

A couple of years ago I took a short course called Introduction to Permaculture for Artists. I had a vague idea what permaculture was about through my involvement in environmental projects and particularly the community garden that I am now a co-director of. That inspired me to think about working with nature-based organisations in this Cultures of Care project. It just so happened that a year-long intensive Permaculture for Artists course came up in year two of my funded project, and it's that I have just completed.

The core of permaculture is a way of thinking and working that is beneficial to the world, and producing abundance with minimal impact and input. Typically permaculture it is about growing food in a sustainable way, locally and in harmony with nature. Over the last few decades, more practitioners have developed the ideas of permaculture towards social or community projects, working with people alongside nature and / or using the principles and ethics to guide non-food growing projects. I have found the building blocks of permaculture and some of the tools used by permaculture practitioners/project creators to be very applicable to artist practice. Some of it really isn't useful or relevant but that which is, is very exciting to explore. I've been following a course by Liz Postlethwaite of Small Things Creative Projects which is designed for artists and creative practitioners. The other members of my course cohort included academics, poets, teachers, musicians and writers.

It all connects with my Cultures of Care project : it's about curiosity, connection, creativity and care, the cycle of caring creative work that I have used as my structure throughout this project.

When I started the course, I was still very focussed on career direction of artist development work and collaborating with organisations to improve artists working conditions. I knew from that introduction course that I found permaculture ideas and systems really beneficial for my understanding of artist ecosystems. Over the course of my project, and the Permaculture course, I have changed direction somewhat and I am no longer heading in that same direction. As I started the course, I completed a very intensive artist development project which had left me very depleted and needing creative nourishment. Through exploring artist ecosystems through permaculture, and considering cultures of care in my other work, I realised just how much I needed to feed myself first, rather than pouring all my efforts into supporting others. I started trying to adapt my thinking away from analysis of artist ecosystems to using the tools and ideas to reflect on my own ecosystem. Some of this was very practical and some more abstract, for example, looking at sustainable water management systems made me think about rain water pouring down the drain rather than into water butts as metaphors for allowing a valuable resource (my energy) to leak away and only feeding the wider system, not my own garden. I love this kind of reflective thinking, and I've really enjoyed having new metaphors and ways to structure my thinking. As a result of all of this, I have redirected my course, the water, toward the deep well of my creative practice to nourish me long-term not just in short bursts. I have redirected the river of my practice but not in a concrete underground culvert, but in a rewilding kind of way, allowing a natural flow with flooding and wetlands, changing the course in a way that is right for me, in this season and resilient in different seasons.

This connects, is rooted, in the three building blocks of permaculture philosophy the ethics.

These are Earth Care, People Care and Future Care / Fair Share. I found these easy to apply to my own practice:

Earth care in terms of a sustainable, low impact artist practice, using as I have always done, old fabrics for the majority of my work, and talking about the importance of this. I have also thought about this a lot in terms of how I work, live and where and how I teach – most of my work is now based at home, reducing travel and studio energy usage, and I am pleased to say that on sunny days, I am entirely solar powered.

I have maybe moved away from this aspect of my work over the years – it's now 18 years since my book *Sew Eco* came out and I was front and centre of sustainable craft textile making practice. It's still fundamental to who I am as a maker and consumer but I maybe don't share that as much as I used to. I have always been frustrated by the light-touch work around artists and sustainable working that focusses only upon materials and packaging and not on the wider issues like travel and carbon in shipping our products around the world, or indeed using energy and finite resources to make things that ultimately we don't need.

But I also believe in creativity for its own sake, rather than for the purposes of capitalism so it's complex. I talked about this in a *Cultures of Care* talk last autumn on productivity and care and that talk, plus the great conversation it sparked, form episode 44 of my podcast *Making Meaning*. I would like to explore this more using permaculture tools to understand the complexities of creative abundance and energy use.

The second ethic of People Care is in two parts: the self and other people, both of which have been fundamental to my Cultures of Care project, and indeed all of my work for most of my career. Doing the course has inspired me to think about my socially-engaged work, my artist support work and the kind of projects I get involved in. Applying permaculture tools to funded projects, commissions from organisations and indeed working with organisations at all, is complex and really stretches my brain in a good way. I have started working on a checklist of things I think are important in projects for people care as well as earth care, asking questions about whether the project is regenerative or extractive – does it teach resilience and skills or capitalism and productivity. My artist friend Sheila Ghelani has done great work about care in creative projects and inviting artists to ask questions about where the care is in any given project, and where it could be.

This overlaps a lot with the third ethic, Future Care / Fair Share which I have been thinking about in terms of projects. I am regularly frustrated by community projects which are tokenistic and short-term, which is insufficiently caring for both artists and participants, and by the funding systems we work within which make this kind of activity the only way we can make money. I want to do more exploring of how my long-term work can have a different kind of outcome, more of a legacy with the people I work with and how I can build in more resilience for everyone. I'll come back to this later on too.

This is all tied together with one of the most fundamental elements of permaculture thinking which resonates so much with me. That's about being regenerative not extractive – leaving a positive impact on the world rather than a negative one. In terms of artist practice, we might think of extractive work being around working with organisations that treat you badly, about being wasteful with resources and about putting all your energies into something that leads no where, or nowhere good. A regenerative way of working might be collaboration and community, about creativity for itself rather than being productive to appease capitalism, about doing what is nurturing for the self, not for the financial growth of others. In between we have sustainable working, where things are better than the extractive landscape, there might be weekends off, a modest fair pay, and just about doing ok. It's not terrible, but it's not creative or personal growth. Alongside this is resilience, a way of working which is progression from sustainable to being able to weather the challenges of creative practice, and experience some really good stuff alongside, or in between the lows. To me this means having good networks, taking breaks, doing work you love even if it doesn't always make money, feeling able to take a few risks and have some breaks. Truly regenerative working is what I aspire to, what I would like to make happen for myself and for others. It's incredibly hard to do this in the social structures of capitalism and patriarchy that we live in, but if we don't taste it, we don't share the ideas of it, no-one will get there. In regenerative working, all our work is based around care – for ourselves and for our chosen communities. We are well funded (universal basic income for example), we are able to be creative for its own sake because creativity is valued by society as a way of living and

being that is positive in so many ways. Regenerative practice is nourishing for the self and for communities, it is a practice upheld by values and is valued by others, and it is stable, committed and surrounded by trust. And above all, we are RESTED. Not just having breaks or a bit of time off when it all gets too much, properly rested, all the time. Just imagine!

I have developed five key elements of a resilient and working-towards-regenerative practice which are:

Resourced

Supported

Reflective

Connected

Rested

That's the dream for me, that everyone should be able to live like this including myself. One of the tools we use in permaculture is around layers and zones of influence, helping to define what we can and can't change, and where our efforts are most effectively spent. In this model, I would say I am focussing on my strongest sphere of influence, artists, particularly but not exclusively, textile artists. I can't create a world by myself where everyone is resourced, supported, reflective, connected and rested. But I can create that world for myself and model that for others, support and enable others to think about what they can change in their own lives and practices to be more resilient and regenerative. That's what I am doing right now with this talk.

As I've said earlier, it's not just about my own practice, our own artist practices, it's about projects too, the way we work with other people and other organisations. Through the course I have been developing models for regenerative and resilience projects too, about ways to work better in community and ways in which to influence and create change in the organisations I work with. For example extractive projects might exhibit some or often all of the following: poor pay, unreasonable demands, limited ongoing benefit to the participants, issues with power structures and decision making, a top-down approach I call 'doing art at communities' rather than collaboration and shared experiences. Sustainable projects are better paid, have willing but not proactive or engaged partners, produce a modest public benefit but no long-term change. Resilient projects might be short-term but regular and consistent, they empower all those involved and they have good networks and support structures around them. Truly resilient projects are wildly creative, nurturing and inspiring for EVERYONE involved, there's appropriate development funding and support for the practitioners and the communities we work with are empowered, involved and nourished by the engagement with artists. Wow. It makes me feel fluttery and excited just saying all this out loud. It exists, in pockets, generally with organisations run by artists, but there needs to be more like this and if we don't know it's an option, we can't create it.

In this final part of my quick dash through some permaculture and creative practice ideas, I am going to share another set of building blocks, the Permaculture Principles. These are a set of guidelines for a growing food and projects around food and resilience, which can be adapted for

interrogating and exploring artist practice too. The original set was 12 principles, 1-12 but in recent years a principle zero has been added, with which I will start (and I will repeat and explore each of these in turn).

0: Respect indigenous wisdom

1. Observe and interact
2. Catch and store energy
3. Obtain a yield
4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback
5. Usage and value renewable resources and services
6. Produce no waste
7. Design from patterns to details
8. Integrate rather than segregate
9. Use small and slow solutions
10. Use and value diversity
11. Use edges and value the margins
12. Creatively use and respond to change

These can be interpreted and adapted in whatever way works for the kind of work that you are looking at. During the course I have used these to look at projects and working with organisations, my wider working life. I have also started adapting them for thinking about my own art practice, in which I am heavily textile-focussed and community-minded.

I'll go through each of the 13 principles, explain what they mean and reflect on how I see them applying to wider artist practice and to my own specific artwork as well.

## 0: Respect indigenous wisdom

This is the later addition to the 12 principles to recognise how much they have drawn on traditional cultures of land respect and food growing. If you want to know more about this concept, start with reading *Braiding Sweetgrass* by Robin Wall Kimmerer.

In terms of artist practice, this might be about true community engagement, working with people in an equal partnership, recognising and respecting all voices and knowledge.

In personal practice this might be expressed as trusting my own instincts, recognising the value of my creative work and honouring the labour of textile makers of the past and their legacy in cloth.

1. Observe and interact. This is about noticing first before leaping in to make changes, in a food growing context it would be about paying attention to the land and nature before planting. In artist contexts I relate this to being curious about the world, the context we work within. This might be about the communities we interact with in our own work and being part of things, networks and groups. For me personally this is

about growing my textile networks, getting involved in what's already going on out there and getting to know other people's practice.

2. Catch and store energy. I mentioned this earlier in relation to water and flow and wasting resources. In artist practice more widely you might interpret this as being efficient, re-using ideas materials, projects and repeat rather than reinvent. For my own practice this principle is prompting me to think about efficiency of my creative energy usage – one way I have put that into practice in recent years is creating this programme of Cultures of Care Group which has multiple outcomes from the conversations we have to the efficient use of 'content' in a talk, a podcast and on my blog. In my textile practice specifically I think about my collecting and valuing of historic textiles as catching and storing energy, and also recording my knowledge and ideas as a way of storing that energy for future use.
3. Obtain a yield. Traditionally this is about a yield of produce, or compost but it could be interpreted as obtaining an abundance of creativity, community or ideas – growth and nurture, not just income / products. For me the yield I want to obtain is time with textiles, I want an abundance of inspiring connections with and through historic cloth.
4. Apply self-regulation and accept feedback. This is about self-imposing limits on what we consume – only having what we truly need and knowing the limits of the finite resources we rely on. This can apply to

artist practice in so many ways, not just about material consumption but about the gathering of more learning and training because we think we don't know enough to be able to do or be what we want. For me personally this is about reigning in my ambition to start too many projects that I cannot sustain and probably also refining my antique textile collections, fabric stash, art materials and books to what I really need. I've done it once and it was really beneficial to defining and refining my work, so maybe it's time to start that process again.

5. Use and value renewable resources and services. For all of us this is about the stuff we use, buy, consume and create, and the systems we might buy into. In my own practice I want to focus on the valuing of old skills, hand sewing and very small scale production. I want to think about regenerative resources and services, rather than extractive ones.
6. Produce no waste. This seems quite obviously about materials and resources, and this is important but also as I've said, thinking about human resources, eating talent and energy on dead-end projects, skills not being shared. For me personally this is about developing strategies to minimise emotional and energy-draining projects as well as the more material specific things that I already do but could always do more of, particularly about fabric waste in my own work and projects and doing something useful and positive with what I've got.
7. Design from patterns to details. This is one I find confusing, perhaps because of the permaculture way of talking about project planning as

'design'. I reworded this for myself as Plan projects by looking at the bigger picture as well as the details and for me this means having an awareness of the networks and sector I work within, recognising the structural issues that cause challenges to the individuals within that system. For my own practice, I want to keep this dual-lens on projects – the details of how things will work, but also the wider impact and regenerative potential of what we are setting out to do. In a textile context, I might interpret this being aware of the complex histories and issues within the sector and subject and create in a way that addresses and challenges perceptions, assumptions and extractive behaviours.

8. Integrate rather than segregate. I love this one and how it can apply to projects and working with others: collaboration, community and partnerships are so important to my creative practice. In my textile practice I see myself as collaborating with makers of the past, recognising the connections and synergies across time and place.
9. Use small and slow solutions. Humans are small and slow solutions. For me this is about working, learning, changing and developing at human pace, not machine pace, about being steady and sustainable in all that we do. I hope that I model that small and slow practice already. In my textile work this really applies to what I already do – using hand stitch and slow processes but there's scope for thinking about this more widely and I look forward to doing that.

10. Use and value diversity. In a growing food context this might be about the range of plants and species grown, like wise in artist practice this might be about valuing different voices, experiences, learning new things and using a wide range of research sources and ideas. For me this is about being aware and connected to the diversity of textile practice, of ways of making, creating and sharing textiles.

11. Use edges and value the margins. This is one that I love too. Creative practice is all about the edges and the marginal places – artist practice is on the edge of mainstream society, community arts practice is on the edge of the edge and it's encouraging to think about that as a vibrant and beneficial space. For me it's about finding new ways of connecting through cloth, exploring the edges of my practice and how I might develop new things in the seams and hems.

12. Creatively use and respond to change. Creative practice is always about responding to change, we are always problem-solving to one degree or another. Thinking about this as a positive is encouraging, I think. We are good problem solvers. In my own practice, often at the crossing place between artist practice and museum practice, I am noticing the change in how museums exist and operate around textiles. This might be a gap, a margin that I can flourish in.

The final part of the year-long permaculture course was to create a project plan (a design as it's called in permaculture) and explore the implementation of this plan. I got tied up in knots about this – right at the start of course I wanted to create resources for artists, a course or workbook on using permaculture in your own practice. At first this made sense, it fitted into my ongoing work on artist support, but I didn't do it. It didn't; feel quite right, having changed my direction in the time of the course. I wavered and worried and doubted and questioned if this was something I really wanted to do or something I felt I SHOULD do, having taken this course with funding. Sharing is so much part of what I do as an artist. In the end the project I did was a reflective activity pondering the question of if making an artist resource was viable for me now, at the time.

Unsurprisingly, I concluded it wasn't and I didn't have the time nor the strong desire to create something new at this moment. I have captured and stored the energy, rather than expend it wastefully on something that I didn't feel wholly committed to. What the process showed me was that the best thing for me to do (emphasis on me) at this time was to use the tools and ideas to explore the questions around my own practice and projects first and then, maybe, adapting that learning into something I could share with others. I also thought about slow and small solutions for this conundrum, rather than creating a big thing and about the idea of stacking functions and resource efficiency where I might use the learning for more than one outcome. And that of course is what has led me here, to this talk, exploring how I have started interpreting permaculture thinking into my practice, and sharing in a small way with others. I chose to create this

Cultures of Care Group to share my thinking without it being teaching or resource-focussed, and this is the perfect space for sharing my emerging ideas. I have resolved to continue working through permaculture tools and ideas with a focus on my own textile practice next, and when one concept works really well, think about adapting that as a resource for others, and share this with my Maker Membership first. I want to embed this way thinking, seeing and doing into my own practice first. Writing this talk has been a vital part of that process, a small-ish and slow-ish step (if more than 4000 words and several hours is small...). I hope you have found this inspiring and interesting and I hope that you will see ways of incorporating some of the ideas of permaculture into your practice and projects.

I don't know if it was the permaculture course itself that helped me redirect myself or the projects and reflections I've done through this Cultures of Care project (including writing these talks every month), or my own deep consideration and thinking through journalling and working with a coach. I suppose it's a combination of all of those things, as well as with almost 20 years of self-employed creative practice and a move towards acceptance of my limitations from chronic illness that has made me realise that I need to focus on things that nourish me, feed the soil soul of my creative being. I have spent most of the last 5 years supporting and developing others

I have started making a checklist of practical things that would be part of a better project practice, built around permaculture ethics, for my own working.

-local, with minimal travel and maximum sense of belonging and connection

- limited purchasing of new resources and materials
- Having an explicitly ethical and or environmental message
- Use small, local venues, & put funds back into communities
- Be clear on the ownership of group / community outcomes and make sure they are wanted and needed, not a problem
- Can we teach skills and resilience rather than productivity?
- Can this project be regenerative not extractive
- Where is the money spent? Local, small, ethical
- Enabling repeat and adapted projects so we are not creating new each time
- Long-term projects for more efficiency of resources and energy
- Build local skills and talent

I've now begun to adapt and develop that list for my own practice too which focuses on work that creatively nourishes me, aligns with my values, enables me to share and connect, builds my networks and knowledge.