious act gave them the opportunity to listen, which appears to be a crucial step to being generous towards both others and yourself.

#### **iv. The Gardener (Nathalie)**

The Gardener believes that generosity lies wherever you look for it. Whenever spurts of generosity happen, their natural urge is to nurture them as to give them the opportunity to grow. By doing so, they are hoping to spread generosity throughout the world; shifting the currently dominant mindset of fear and scarcity to one of consciousness, abundance, love

and connection. According to them, this change begins within ourselves by staying open-minded and cultivating gratitude, hopefully starting a shift within more people in the process.

**v. The one whose understanding of generosity will be her downfall (Sien)**

They are prolific giver, but do not know how to receive; they even go to the point of forcing generosity upon people who do not want it or do not know how to receive it.

This behavior results in them feeling empty, and not having enough generosity to fuel themselves. Only when they realize they should care not only for others, but also for themselves, can they be generous again.

This character was meant to enforce the idea that generosity becomes sacrifice when you give at your own expense.

**vi. The one who is always asking for generosity but never gives any (Waso)**

They have a bottomless craving for generosity and demands for everybody to give as much as possible to them. Their understanding of generosity is one-sided; they see it as a way of filling the void they feel inside, as something to be owned rather than shared.

When Sien's character finally stood up to them and said "no", they succumbed to depression and were left feeling alone and empty. From this point on, they became able to interact with The Invisible One. This encounter allowed them to reflect on the consequences of their actions; after being shown mercy by someone with similar circumstances, they realized the importance of nurturing and sharing generosity.

This character was also meant to enforce the idea that being generous to yourself becomes selfish whenever you do it at someone else's expense.

**vii. The one who get generosity by dancing with others (Stan)**

"I am because you are, and because you are therefore I am" (John Samuel Mbiti): this character believes that generosity can be embodied by people dancing together; each movement giving meaning, purpose and energy to the next. They both give and receive generosity through sharing deep, raw feelings with others; therefore being witnessed, witnessing and acknowledging each other as a part of society. Their understanding of generosity is deeply rooted in concepts such as happiness, vulnerability and connection.

**V. Writing of a play illustrating our different conception of generosity (Scenario)**

Clara enters the stage and wanders around. She is pleasantly surprised that she found a stone in the grass. With this act she gives form to the image of generosity of a passive giver to an active receiver who acknowledges her by an open look and mind. Next Marjeline and Sien arrive on scene. Marjeline looks uncomprehending around while Sien shares her generosity unconditionally and desperately. Marjeline reacts to Sien's offer of generosity by

saying: *'No, I do not want your generosity' I want altruism!* This way we see the persona of Sien as a person who is giving herself away to others. A people pleasing character that finds it hard to set boundaries. Marjeline represents the confusion and disagreement about the different concepts related to generosity like altruism and solidarity who have similarities with but are very different in reality. Also during the process when talking about the meaning of generosity, altruism and solidarity we found ourselves sometimes going in circles and mixing up the different concepts.

In the background Jade is hopping in a desperate way. She lost all contact with her environment, but the desire for being in a generous state is fundamentally in her. Waso immediately accepts Sien's offer of generosity. He collects generosity everywhere but does not spread it to other people. Nathalie remembers the importance of generosity and wants to share it with others by pointing out small (f)acts of generosity to others. By bringing moments of generosity and being grateful for them, this is a way to spread the virus of generosity to create more connection and love in the environment. Stan is being generous by stimulating others to dance with him.

Sien gets exhausted by giving all her generosity and herself away. She collapses on the ground of exhaustion. Waso goes asking for generosity although she is burned out. Sien screams *'NO!'*. This way she is finally being generous to herself. This way we also touch the concept of loving yourself and selfcare. Meanwhile the other personas form a group in the background. Waso is surprised by the unexpected rejection. Lost and alone he sits in the grass. This grasps Jade's attention. She leaves the group that she desires to fit in, to join Waso in his loneliness. *'YOU, You are just like me!*' she tells Waso; blaming the group but also relieved to not be alone anymore. Together they join the group.

In the end of the play, Marjeline relaunches her question where she confuses solidarity with generosity. This moment the others say all together: *'NO, WE will SHOW you what generosity is'*. This is when the chaos is starting when every person tries to explain his view on generosity.