

Interview

A Woman's Place?

Robin Kahn in
conversation with
Stephanie Bailey

In 2012, Robin Kahn worked with a collective of women from Western Sahara to create *The Art of Sahrawi Cooking*, an installation and series of events for dOCUMENTA(13). The project was inspired by a book Kahn produced: *Dining in Refugee Camps: The Art of Sahrawi Cooking* (2010), the fruit of Kahn's experience in the refugee camps of the Western Sahara as part of the ARTifariti festival in 2009. The project stems from the idea that the word *haima* means both 'family' and 'tent' in Hassanyia, the Sahrawi's Arabic dialect. For dOCUMENTA(13), Kahn transplanted a tent – the centre of Sahrawi social life – from the sands of the Tindouf Refugee Camps in Algeria to the soil of the Karlsruhe Park in Kassel, producing a

Robin Kahn's 2009 project at ARTifariti, Sahrawi Tea ceremony, Ausserd, Tindouf Camps, Algeria. Image courtesy of the artist.



people, their history; they've been living in exile in the hottest part of the Saharan desert for 38 years. They can't grow food and they have to rely on humanitarian aid for survival. The women collectively built each other's family compounds, using the only material available to them: the sand. It's amazing to me that they continue to have babies and to raise proud families with a strong sense of their history, traditions and identity. I was thinking: would I be able to go on and celebrate life even if I was just trying to survive? I wanted to go. So I wrote a proposal to be part of the festival the next year so I could stay with these women, follow them and learn from them. I proposed the idea of the cookbook so that I could spend time with the women inside their homes and try and relate to their experiences.

SB: And what was your experience at the festival in 2009?

RK: At the festival you stay with small groups of artists in different family homes. There must have been ten of us in this big central room where we lived together: we slept, ate and relaxed there and we would go out to work on our separate projects. The women of the house and their daughters were the ones who were there everyday making us a part of their family. Through them, I was introduced to other families and friends. I visited other artist groups in their family compounds and began to introduce my project to the women there, too. At first, it was difficult gaining access into the kitchens: that's a space that is not often visited by anyone other than the women of the house. It took long sessions of tea and conversation before each family extended me that invitation. After all, you can imagine that a lot of people have come through the camps over the years, asking questions. They've been there for 38 years and they have opened up their doors countless times to humanitarian aid groups, anthropologists and artists, but nothing happens.

SB: You have said of the cookbook you produced from this 2009 experience that it was the first time you moved out of the art community and started to approach Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs). Why?

Robin Kahn,
preproduction for The
Art of Sahrawi Cooking
installation, 2012,
dOCUMENTA(13).
Courtesy of Robin
Kahn, Kirby Gookin,
Maura Sheehan.



RK: By that time I had already put several large art anthologies together, as well as my own artist books, so I had distribution access to art venues. But for this book, I sought funding from NGOs because I thought that the audience really should be larger for it to have real efficacy. But the NGOs that I went to were not interested, which was really surprising. It showed me how little Western Sahara is considered within the global community. We're talking about a country invaded illegally and then occupied by Morocco in 1975 with two thirds of its indigenous population currently living in exile in Algeria. Those Sahrawis who still live in the occupied territory are not protected by a U.N. human rights mandate, which means they can be beaten on the streets, arbitrarily jailed and tortured. There may be several international peace organizations there, observing and making reports like the R.F. Kennedy Center for Justice & Human Rights, for example, which visited last August (www.rfkcenter.org). But basically the support fails to provoke an international response.

So in solidarity with their family members that remained behind, the people in the camps put their history, traditions and Sahrawi identity at the forefront of everyday life. They don't identify through the help of others in the camps. That's something they downplay very much and they don't want any photos of them waiting for supplies to be delivered or showing how they carry large sacks of flour stamped with 'USA' back to their homes. That is not how they want to be seen and that makes this a very interesting place. In a sense, I guess every culture controls its own image.

SB: So from the cookbook came the idea for dOCUMENTA(13)?

Robin Kahn,
preproduction for The
Art of Sahrawi Cooking
installation, 2012,
dOCUMENTA(13).
Courtesy of Robin
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RK: Yes, I wanted to create the atmosphere of the camps and how the women create a sense of home within the state of homelessness. The idea of 'home' transcends cultures. It's very familiar to how we – women and mothers – who want to do everything in life, wear countless different aprons. That strategy for creating a space that's called home, which we carve out, these women did that in the middle

of these camps and that is how I understood them so well, because that's what I do here in the middle of Manhattan. That is how we were able to share authorship of the dOCUMENTA(13) project.

Another part of the story is that after my experience with the NGOs, I met with *autonome media*, an anarchist publishing collective. Its editor, Jim Fleming, understood the cookbook's resonance and agreed to take it on. Once it was printed, I distributed it to my circles and he did to his, which is how Peter Lamborn Wilson (aka Hakim Bey), the North African scholar, mystical philosopher and author of *T.A.Z. (Temporary Autonomous Zone)* got a copy. The night that he read the book, Peter dreamt about a tent where Sahrawi women were cooking couscous in Kassel. The next day, at a scheduled meeting with dOCUMENTA(13)'s Director Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and curatorial staff member Mick Taussig, he told them about my cookboo, produced in solidarity with the people of Western Sahara and recommended that we do a project.

Original ads by Brazilian artist Vik Muniz (l) & US artist Rachel Lachowicz, 1993, promotional copy, edited by Robin Kahn. Courtesy of the artist.



Initially, our project was supposed to last only as long as the opening press days of the exhibition. I lobbied the curatorial staff for over a year to have it stay up throughout the exhibition's duration so that the general public would have the opportunity to engage with us. When the women from the Western Sahara weren't there, I invited all sorts of people involved in the Sahrawi conflict to make presentations. Word got out quickly and the tent was always filled with lively conversation, music, dance, food and daily events. Refugees from Ethiopia, students from Mauritania and visitors from many other countries began showing up to cook and share their own traditional recipes as a way of introducing themselves and their countries to the discussion. That was an amazing experience and it was great that we kept it up for three and a half months.

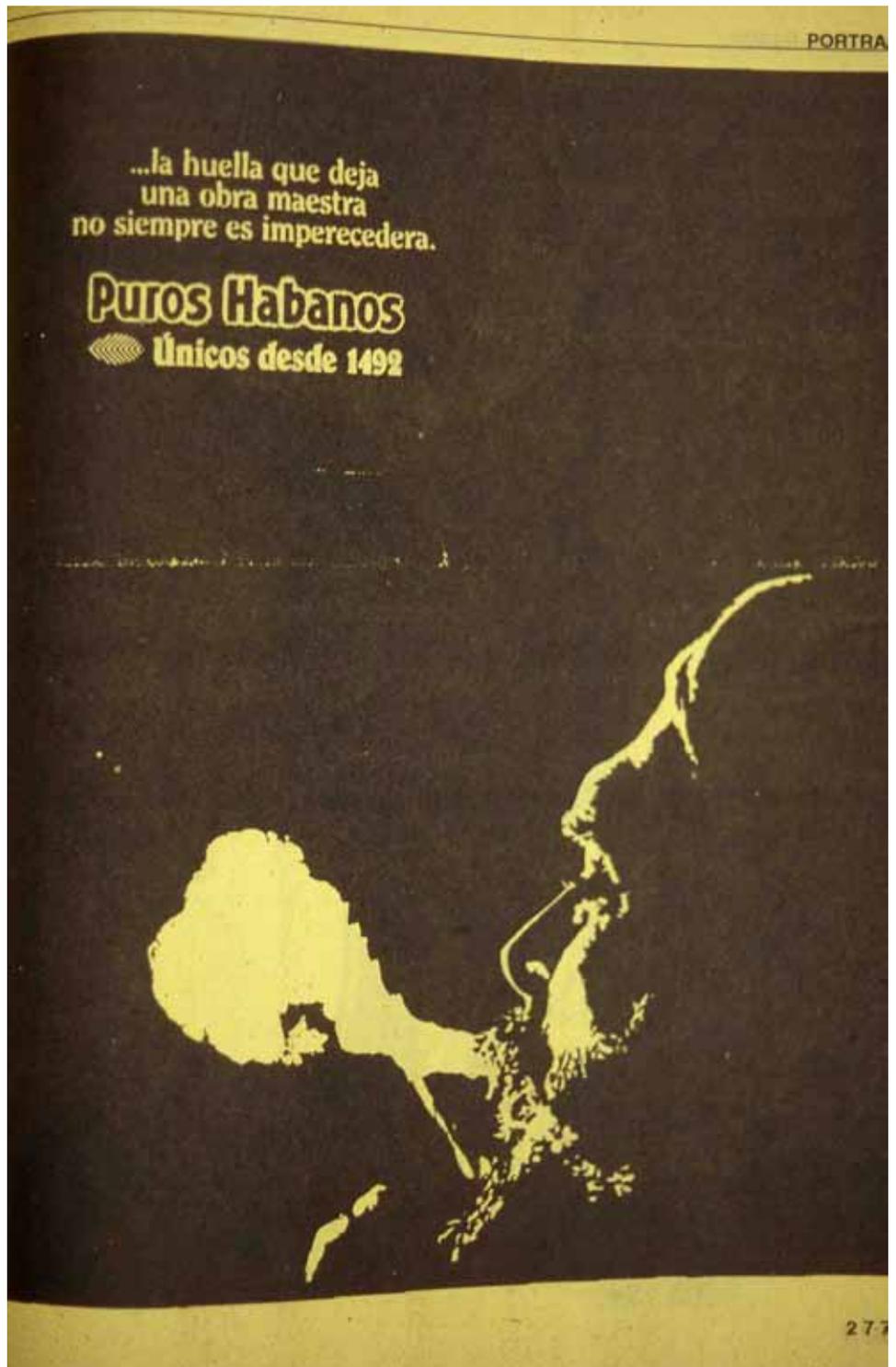
What we created at dOCUMENTA(13) was a Sahrawi home-in-exile in a park, instead of in the desert. For these women, they just wanted to make it as comfortable as possible for themselves and for everyone else. Even though I hadn't met six out of the eight Sahrawi

women before their arrival in Kassel, they all had this warmth, this indomitable spirit and a readiness to work. They immediately saw me as a sister and understood what I was trying to do, because it is what they are trying to do all the time, and we put our heads together and worked in the service of each other.

SB: I'm going to play devil's advocate here and bring up the argument that such projects are not unlike exhibits of natives from colonial territories presented in World's Fairs throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

RK: Obviously I know that tradition, but this is not about that at all. It was about engagement, experience and exchange. Basically, visitors entered through a walkway of large collages of images and

Original ad by Cuban artist Jose Toirac, 1993, promotional copy, edited by Robin Kahn. Courtesy of the artist.



text about the Western Sahara that I designed in the style of the cookbook. The last poster, opposite the tent's entrance, described the remarkable leadership of the women who basically run so many aspects of cultural, social and educational life in the camps. As you went into the tent, you received a small bowl of warm vegetable couscous. With heightened senses, you located a comfy cushion and joined a group of people eating and sharing discussions with the Sahrawi women seated among them. It was never about being an 'exhibit'. Every detail of the project was designed with the women from the Cooperatives in Tindouf to engage – the silky feel of pillows scattered on thick carpets; the dazzling patterns of red, blue, yellow, green and gold fabrics; the incense-scented air mingling with Sahrawi music; the sweet taste of sugary mint tea and the relaxed and easy manner of the Sahrawis sharing recipes, clapping, dancing, and talking.

It's not surprising that people are going to levy this critique because it's easy. The project reads differently on paper than how it's actually experienced. The idea might read as controversial; but the experience was a natural and spontaneous one. You never knew what was going to happen while it was happening. This was all facilitated by the meal and what the meal means to people cross-culturally, how it operates and how it is affected by the presence of these women. To enter the tent, you had to take your shoes off and make an effort. But that effort was an invitation to enjoy yourself, relax and interact in order to start thinking about what this is, where you are, why are you here and how you relate to it.

SB: How do you situate this project in relation to your practice as an artist?

RK: When I was a young artist, the norm was to exhibit one's work in a gallery context. That's how you measured success. It was considered the most desirable way, not just for its commercial reward, but because your artwork could be seen by a large public audience. But, when I had that experience, it was disappointing because there was no conversation.

Now, the interesting thing for me as an artist is that art puts you in a world with intellectuals, thinkers, cultural historians, anthropologists, mythmakers; all these people come together under the rubric of culture. So it is about seeing how we can connect our ideas and learn from each other: seeing how I can adapt my ideas to grow and understand the world better. I make images, books and installations. I put together projects involving other artists and communities. I make my own personal work and also organise public art projects. So, it is very hard for me to define what I do as an artist, though I do always deal with women's issues and that has been consistent since my earliest work because I'm a woman. In terms of identity, it is about exploring women's roles throughout time and cultures and relating those to my own experience and trying to learn from that.

SB: Looking at your earlier projects, like the *Time Capsule: A Concise Encyclopedia by Women Artists* (1995) or *The Intelligent*

*Manually
Shrinkwrapping
Recipes*, 1992, special
issue. Courtesy of the
artist.



Woman's Guide to Art (2005), I'm interested in your idea of the publication as a public space and your use of printed matter as an exhibition format. How does this extend into *The Art of Sahrawi Cooking*? There is also the theme of the feminine in your work, too.

RK: I'm not exploring the idea of the feminine, but the necessity for feminism. I remember in 1991, my work was included in a group show where I was the only woman artist and in some way, I was supposed to represent 'the woman's' perspective. I thought I don't want my artwork to represent 'all' women. But that is the way the system works. There is a checklist for diversity: include a woman, an artist of 'colour' and so on. It was then that I became interested in finding alternative mediums and spaces for 'exhibiting' work. The idea of the publication as a public space was about organizing an anthology of artworks and ideas – a group show – where contributors respond to a proposed theme. It was exciting to be able to create projects where so many artists who never had exhibited side by side in a gallery could do just that in a publication. First, I put together *Special Issue* in 1992: a photocopied manual of artist's recipes that have nothing to do with food. I shrink wrapped the edition but left it unbound so that when you broke the plastic open, the recipes went out into the world. From that point, I realised that books have a different life. They get added to, put into different collections, different libraries – they work differently in different contexts. So from there, I kept making these very open, anti-copyrighted publications. After all, books are inexpensive; they can be produced in large and they can travel endlessly from person to person and from place to place.

I published *Promotional Copy* in 1993, which worked on the principle of a chain letter: invited artists were encouraged to invite other artists who could invite others and so on. The basic editorial guideline was that as long as I received the contribution before the deadline, the work was included. *Promotional Copy* was a 'yellow pages' directory of free advertising space by artists, anarchists and anthropologists, whomever received and responded to the

opportunity. At that time, we weren't allowed to send mail directly to Cuba. So my friends in Spain extended the invitation to a group of artists living in Havana. Some months later, the Cuban artists, Banco de Ideas, emailed me their edition of 'Libro Arte Promocional', printed on brown kraft paper. Because all of my publications are 'anti-copyright', they were free to create a representation of the same idea as defined by the politics of their situation.

Returning to the group formed by myself, Kirby Gookin, Veronica Gil and Federico Guzman, this is an illustration of the ideas that really grew out of the four of us coming together and thinking about art. As a collective, we created a series of public art projects based on our shared ideas about the copy. A really good example of this collaboration is *Copilandia* (winter of 2005-6), a month long project where everybody brought artworks ranging from music to film, to images and books, all to a specific site: a boat. *Copilandia* was a 'pirate' ship, with free access to all kinds of copying machines so that every artwork on board could be reproduced, added to, taken home, whatever. Every visitor could add to the exhibition, make a catalogue of their experience there or take home an exact replica of the entire exhibition; a true celebration of the copy.

SB: Thinking about *The Art of Sahrawi Cooking*, it feels like you were somehow leading towards producing this project...

RK: From the center of Manhattan to the remotest part of the Sahara desert!

SB: From this, I wanted to think about this idea of expanding the exhibition space, as you mentioned in terms of your publications. In the case of dOCUMENTA(13), were you essentially claiming a space and defining or outlining the way in which that space would promote a sense of exchange, just as you might approach the concept of the publication?

RK: Exactly. At dOCUMENTA(13), everyday that space became something greater beyond anything that was harnessed by my

Robin Kahn,
preproduction for *The
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installation, 2012,
dOCUMENTA(13).
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principle idea, because through engagement it grew. It developed beyond my control and that is what I think art really is: a place of exchange that goes beyond what is expected.

SB: Is there an end point to *The Art of Sahrawi Cooking*?

RK: It keeps growing, but it does have an end point: when the people of the Western Sahara reclaim their country. But I suppose it will go into a celebratory mode if that happens. In the meantime, I am dedicated to presenting new incarnations of the project in order to engage our global citizenry in a discussion about the Sahrawi's peaceful struggle for the right to self-determination. I'm excited about having been invited to bring Sahrawi women, the tent and the vitality of the dOCUMENTA(13) installation to Texas this coming autumn as part of MAP2013, produced by MAP (www.makeartwithpurpose): a festival and exhibition of projects taking place in October and November, that aims to restore and preserve the environment, promote social justice and advance human knowledge and well being.

Robin Kahn has produced a series of collages documenting and responding to the experience of *The Art of Sahrawi Cooking* especially for Ibraaz, viewable in [Projects](#).

Robin Kahn

Robin Kahn (1961) lives in New York City where she practices the complementary and interchangeable role of artist, curator, editor, and writer. Her projects, committed to expanding the (de)definition of art, explore new strategies for engaging the public. In "*Milking Dada*" Andrea Codrington's 1996 feature article on Kahn, she heralded Kahn's collaborative spirit for "emphasizing collaboration over gallery kudos." (*World Art*, October 1996). Since the early 1990's, her work has been included in international art exhibitions and collected by both private and public institutions. She was recently invited to lecture about her projects at the The Museum of Modern Art in NYC.

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For information about the Western Sahara:

www.westernsahararesourcecenter.blogspot.com

About the author

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