

## **Summary of Consultations**

### **Introduction**

In my attempt to bring a new voice to the “With Care” project, I decided to have consult with Arab artists based in their home countries, but also those who are living as expats, immigrants, or refugees in other countries. All of the artists I consulted with are Lebanese except for one, who is Syrian. Initially, I had planned to consult with Arabs from more and different Arab countries, but then I quickly realized that I will never have a pool big enough to draw conclusions about Arab artists. Furthermore, Lebanon and people living in Lebanon have experienced numerous events considered to have induced collective traumas and, thus, their experiences can better be looked at with a similar context. I tried to vary the pool of consultants as much as I could at the levels of age, gender, main arts/research discipline, location, and communities they work with.

I tried to keep the conversations as informal as possible. I had some guiding questions that I would use to move the conversation forward, but it was mostly a freely flowing conversation. The guiding questions were:

- How would you define care?
- What drives your ethical compass when you’re working with people who need care?
- How would you want to be cared for?

I made sure that the consultations were one-on-one conversations. I wanted the consultants to feel free in expressing everything as well as create a sense of informality and the best listening environment.

One of my biggest challenges was getting case stories – or at least getting the details of those case stories. Most artists were critical about their experiences, and they didn’t want details about the stories they shared to be public. With that limitation, I couldn’t document the case stories the way we needed them in order to make sure that they are shared in a useful manner.

In my recounting of the gist of the conversations, I collected similar takes and grouped them together. I tried to be as faithful to the conversations as possible, but at the same time I was not sparing or hesitant in sharing my own opinions and/or relay their experiences through my lens. I say this because it’s important to include a disclaimer that as much as we try to be “objective” in relaying such conversations, at the end of the day this result you are reading right now is, whether I like it or not, affected by my own experiences. Furthermore, it was inevitable that my colors be all over the document since this is an attempt at capturing the essence of unorganized reflections and conversations.

### **The Consultants**

This is a list of the consultants with whom conversations were carried out.

- Wael Kadlo – Syrian living in the Netherlands (previously lived in Lebanon). Researcher using film and theater as a tool for his research.
- Jennifer Nasrallah – Lebanese living between Lebanon and France. Creative arts therapist and performer.
- Ahmad Seifeddine – Lebanese living in Lebanon. Stand-up Comic and artist.
- Abraham Younan – Lebanese living in Lebanon. Vocalist/Guitarist/Singer/Songwriter and performer.

- Mohammad Sabbah – Lebanese living in Germany. Artist, educator, and research working through film and performance.
- Carmen Nasr – Lebanese-British living in the UK. Artist and educator / Playwright.
- John Achkar – Lebanese living in the UAE. Stand-up Comedian, TV Host, and Artist.
- Romario Akiki – Lebanese living in Lebanon. Theater maker and artist.

### **On the Perception of “Care”**

A throughline for all the artists I consulted with emerged when trying to define care. This throughline is support. Different artists might have expanded on the concept of support differently, but all the expansions fell within the same ballpark. Artists feel cared for when they are supported emotionally, mentally, and physically. Some artists highlighted the importance of financial support, but most artists agreed that the minimum requirement to feel cared for is to feel supported, each according to their own needs of support.

It was important for most of the artists that any process of care be “participant-centered”. No assumptions should be made about what kind of care someone needs and sometimes all the care that’s needed is a listening ear. Listening seemed to be a cornerstone of all work with communities for the artists. Listening has also appeared in the ethical considerations of care (more about it later). In this process of listening, empathy is extremely important according to multiple artists.

Other ways care can be experienced are through appreciation of the artists’ work and time, access to resources that help with self-care, and transparency.

Since artists are wearing their hearts on their sleeves most of their time, it is important that artists have support systems. Support systems help artists through times of self-doubt, as well as help artists feel more inspired and motivated.

Care is also a cycle. The more you care, the more you will be cared for.

### **The Ethical Compasses of Giving Care**

The collection of the reflections on the ethical considerations of giving care from all the artists I talked to is that of a marvel. When put all together, they give a canopy over the whole range of topics. The details in between can be filled in based on each person’s scale of ethics.

The true north of the ethical compass of giving care is the community. The community being at the center of any process came up in many different versions as the ethical basis of any work with a community. The community-led, community-centered approach tried to ensure that no imposition of needs or values is taking place. It also means that no assumptions about the community should be made. Unless it is from the community, it does not exist, according to most of the artists and researchers I talked with.

Being sensitive to the community’s culture and “speaking their language” is one of the cross-cutting skills needed in the work with the community. Whether you’re a researcher or an artist or a researcher through the arts, it is of utmost importance that the community’s culture is at the center of your day-to-day behavior. Similarly, if you can’t get through to the community because of the use of jargon or a language they can’t relate to, then your intervention might be of no use to begin with.

Clear and transparent communication is also a light that the artists and researchers follow not to get lost in ethical dilemmas. This can be at the level of expectations or provisions or policies or anything else that will play a crucial role in the relationship with the community.

And that relationship wouldn't hold any ethical merit if it is built on a privilege that the artist or researcher brings with them. The artist or researcher should be aware of their privileges and make sure they are leveled with the community. The research or work are of no use if the researcher or artist isn't or doesn't become part of the community.

Traumas and other mental health challenges should be respected. Most communities have traumas or other mental health considerations that should have priority over any process. Having a mental health specialist on the team is also always recommended.

For that reason, empathy as a skill that helps keep our ethics in check has come up over and over again. Empathy is important in the way the artists and researchers are cared for, as most of them agree that empathy is a skill that those who have are usually supportive of them. Correspondingly, they work hard on building, maintaining, and improving their empathy skills in order to be able to navigate ethical dilemmas that surface unexpectedly.

On the other side of the spectrum, many artists also agree that it is only ethical that we "always give our 100%." Giving at the full of our capacity and making sure that the quality of our work is the best it came be is the least that we can do to contribute to the community. It is also important for us to be always present, giving whatever we're interacting with our fullest attention.

It is highly unethical to expect all the members of the community to express the same way, especially if that way is our way as well. Because of such unique cases, there should also be a space where expression can take place privately.

Finally, genuine kindness and honesty seem to be the best way to avoid ethical dilemmas to start with. These are the foundations of good communication and understanding; skills needed not only to keep the ethical compass easy to read, but also to build skills.

### **How to be Cared For**

Freelance artists have the most volatile of jobs on Earth. It is no wonder, therefore, that all of them agree about the best way organizations can take care of them: give them support. Support can and should be financial. Artists should not worry about paying the bills. Other than funds, organizations should provide health insurance, mental health sessions, and ongoing professional training. Last, but not least, logistical and legal support is something artists and researchers can benefit from a lot and takes a lot of weight off their shoulders.

Another thing that seemed very important to the artists is the clarity of guidelines and policies of an organization and how they are communicated. This kind of clarity shows respect and appreciation of the artist's time. A functioning system at an organization makes artists and other partners feel safe and cared for, especially if this system is created to minimize prejudice, privilege, and entitlement.

Freelance artists are not usually part of any specific organization. However, if they are cared for, they are not made to feel like they are replaceable. That feeling puts a lot of burden on the artists and that eventually takes a toll on their mental health.

Aftercare is also one of those things that artists find themselves in need of. If an artist is in-between projects or taking a break (which does not happen enough out of fear of not making ends meet), aftercare would be an important way to support that artist financially in that period.

## **Conclusion**

Listening to these conversations, thoughts, and reflections, I found myself nodding more than not. Not only do I agree with the collective findings and summary of these consultations, but even the artists and researchers rarely contradicted each other.

In the few times that they were not saying the same things but with different wordings or perspectives, they were actually adding an idea that had the other artists or researchers heard, they most probably wouldn't have disagreed with. This only made the entirety of the consultation more of a synthesis than an analysis.

One of the most important reasons is the impact of shared experiences. These are artists and researchers who, even though they are living and working in different countries now, have previously been part of the same collective experiences; be those traumatic experiences, healing journeys, or just history. The weight of such experiences makes the sensitivity of people similar, even as their needs may change.

Empathy and listening seem to be recurring themes in these conversations regardless of the angle from which care is approached. In a world that's becoming more and more polarized, about more and more topics, it's refreshing to see that a group of artists and researchers coming from the Middle East and working in different disciplines all over the world still value of empathy and listening so much that they are essential skills and needs when care is concerned.