

Critical Friend Report

**Workshop TOWARDS PERMACULTURAL INSTITUTIONS:
CURATING TRANSFORMATION**

People Care: Allyship and Climate Justice

20. – 21. Oktober, 2023

by Angela Serino

1. The Context and What I Did.

The focus of the two day meeting was the idea of allyship: how do you build one? In the specific case of the gathering, the question was meant to investigate how to build an alliance between the contemporary art institutions and the climate/justice activist movements.

Inspired by the permaculture practice of Looby Macnamara and the critical take on permaculture discussed by Terry Leahy in "[The Politics of Permaculture](#)" (2021), I organized an activity for the group of participants articulated in two moments: a moment of exploration on the first day, and a moment of restitution the second day.

The intention was to create a comfortable setting to start an informal conversation among the participants and to use the permaculture practice to define a common intention for the group for the two days.

For the phase of exploration I prepared a series of 'prompts' (see further) and asked the participants to react to them first in pairs and then in bigger groups to gradually allow everyone to share his/her own ideas around building an allyship and being an ally.

I also proposed a question to think of for the duration of the 2 days, to be discussed in the 'restitution' at the end of the second day (see further).

Practical feedback:

- This activity I proposed was spread over the two days. Seen retrospectively, the exercise would have benefited if the same group of participants attended both days (most participants were different in the two days). It's good for the future to know in advance what people's commitment is.
- The second day, together with the curators we decided to give more space to the presentation of Camilo Pachón and Jakeline Romero. This has shortened the collective moment of 'restitution'/debrief on the second activity I had asked people to do.
- I was surprised that only a few people from the 'medienwerk.nrw' network were among the participants.
- At the same time, I noticed that several participants attended the event out of their personal curiosity towards the theme. Many shared their willingness and need to connect to other practitioners to search for ways (and places) to work together sharing a critical consciousness. This was a positive surprise and it indicated a concrete need for collective moments of gathering, reflection and action like these ones.

2. Permaculture and Allyship

Looby Macnamara acknowledges that there are as many meanings of permaculture as there are permacultures, but she offers these key points as commonalities among them all.

A permaculture approach:

- Uses nature as our guide
- Thinks holistically
- Is solutions based
- Is a design system
- Is based on co-operation and connections
- Creates **abundance** and harmony

I found particularly relevant her emphasis on abundance (here and in other texts she wrote). When we face difficult situations or conversations, there is generally a shared tendency to dwell on negative aspects: what goes wrong, what is missing, what does not work. While it is important to acknowledge the limits of the reality we live in and the processes we are part of, we ought to remind ourselves of what we already have. Looking at what we already have and sharing it with others can help us find new connections and possible uses together: this often provides inspiration to start small changes from where we are.

Inspired by these ideas, I decided to create an activity for the participants that would allow them

Here some of the **participants' key-words:**

On Allyship as trust

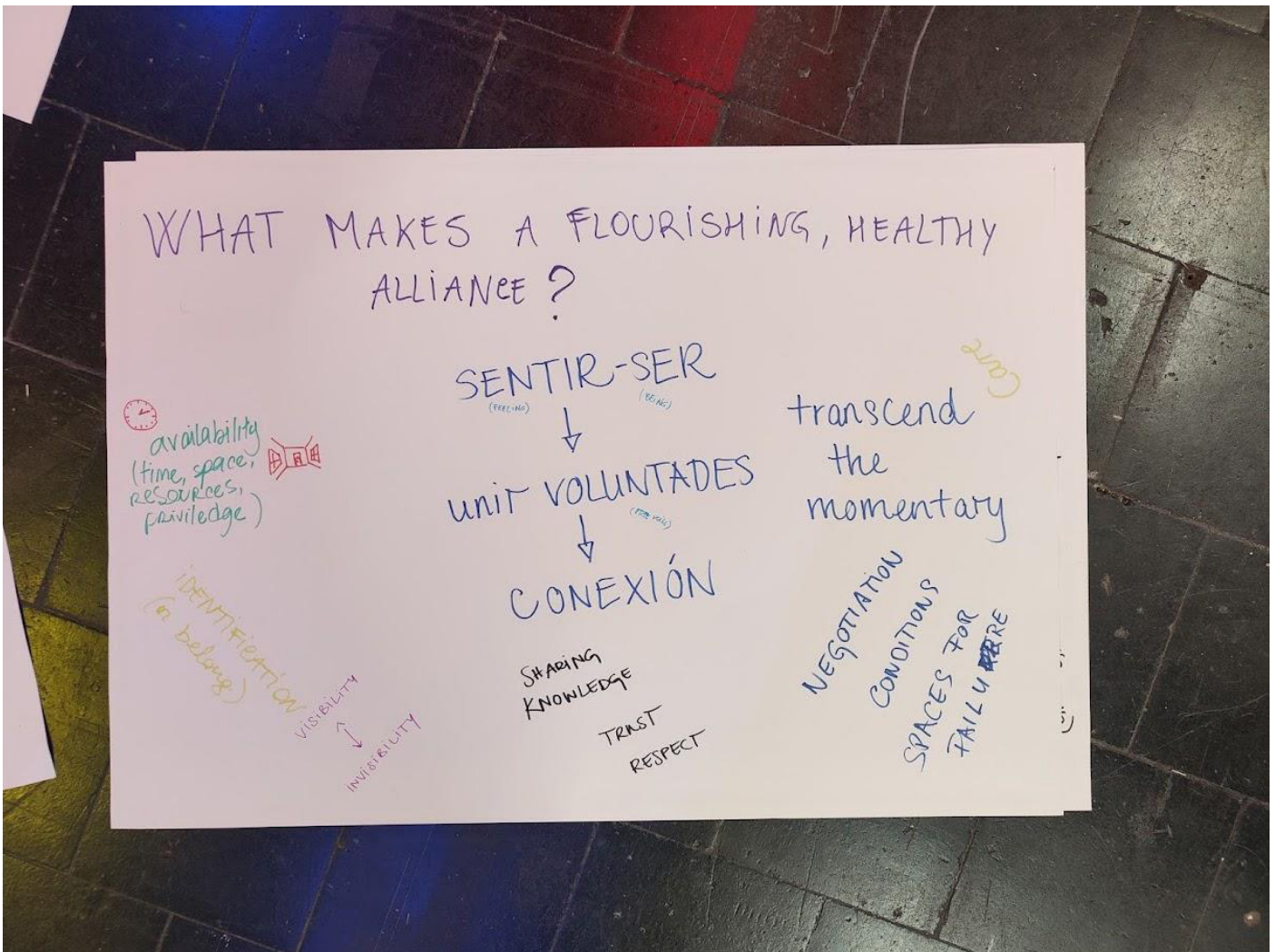
- dedicate time to another + work with low time
- no expectations to gain anything back
- reciprocal and eye-level relationship

Problems with an ally: imbalances of power. Need of being alert, to listen carefully and have constant self-reflection.

How to build an alliance:

- being responsible towards one another and against a common fight
- political alignment vs unusual alliances
- principles first (not opportunistic alliances) - having 1 shared intent?
- boundary setting
- privilege sensitive
- share a cause/interest while acknowledging differences and heterogeneity (different positionality)

2.B What makes a flourishing, healthy alliance?



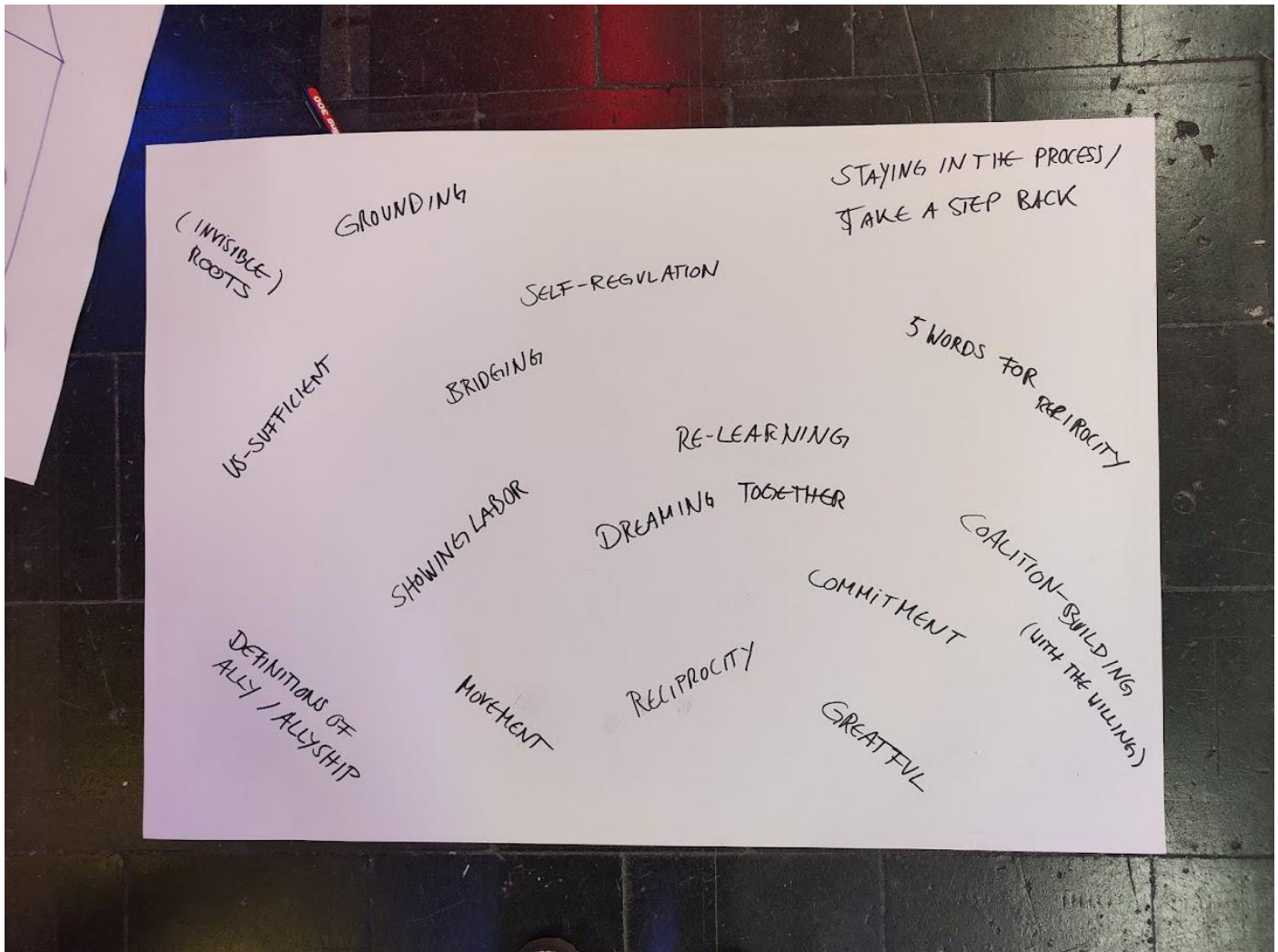
These were the elements necessary to make **an healthy alliance** according to the participants:

- Sentir-ser [Feeling/ Being] -> unir voluntades [Free Will] -> conexión [Connection]
- Sharing knowledge, trust, respect
- Care
- Identification and sense of belong

- Availability (time, space, resources, privilege)
- Having an impact that transcend the momentary
- Negotiation, conditions, spaces for failure

Other relevant questions that emerged during the discussions of the prompts in the second day were:

- Do we discuss alliance or solidarity?
- Can we speak of 'us-sufficiency' instead of 'self-sufficiency'?



3. An extra question.

During the first day, I also briefly introduced the 12 Principles of permaculture. I highlighted 3 of them, as I found them more relevant for the discussion of the day, and used the last one ('Use and value the edges and the marginal') to develop a question for the whole group.

The three principles I presented were:

- **Use small and slow solutions (principle 9)**
- **Use and value diversity (principle 10)**
- **Use and value edges and the marginal (principle 11)**

The last principle is described by Macnamara as follows:

"Don't think you are on the right track just because it is a well-beaten path. The most obvious solution is not always the most important and correct. Just because everybody else does it, doesn't mean there aren't preferred, viable alternatives."

I adapted this principle to develop the following invitation for the group:

'I'd like to invite you to **observe what are the margins (and the edges)** – yours and the ones of the others, but also of your field of work, of your organizations for instance, or of the discipline you work in.

Take note of what are the possible points of contact that you have or you could have with another: another area of yourself, another person in your team, another person in another field; another type of organization. (You can name it). You can take note of this individually and we would share and discuss it at the end of the second day.'

There was no time unfortunately to discuss the answers collected by the participants for this invitation. Partly because not all the participants of the first day were in the audience the second day, and partly because the time for the restitution was shortened and we focused on the results of the answers to the 'prompts' listed at point 2 of this report (section 'Permaculture and Allyship', 2.A -2.B here).

I like to think that this invitation stayed with some of the participants fostering further thought, even if on an individual personal level.

Final observations:

- Overall, the discussions held in different moments during the two days were useful to explore the meaning of the words used in the theme of the gathering.
- I felt that the programme put together by the curators was very inspirational and offered lots of input and specific experience on how to build alliances (from the activist point of view with Chihiro Geuzebroek and an institutional point of view, with Antonia Alampi, Spore Initiative – among others)
- During the gathering there was often reference to the (economic, political and social relationships) between global north - global south. However, in the conversations within smaller groups I heard a lot of experiences from participants from Cologne that described their way of working as being in the 'margins' of the main narratives/discourse supported in the global north. I wonder how we could use a more nuanced distinction of what the expression 'global north/global south' indicates.
So that contexts, organizations and people expressing a critical voice within the global north can emerge and be connected to other critical voices working in the south (=outside Western Europe). It could be interesting also to use other terms to indicate common fights/critical positions of groups of people and organizations existing in different countries across the world. – *could a new permaculture-art alliance be one for this?*
- Other challenges were:
 - how to create solidarity with places (struggles) that are far away from us
 - how to intersect and build a common ground among people and organizations from different fields
 - how to involve art institutions in this process (little present in the audience)

(Photos of the day <https://photos.app.goo.gl/jto2UqZwSy6yaBz17>)

Die Workshopreihe ist eine Kooperation des Büro medienwerk.nrw und der Temporary Gallery.
Zentrum für Zeitgenössische Kunst in Köln.

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