

Self-Organizations

SUPPLEMENT

Tips & Tricks for
Working Together

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**This Is How We
Work Together**

Carine Doumit

Intersecting Circles

How do you define your collective, **someone asked me**. Given the fact that you are three women, are you a feminist group? **It's funny that one doesn't really define what one is doing, I thought, unless solicited to do so**. How would we define the Camelia Committee? **I asked my collaborators Nour Ouayda and Mira Adoumier on our private chat**. I would say that we are friends, **wrote Nour**. The space of the collective is where we clarify our thoughts and refine our respective creative processes, she added. I would say that we are longing to create some sort of material unity in a world collapsing around us, **wrote Mira**. Coming together, thinking together, and making things together is a question of emotional and intellectual survival, **she added**. **As for me, I shared a drawing and wrote**: This scribble by my friend Daniel K. makes me think of us: evolving circles, revolving around each other, intersecting in various ways to create various compositions. To me, it signifies the various instances in which we came together and will potentially come together in the future. In the first composition, I am the green circle in the middle, intersecting which each one of you separately. This is how it all started for us!



A scribble by Daniel Kupferberg, Berlin, April 2023.

Not long after, I was asked by Mophradat to have online conversations with collectives and groups, from the Arab world or located there, who had recently come together, for various reasons and under different circumstances. The

idea was to find a way to convey what their experiences communicated about collectivity. The exchanges happened during the months of March and April 2024.

Against the Odds

Referring to the ongoing attempt to destroy the Palestinian people which had escalated horrifically in October 2023 and the daily Israeli attacks on Lebanon, but perhaps also to the region's collapsing economies, the reign of corrupt dictators, the wars disseminated here and there in the region, and the threat of a wider one looming over our heads, Ahlam, a member of one of the groups, noted: It has become harder and harder to acknowledge the facts we are witnessing every day and keep afloat, to contain our rage and maintain an active relation to the events, instead of adopting a retreated position. Coming together seems more and more urgent, **added Hashem, a member of the same group**, as we are subjected to the pervasive colonialism which assails us with impossibilities.

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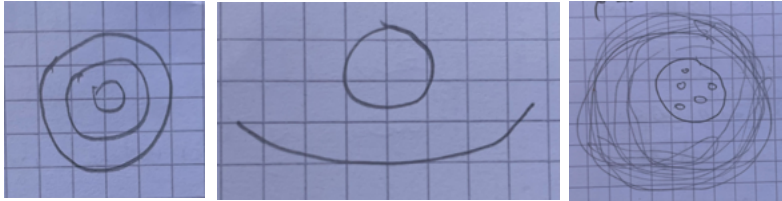
What mostly drives us is the lack of other alternatives, **said Mustafa and Abdulla**. In Somalia, there are very few collective spaces, no opportunity to work collectively, to share tools and resources. **Amid a general absence of genuine unions and syndicate activity across the region in the last decades, I thought, were our collectives serving, willingly or unwillingly, as substitutes for public social, economic, and cultural structures, because those that exist have failed to protect us or provide any sustainability? Does this void of public structures threaten our very existence as free thinkers, researchers, activists, and artists?**

Intersecting Circles (bis)

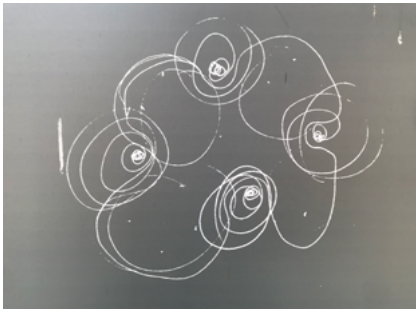
The focus is not on improving the future, but rather on acting out of impossibility. A desperate person can move mountains, but it is not hope that

drives them. Instead, it is anger, solitude, hunger, extreme unhappiness, pain, and an unbearable desire or need. *Ali Hussein Al-Adawy, Is There Autonomy in Hell? (2023)*

After October 2023 we hosted grieving circles, said Nada, Doua, and Sarah, talking about the multiple uses of their shared space which was thought of, among other things, as a support space for women in Cairo. I had already noted the recurrent appearance of the circle figure in other conversations. A circle to signify a safe space, or the group itself, or the relation between a collective and its environment: bringing more people into the circle // a smaller circle within a bigger circle // to enter each other's circles. I sketched the different circle figures as I imagined them, although I am not much of a draughtswoman:



Around the same time, I spotted this on a walk:



Anonymous graffiti seen in Bologna, spring 2024.

The intersecting circles appeared to be spiraling into central and more dense spots, as well as drawing a larger circle which contained them all. The graffiti portrayed both an inward and an outward motion. Together, the intersecting and spiraling figures composed a world of their own, *un monde en devenir constant* (a world constantly becoming) as Gilles Deleuze put it.

Rooted in Muddy Waters

As I thought through what was being said to me in confidence throughout the conversations, I wondered if coming together was not, first and foremost, instigating times inside time and spaces inside space, capsules which are both inside and outside of our daily lives, to think, to meet, to act, in spite of everything that leaves us helpless and in a state of perpetual postponement. We often wonder if we are, if our work is relevant, said Hashem and Ahlam. In stormy times, you either root yourself so deep that you become shielded against the outside world, or you drift away. So you have to work on having more control over the external factors which dominate your life and drown you in pools of insecurities. Despite acknowledging that the current phase might be one of political defeat, we have to look for economic, social, and creative ways, together, to face the impossibilities ahead. In a way, you have to teach yourself to be rooted in muddy waters.

Rooted-in-muddy-waters was one of many powerful images. It has remained imprinted in my mind, along with several other compelling thoughts and inspiring endeavors which I am doing my best to *translate* here.

Circles of Friends

We started out as friends, a group of people who lived together in a communal house, said Rami, Dima, and Ghaida. Games have always been an integral part of our daily lives. We

used to dress up as clowns and take to the streets, interacting with the communities around us. **Friendship was mentioned many times when I asked about the origin story of each of the groups, and this resonated with me.**

It all started by playing together, **said Nada, Doua, and Sarah.** We even decided on a day when we would all come together and play. **Within the context of performing arts, I thought, “to play” can be used as a synonym for “rehearse,” to repeat gestures or words over and over. Even for a brief moment, this might give a sense of control over time. “To play” could also signify, in specific contexts, “to play a role” or even “to roleplay,” to be liberated from the shackles of one’s identity and/or cultural, social, and economic restraints. Different groups of bodies “playing together” can be unpredictable again, even if briefly, I thought. I tried to imagine what would happen if these small armies of players multiplied...**

During the conversations, it was argued in many instances that when friendship is the reason a group of people come together, it can come in the way of collective harmony. It is harder to manage the emotional realm when boundaries between the private and the collective blur, and individuals might find themselves in messy and even chaotic situations. However, it was also argued that every group of friends needs a purpose or it will collapse. **To be part of a group of people with a common purpose is therefore a way to preserve friendship. Whether friendship allows for things to happen or complicates things, whether we work together because we want to become friends or we become friends because we want to work together, friendship is a driving force to be reckoned with.**

Haphazard Encounters

But what if a collective is a group of strangers who did not initially know that they shared interests or were

searching for similar things? We clicked very fast. **I heard this expression a few times.** I love “where” we met, **said Lubna and Shazia. Describing the event where the meeting happened, Lubna added:** An event is always bigger than the event itself. Perhaps we bonded over rage and grief. Perhaps also over joy. Coming from India and living in the UAE, **added Shazia,** we were looking to meet people who shared a certain origin, which implies singularities outside family structures and dynamics. We discovered similar ways of negotiating the relationship with our identities. This is probably “where” the conversation between us started, concluded Lubna, then it fizzled out into something bigger.

I instantly related to that sense of relief in finding each other. At some point, one of them noticed that the other was pensive. What’s on your mind, she asks her softly. A few months back, these two women were perfect strangers, I thought. Now they have the ability to read each other from behind the screen. It reminded me of what Audre Lorde wrote about being part of circles of Black lesbian women in the US, fighting patriarchy among other things. Could it possibly apply to our circles as well?

[...] I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought. This deep participation has often been the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before. Audre Lorde, Uses of the Erotic (1978)

We Came Together to Stay Independent

I began to comprehend an important fact about the various groups: they might act as a unit now, but they were pre-existing entities to begin with, individuals who had been part of other groups, groups faced with accumulated collective failed experiences. As individuals and as groups, they are now looking to find new and more adapted ways to be functional and sustainable, or for ways to simply be in the company of one another in spaces where they can feel both safe and challenged.

We did not feel safe working with and within institutions, **admitted Lubna and Shazia, who were not the only ones to mention this.** We are a group of radical friends, as we like to call ourselves, **said Ammar, Nour, and Ali.** We got together in the face of art institutions which act as gatekeepers. We wanted to have a say at who decides what is art and what is not art, more specifically, about what art is and art is not. We were organizing to take ownership of our own work and therefore of our own narrative. A collective is a support system, **added Sadiq and Bashayer.** We came together to stay independent.

Together, in solidarity with one another, I thought, we can negotiate our stormy relationships with dominant structures. Isn't it what Ali Al-Adawy meant when he wrote this?

Artistic autonomy is a struggle, an inseparably material and immaterial negotiation, and a practice of institutionalized artistic labor for singularity, self-organizing collectivity, and political agency. Ali Hussein Al-Adawy, Is There Autonomy in Hell?

Building Tools, Resources & References

Coming together is not about the people, **said Bashayer and Sadiq,** it's about the shared interest. **Amid the current struggles to make ends meet, let alone get things done, this sounded to me like a view of the collective as a pool of tools and resources where one can find both material and moral support.** The purpose of the group is sharing resources, **said Yara, Zaher, Marielise, and co.,** and part of the resources is moral support. It is also about sharing knowledge, **said Sarah, Doua, and Nada.** We share our knowledge with each other and with others. We call this: ذكاة المعلومة (giving away information).

Coming together in the absence of clear references encourages you to search for fragments of experiences which start to gradually form your own canvas of references. Even though most of us are defining the



situated scapes - Tomorrow's Yesterday - Azore; situated scapes - tools for tomorrow, Cairo; situated scapes - with each other, Lisbon. From: Ali Talaat, Gustavo Ciriaco, Nada Hesham, and Ebrahim Bahaa, Situated Scapes | Tools, Tales and Transition (narrative report for Mophradat's Self Organizations 2024). Photography: Mariana Lopes, Ali Talaat, Aly Soliman.

experience as we go, I thought, a collective experience can also have a very specific driving force which is sometimes the research itself. In our case, said Ali and Nada, the orientation point for the group was a research project conducted by one member. The role of the other members was to interact with the research and suggest a set of tools to develop and materialize it.

The Case of the Multi-Headed Dancing Broom

We worked on developing set of tools, a tool kit, explained Ali and Nada. From there, a specific and singular physical object was created, which can be called the multi-headed dancing broom. Developed and evolved through various choreographies, the object signifies the dynamics of the group (we followed a simple motto: join > unify > balance, they said) because of its shape but also because of the stretch-and-release movement it generates: حركة بتشد وبتزق. The multi-headed broom materialized the current need to limit the voices in the group, looking for one unifying voice which would work for all, said Ali and Nada.

The Case of the Deconstructed Salad

Another experience based on research conducted by one member of a group was the deconstructed salad project. Conducted from the collective kitchen in Cairo, the project instigated a historical and geographical deconstruction based on a study of socio-political influences and crop migration. It also led the group to questions about scarcity and abundance; the current economic hardship in Egypt due to the financial crisis—the tea and sugar shortage, for example—extended the project beyond the cooking aspect.

And it was not only about nourishment, said Rana, Nour, Mariam, and Amy, but also about tasting, which meant it

was about navigating our individualities. The anti-garlic version of the salad was outvoted. Sometimes this is how it works, and you have to accept it. **The kitchen became a space where all of these negotiations** around history, economics, nourishment, and taste **could take place.**

Let's Talk About Conversation

There are people, I cannot understand a thing they say. Even if they say something simple, even if they say, Pass me the salt. I still have to ask myself, What are they saying? Gilles Deleuze (in Abécédaire, F comme Fidélité)

As obvious as it may sound, being together requires talking together. For many groups, discussions, reports, and collected testimonies were taking up a big chunk of the time spent together. For some, it was essential to define roles during meetings and come up with concrete outcomes after each conversation. Others were more flexible. Even though many ideas remain from one meeting to the next, others are lost along the way, said Nada from one group and Ahlam from another. So we just have to let those ideas go, until they resurface again.

Going back and forth between group meetings and one-on-ones can sometimes be efficient in managing the different paces and misunderstandings that might slow down the conversation, said Beshoy and Mehdi. Not everyone is equally comfortable with the kind of intimacy that conversing requires, but Rana, Nour, Mariam, and Amy mentioned that communication can also be achieved by being actively present, even in listening and observing.

Through the Looking-Screen

To work together, one has to be in the presence of others. We are actively working together, shared Mehdi and Beshoy, despite the fact that some members of the group have

actually never met in person. Our space became the digital world: WhatsApp groups, Zoom meetings, Google sheets, etc., **they explained**. Since the pandemic, we no longer regard this as a constraint, but as a way to challenge our exploded geographies. When we used a Google sheet as a canvas for the ideas, and watched our thought process build up directly on paper, **they added**, we realized that even though we hope we could, we don't actually need to be physically together. **As part of a collective which has learned to function despite being a long-distance relationship, I could not argue against that!**

On Cohabitation

For groups who were already cohabitating, sharing communal houses or collective spaces shaped the dynamics. Mansion was often mentioned by those living and working in Beirut. This was a space that hosted different groups for years, but also witnessed many transformations of the city.

In cities such as Cairo or Hargeisa, groups often had to work with smaller, perhaps more limited spaces. It took them a long time to find spaces, recycle them, and adapt them to their needs and desires. Spaces were chosen for their balance between intimacy and accessibility. They were both closed and open. Our movement studio, which was situated in a residential building, was kind of a secret space with no sign leading to it, **said Nada, Doua, and Sarah**. Even though we were attached to the idea of the space, we knew we could not grow there, because of the nature of the space also.

For us, **said Mustafa and Abdulla**, the studio in Hargeisa was a dream come true. Once a school for children, it became a place for both individual and collective work. Occupying a space together not only implies overlapping times but also interchanging tools, assets, practices, and interests. The shared space is a creative trampoline, **added Abdulla**, expanding the creative boundaries and driving you to push your individual

practice. This is what happened with me since the work studio was created.

Talking about the different spaces the groups inhabit-ed, I noted two keywords: porousness and expandability. It seemed that what we all look for in a space, whether we find it or not, is a mix of safety and openness. As someone put it: semi-private spaces.

Far Away from the City

We wanted to get away from Beirut. Things kept getting harder and harder there, **said Yara, Zaher, Marielise, and co**. We wanted to create social and cultural networks within the villages and small towns we were born in and/or villages and small towns we chose to live in, **explained Yara**. Then we started inviting each other to each other's villages and small towns, **added Marielise**, learning more about the dynamics at work in the different communities. This is when the idea of a "network of networks" was born.

I found the potential for things to be simultaneously collective and decentralized inspiring. This was mentioned by Ahlam when she talked about the time after her group had to leave Mansion. The festival they were organizing got dispatched to communal spaces outside of the capital. We were moving around together, sharing our work, and discovering all kinds of potential spaces to gather and share time with each other and subsequently with the people related to these preexisting spaces. To us, **she said**, this is part of building a bigger network.

The function of a network, Deleuze suggested (in *Abécédaire, R comme Résistance*), is to resist and to create. Describing networks as imperceptible relations with imperceptible people, he argued that they evolve in imperceptible territories, and this echoed with something Marielise had said...

Like Mushrooms in a Forest

بلادنا مقطعة أوصالها، بدنا نرجع نحكيها مع بعضها (The country—Lebanon—is in pieces, we need to knit it back together). We are doing that by inviting people to be more involved in their communities, **Marielise explained**. In doing that, don't you get confronted with the warlords' hegemonic structures? **I asked the group**. Well, we accept that we can't beat those in power at their own game, **they answered**. We have to teach ourselves to outsmart them, to lure them into letting us do what we want to do. In a sense, we are partners in crime.

Describing themselves as شبكة تشبيك (a networks of networks), they insisted on the importance of opening spaces for discussion and including, in the ecological and artistic projects they are conducting, the communities of the places they have adopted or come back to. Could it be that we are really the nucleus for change in the future? **asked Zaher. The group had recently met with other networks as part of a large event they had organized in Tripoli. When you find people who speak the same language, I thought, you can feel such immense relief, a joy that resembles hope, and you willingly let yourself get fooled again, even though you are deeply aware of the consequences. The excitement the group shared with me was so sincere that it was contagious.** I like to think of us as being mushrooms in a forest, **concluded Marielise**, we can grow anywhere, unnoticed. In fact, we are what connects the trees together. We believe this is the only way change can happen, through these imperceptible movements, almost invisible and therefore hard to control.

The Perfectionist, the Cynic, the Romantic, the Practical & All the Others in Between

إنا ما باقيتش دماغ وحدة (I am no longer one brain only), **said Beshoy, explaining that after working collectively he**

can no longer resort to working alone. But “being many brains” comes with increased risks of neurological dysfunction, and both unpredictable accords and discords, I thought! I am the cynic in the group, **said Mehdi**. Others can be more romantic. With time, we learn to humor our flaws, instead of being in constant battles against each other. **If some of us are incurable idealists or cynics, others perfectionists, and others thrive in chaos, how can all our personalities reach some sort of balance and unity?**

In a kitchen there can be two kinds of cook: the one who cooks the same meal to perfection and the one who likes to experiment, **said Rana & co. How do these two cooks manage to put a meal together then? Perhaps by clearly defining their roles?** I am good at multitasking and find it hard to delegate, so I tend to take on a lot, **said Nada**, and then I crack. **It is not always easy to apprehend the paradoxes a group is faced with, let alone those of an individual within a group.** I sometimes struggle with taking initiative through fear of taking on a leadership role, **admitted Dima. Talking about this problem from another group, Mustafa said:** We have come to accept the fact that the group “leader” is merely the one that has more time on his hands and is willing to give it to the collective.

On the other hand, some of us are more privileged than others as they don't have to work full-time jobs, **said Lubna and Shazia**. This is why the third member in our group could not be with us today. However, when worldly factors bleed into the group, it is the way we handle situations where we have been apart that brings us closer together afterwards, **they concluded**. It helps to remember that when we have reached a deadlock, something small and concrete can be enough to keep going. It can be as simple as putting up an Instagram post.

How to Maintain the Flow, Contain the Cracks, Resist the Ripple Effect & Break Up (If We Have To)

Inspired by the 25 headings of “An alphabet of suggestions for collaborating,” proposed by Jenifer Evans in this publication, I decided to compile a number of direct actions, mentioned here and there throughout the conversations, sometimes by more than one group, and which can serve as additional “tips” on how to better work together:

- We humor our flaws (my personal favorite!).
- We play together to alleviate the tensions.
- When needed, we ask for an outside eye, a mediator.
- We create spaces for caretaking outside of the working spaces.
- We take turns between the artistic, the managerial, and the internal communication tasks.
- We willingly fill in for each other when needed.
- We make sure to take the time for a check-in, a time to sync up our intentions.
- We learn to be okay with slowness and inefficiency.
- We accept that we do not need to answer all the questions that are raised.
- We accept what we are not in control of and let go of the end product.
- We try as much as possible to define what we don't want.
- We learn to accept that in many instances, we are simply figuring things out as we go.

Sometimes, Everything Just Falls into Place

... and it is a strength that resembles magic, **said Rami, Dima, and Ghaida**. There was a time in the conversation with the group when, sharing in confidence the emotional hardships that collective work can trigger, one of them recalled the moment when another of them dressed up as a clown and took to the street again. Faces lit up as they described the simple joy of interacting spontaneously with people, which was the reason they came together in the first place. At that moment, everything just fell right back into place, **they agreed**. To me, as long as the desire to work together is still there, **concluded Ghaida**, I have to continue, no matter how hard things might seem at times.

Building collectives is about invoking “the spirit of the collective,” trying to find the magic formula for things to work, **said Hashem**. Whether it is working or not, it is important to chose to stop questioning the very idea of being together every time we are faced with difficulties. Because when we have experienced something, even if only once, **he added**, we know we can aspire to it again.

Archiving Processes & Processing Archives

Following extensive phases of action, it might be time for self-reflection. Some have found that using such times to create and organize an archive of the collective is a good way to make sense of the experience. We have decided to conduct interviews with the members of the group and ask about our past experiences together, **Rami, Dima, and Ghaida explained**. This archive is some sort of message in a bottle for future collectives or researchers. Among the questions that might be raised during the process of self-reflection, **added Rami**, there is this one: are we looking to be part of a project-based collective or do we want to establish a more permanent structure? For our group, a rigid structure

seemed to be counterintuitive. Perhaps what the group needs is “clarity” rather than “structure,” **he suggested.**

One Collective Leads to Another

We work on building alliances, **said Ammar, Nour, and Ali.** This doesn’t only bring new perspectives but opens up our circle to other circles in other countries in the region. We actively support members being part of different groups at the same time, **said Yara, Marielise, Zaher, and co.** The connection to others can either be made through individuals within the group or through the nature of the spaces we occupy and which can host our ever-growing network of allies. In the future, **they added,** we can plan on creating a database of allies and resources, including all organizations working in the same fields. As a cooperative, **said Hashem and Ahlam,** we might even suggest the creation of a collective treasure fund which could include other groups who also function as cooperatives.

These endeavors, meant to expand networks and means, seemed closely related to each other and I wondered if any of the groups would end up crossing paths. I was reminded of the graffiti I saw in the park in Bologna, the intertwined circles figure. There is nothing else but accumulated time, conversation, and experience which can alleviate our complicated relationship to the present, I thought.

Conclusion: This is How We Work Together

Ideas come from a person and are communicated to others who either adhere to them or not, **said Hashem.** Unless there is some sort of telepathy! **he added mischievously. This idea was reiterated by another group.** Let’s not kid ourselves, **said Zaher,** most of the time initiative comes from individuals. **When asked about how they defined themselves then, the group said:** We cannot say we

are individuals, but we cannot say we are a group either. We are both simultaneously, **and I assumed that he meant they had to juggle with this duality all the time.**

Isn’t it the same for all of us, I thought? We meet up, we talk, we follow up on each other’s work, we recognize ourselves in it, we cohabit, we are invited into each other’s spaces... it is slow and tedious, but we are weaving something. Some might say webs of solidarity. Others might say we are instigating a chain reaction. Or a contagion of systems which intends to create disruptions or provoke tiny, almost invisible glitches in the System. Slowly but surely, processes, gestures, and apparatuses bleed into each other.

I have come to believe that it is not WHAT we do together but HOW we do it which matters most. Form informs or even prevails over content. For now, this is what I conclude from my own collective experience and from these collective conversations.

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About the writer

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