

RETHINKING DEVELOPMENT

ROUTLEDGE

ARTS AND CULTURE IN GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT PRACTICE

Expression, Identity and Empowerment

Edited by **CINDY MAGUIRE AND ANN HOLT**



Arts and Culture in Global Development Practice

This book explores the role that arts and culture can play in supporting global international development.

The book argues that arts and culture are fundamental to human development and can bring considerable positive results for helping to empower communities and provide new ways of looking at social transformation. Whilst most literature addresses culture in abstract terms, this book focuses on practice-based, collective, community-focused, sustainability-minded, and capacity-building examples of arts and development. The book draws on case studies from around the world, investigating the different ways practitioners are imagining or defining the role of arts and culture in Belize, Canada, China, Ethiopia, Guatemala, India, Kosovo, Malawi, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, the USA, and Western Sahara refugee camps in Algeria. The book highlights the importance of situated practice, asking what questions or concerns practitioners have and inviting a dialogic sharing of resources and possibilities across different contexts.

Seeking to highlight practices and conversations outside normative frameworks of understanding, this book will be a breath of fresh air to practitioners, policy makers, students, and researchers from across the fields of global development, social work, art therapy, and visual and performing arts education.

Cindy Maguire, PhD, is Associate Professor of Art & Design Education at Adelphi University, USA. She also co-directs ArtsAction Group, a community-based collective of arts educators, art therapists, artist teachers, and educators committed to facilitating arts and education initiatives with young people in conflict-affected environments.

Ann Holt, PhD, is a visiting assistant professor of Art & Design Education at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York, and an adjunct professor of Art & Design Education at Adelphi University, USA. She also serves as advisor to ArtsAction Group.

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**Edited by
Cindy Maguire and Ann Holt**

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Contents

<i>List of illustrations</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	xiii
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxi
Introduction: Bringing forth human expression, forming identity, and empowering communities through arts and culture: Who defines it? Who is it for? Who gets to do it?	1
ANN HOLT AND CINDY MAGUIRE	
1 A temple of art in the middle of the desert: Reflections on creating Motif Art Studio and the role of art in the Sahrawi refugee camps	17
MOHAMED SLEIMAN LABAT	
2 A Painted Conversation: Narratives in community-based mural making processes	34
NATALIA PILATO	
3 Ojos que Sienten: Changing the narrative of seeing through sensory photography	55
GINA BADENOCH	
4 Turning higher education hierarchies inside out: Sticky encounters in co-designing a community centre using multimodal interventions	69
KIM BERMAN AND BOITUMELO KEMBO	
5 Creative teaching through solidarity networks in the Saharawi refugee camps: Desert Voicebox	86
DANIELLE V. B. SMITH AND VIOLETA RUANO	

viii *Contents*

6	Healing and education through the arts: A HEART-based approach	104
	GIRIJA KAIMAL, SARA HOMMEL, LAUREN PISANI, AND JONATHAN SEIDEN	
7	Cultivating Black diasporic memories and communities through community archiving	118
	DÉSIRÉE ROCHAT	
8	Cross-cultural collaborations through the lens of art therapy: Sri Lanka	131
	EMILJA MECELICAITE AND JANINE SIMPSON	
9	The arts and creative education as resistance and renewal: Kosovo	148
	REFKI GOLLOPENI	
10	Authentic and ethical fashion design guided by the heart	162
	ALEXIA SOBRADO	
11	Bridging communities through innovation: Art, design, and entrepreneurship: COPE NYC	179
	VIDA SABBAGHI	
12	Feminist art and education: Facilitating a cross-cultural exchange: U.S.–China Art Summit	193
	KAREN KEIFER-BOYD AND XINXIN GUO	
13	Moving the margins in Malawi: Culturally responsive art education for girls	209
	DARDEN BRADSHAW AND NOVEA MCINTOSH	
	<i>Index</i>	229

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Ann Holt, PhD, is currently teaching graduate and undergraduate courses in art and design education as a visiting assistant professor at Pratt Institute and an adjunct professor at Adelphi University. She serves as an advisor to ArtsAction Group, an international community-based collective committed to facilitating arts initiatives with children and youth in conflict-affected environments. Her research, teaching, and writing encompass social justice issues involving arts and human development and research on and with archives to broaden understanding about engaging art education archival records. Her art-making encompasses mixed media materials responding to her life experience, research, and teaching. Holt holds a BFA in painting from the San Francisco Art Institute and an MA in Art Education

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Cindy Maguire, PhD, is Associate Professor of Art & Design Education at Adelphi University. She also co-directs ArtsAction Group, a community-based collective of arts educators, art therapists, artist teachers, and educators committed to facilitating arts and education initiatives with young people in conflict-affected environments. Cindy is a member of the Teachers Without Borders Global Advisory Board and has taught K–12 visual arts education in Los Angeles city schools. Her research interests include STEM to STEAM and the role of collaborative and socially engaged art in personal and social transformation. Maguire received her PhD in Art Education from New York University, MA in Art Education from California State University Long Beach, and her BAE in Art Education from the University of Kansas. Cindy is also an exhibiting artist and designs and produces socially engaged art with communities.

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Natalia Pilato is a community-based artist, educator, and scholar whose work focuses on building the social capital of target communities through artistic processes. Her large-scale national and international community-based mural projects have engaged thousands of intergenerational community members in both the design process and the painting of the murals. She holds a PhD in Art Education from Pennsylvania State University. She attended her program as a Bunton Waller Graduate Fellow and has received numerous awards of recognition, which include: the Joy of Giving Something Award, Imagining America Scholarship, the Creative Achievement Award from the PSU College of Arts and Architecture, the Ingrid P. Holtzman Award, the Brian Betzler Memorial Scholarship, Alumni Honors Award, the American Association of University Women Outstanding Achievement Award, and the Business and Professional Women Opportunity Grant. Currently, Dr Pilato lives in Norfolk, VA, and is an assistant professor of Art Education and the director of the Art Education Program at Old Dominion University.

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Violeta Ruano is a music and languages education specialist with over a decade of experience in researching, teaching, project development, and management. She has a PhD in Music Research, focusing on Sahrawi music and resistance, and a MMus in Ethnomusicology and an MA in English as a Second Language Education. Throughout her career, she has collaborated with international organisations such as the British Library, the School of Oriental and African Studies (University of London), the British Forum for Ethnomusicology, and the Volkswagen Foundation. She has published about Saharawi music in numerous publications such as *Transposition; Sahara Occidental: Conflit Oublié, Population en Mouvement; Culture and Politics in the West Sahara (Mauritania, Mali, Western Sahara): Arts, Activism and the State in a Conflict Area* (France); *Memory, Power and Knowledge in African Music* (Germany); the *Journal of the International Library of African Music* (South Africa); *Songlines* (UK); and more. Dr Ruano has been working with Sandblast since 2011, charged with setting up the Desert Voicebox pilot in the camps. Between 2016 and 2017, she spent over eight months there training the local teachers, teaching the first year of lessons, and overseeing development of the classroom and donations.

Désirée Rochat, program director of the Observatoire des Communautés noires du Québec, is a community educator and transdisciplinary scholar. She holds a PhD in Educational Studies from the Department of Integrated Studies in Education at McGill University. Guided by an integrative approach connecting historical research, community archival preservation, and education, her work aims to document, theorize, and transmit (hi)stories of Black communities' activism. She develops collaborative projects bridging scholarly and community work and is involved in various initiatives for the preservation and promotion of Black community archives.

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Vida Sabbaghi, a cultural producer, is the founder and executive director of Creative Opportunities Promoting Equality New York City (COPE NYC). COPE NYC promotes social relations through art exhibits, symposiums, education, fashion shows, and community art projects. Sabbaghi is a consultant for NYC galleries; her curatorial projects include photography and film. She organized a three-day international art education conference and exhibit at Queens Museum and was their guest curator several times. Her expertise extends to traveling exhibits, including *Overlap: Life Tapestries* and *Repsychling*. She also designs programming, workshops, and discussions to accompany exhibits. She expanded COPE NYC's reach with artists-in-residence projects in Brooklyn, Taiwan, and Germany. Vida, an editor and writer for art publications, co-edited *Bridging Communities through Socially Engaged Art* with Dr Alice J. Wexler, published by Routledge. Vida studied industrial design; theory, criticism, history of art, design, and architecture; and art and design education at Pratt Institute; she graduated with distinction. She received the Pratt Circle Award for Outstanding Academic Achievement and the Certificate of Excellence Award for Outstanding Merit in Graduate Art Education. Vida received the Art Advocate of the Year Award from NYCATA/UFT and the Edwin Ziegfeld Service Award from USSEA.

Janine Simpson holds an MA in Art Therapy from the University of Hertfordshire. Janine has ten years' experience working with looked-after children in a London-based charity specialising in residential care and therapeutic engagement. In her consultancy role, Janine uses art therapy theory and practice to facilitate art-based reflective practice sessions for children's workers and home managers. Passionate about mental health and well-being, Janine has two years' experience as an art therapist in NHS adult community mental health services and later NHS forensic services. Janine believes in "well-being for all" and promotes a collaborative, side-by-side approach when working with individuals, communities, and organisations, on a local and global scale. In her spare time, these themes continue in her

work as an abstract expressionist artist where intersubjective theories are explored visually.

Mohamed Sleiman Labat is a poet and visual artist from the Sahrawi refugee camps in southwest Algeria. Born and raised there, he did his primary education in the camps before continuing his studies abroad. After graduation from Batna University with a degree in English Literature, he went back to the camps to help support his family and community through art. Working with different art genres and mediums, he is a photographer, a sculptor, a painter, and an arts facilitator. Coming from a desert culture, he is familiar with the long tradition of oral arts of the indigenous Sahrawi poetry and stories which he likes to combine with visual artistic mediums. Recently, he has experimented with utilizing discarded materials to create sculptures, which has led to creating MOTIF, an art studio in the middle of the desert. The studio is also used to facilitate art projects for others. Sleiman Labat is collecting the oral history of the Sahrawi community in the camps through video and audio documentation. The growing archive of oral history is part of MOTIF Art Studio's archival material. He is co-author of *Settled Wanderers, the Poetry of Western Sahara* with Sam Berkson, the first collection of Sahrawi poems to be translated into English.

Danielle V. B. Smith graduated with a degree in Biochemistry from Mount Holyoke College, studied Arabic, and received an MA in Anthropology at Haifa University. Her involvement with the Saharawi refugee community began in 1991. She began speaking widely about the conflict at universities, the UN, the UK Parliament and on radio and TV. In 1993 and 1994, she taught English in the camps, learning the spoken Hassaniya dialect. She has made two documentaries about the independence struggle, *Song of Umm Dalaila* and award-winning *Beat of Distant Hearts: The Art of Revolution in Western Sahara*, and was invited to produce the 1998 BBC2 correspondent programme, *A Forgotten War*. Smith's interest in the role of the arts in the Saharawi struggle led to the creation of Sandblast in 2005 and to the organisation of an arts and cultural festival on Western Sahara, in London, in 2007, which culminated with *Sand Tracks*, the debut album of the camp-based Tiris band. Between 2010 and 2014, Smith ran the Studio-Live project providing sound-engineering training and, in 2015, she set up the Saharawi Artivism Fund to encourage youth to creatively engage with their local community for long-term positive change. In 2016, she launched the Desert Voicebox project in partnership with Ruth Travers, the creator of the Stave House method, and Dr Violeta Ruano.

Alexia Sobrado founded BoBo GloBal in 2014 in a quest for authenticity, fair trade principles, sustainability, and environmental and cultural awareness through the visibility, attribution, and honoring of indigenous artistic heritage and craft. With her co-designer and partner, Felicia Lieto, the two women make annual trips to collaborate and partner with indigenous artisans in various regions of the world.

Acknowledgments

This book project is the cultivation of a deep friendship amongst colleagues (the editors) that started out of professional practice and a recognition of our aligning values around teaching and the role of arts and culture in global development. Our relationship flourished in spite of a world in crisis; most of the manuscript was put together during a time when social distancing replaced the lovely day to day exchanges in the office that buoyed us amidst all the inequity around us. With our daily routines disrupted by the Covid 19 pandemic, we spent countless hours together on the phone writing in real time, on shared documents, discussing and synthesizing ideas, and lamenting the seemingly endless list of issues going on in the world impacting the arts and communities in transition. Parallel to this was the pandemic snatching lives without proper goodbyes and people risking infection as they engaged in their daily work and/or in life threatening protests against police brutality across the United States. As we finish this acknowledgement, the WHO Covid 19 dashboard reports a total of 5,462,631 deaths worldwide.

Never has a day gone by that we didn't appreciate witnessing this book unfold—a beautiful reflection of passionate artistic engaged social practice. In that way, this book has been a wonderful journey for us in discovering powerful global arts based social practices and for that we acknowledge the authors who have joined us in this endeavor. We also acknowledge all those, everywhere, who are creating art because their lives depend on it. We acknowledge all the students who have taught us about teaching. We acknowledge our respective partners who have endured over two years of our countless over-the-phone writing sessions, with each of our voices, over speaker, present in each other's homes and lives.

Ann Holt
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1 A temple of art in the middle of the desert

Reflections on creating Motif Art Studio and the role of art in the Sahrawi refugee camps

Mohamed Sleiman Labat

Melting away

It hardly rains in this part of the world. Some call this area *the desert within the desert*. It is October 2015. The rain has not stopped for seven days and nights in all the five camps located in the Hamada Desert (Lecat, 2016). Very quickly, small water streams start to run down the solid desert grounds. Before we realize it, water is flooding through our tent and soaking our belongings. Outside the tent, water has slowly encroached and eroded the floor of our room; it is a mud room that my brothers and I built together a few years ago. The mud room cannot resist the erosion and falls down within 15 minutes. The room is my family's living room, my library, my workshop, and our guests' room (Berkson & Sulaiman, 2015). Now my books are under the rubble, soaked in mud, along with my sewing machine and my artworks.

A few hours later, the family gathers in the tent on a small dry island between the two bamboo sticks supporting the tent. My father is telling stories from his childhood as a nomad in Western Sahara. He tells us about huge roaring floods uprooting trees, dragging camels, and blocking the cattle for long weeks and months.¹ My parents have lived as nomads in different parts of Western Sahara, just like the rest of the Sahrawi.

The next morning the rain stops. There is a lot of damage: mud walls crumbling, broken furnishings everywhere, and clothes and blankets hanging to dry on the ropes of tents. It's an overwhelming scene, and I can feel the loss in every corner I pass.

Troubled past

I am a Sahrawi artist, born and raised in the Sahrawi refugee camps set up in a part of the Algerian south called the Hamada Desert. I live and work in Samara Camp. The journey of my people started in Western Sahara, located in the north-west part of Africa, facing the Canary Islands. It's now a conflict zone that is rarely talked about in the news.

Formerly known as Spanish Sahara during the Spanish colonization, Western Sahara is now widely referred to as Africa's Last Colony (Martín, 2017). In

November 1975, Morocco invaded the territory. A war of resistance led by the Frente POLISARIO broke out and only ended after the UN-brokered ceasefire in 1991.² Many Sahrawi communities sought refuge in Algeria where they established five refugee camps near the border town of Tindouf. These camps consist of basic infrastructure of fabric tents and hand-built mud houses. The tents symbolize the temporality of the situation as well as a connection to the Sahrawi's past nomadism (San Martín, 2010). The Sahrawi have also built schools, local hospitals, and other administrative facilities.

The desert environment where the Sahrawi have settled is extreme and unforgiving. The temperature can reach up to 50 degrees Celsius.³ It's different from the slightly moistened Western Sahara Desert where the Sahrawi originally come from. Here, there is not enough water, and the camp population is dependent on international aid. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 173,000 people living in the five main camps of Samara, Layoun, Dakhla, Auserd, and Boujdour.⁴ The camps are named after cities and places back in Western Sahara in order to maintain cultural connections with our homeland. It's in one of these camps, Dakhla Camp, where I was born, literally in a fabric tent, one cold February night in 1986—as my mom recalls.

For centuries, the Sahrawi have been the nomadic indigenous people of Western Sahara (Omar, 2008). They raised camels and goats and moved with their tents and cattle across the different parts of the desert. The Sahrawi speak Hassaniya, an oral dialect from Arabic and Amazigh languages. Hassaniya is largely spoken in Western Sahara and Mauritania, the south of Morocco, and some parts of Algeria, Mali, and Senegal (Zbeir, 2013).



Figure 1.1 Samara Camp. Photograph by Mohamed Sleiman Labat/Motif Art Studio

I write this chapter to share reflections on creating Motif Art Studio, a small hub for art creation and experimentation as well as international collaborations in Samara Camp. I highlight some of the individual and collaborative projects in the studio and the role of art in the Sahrawi refugee camps. I then share insights about the past, present, and future complexities of the Sahrawi traditions and my response through art and archiving oral traditions to raise questions of how we can relate to our past in order to face the present and future.

How it all began

My father, Sulaiman Labat Abd, is a self-taught artist who taught me the basics of calligraphy, crafts, and a love for oral wisdom and desert stories. My grandmother, Akhyarhom Limam, was a poetess. Both of them lived much of their lives as nomads in Western Sahara before they ended up refugees in Algeria. I grew up listening to their poems and stories and using my hands to play with things. At the age of 11, I had to leave the camps to continue my studies in different Algerian cities. As there are no high schools in the camps, all the Sahrawi youth go abroad to study before coming back home. After graduation from Batna University, I returned to the camps. I wanted to help support my family and my community. But I didn't know how.

In the first few years, I worked as a translator in the camps. In 2010, I was invited to take part in ARTifariti (www.artifariti.org/en/about-artifariti), the International Encounters of Arts and Human Rights of Western Sahara, held in Tifariti, Western Sahara. ARTifariti is an international appointment with artistic practices as a tool to vindicate human rights—the right of the people to their land, their culture, their roots, and their freedom. ARTifariti is about establishing connections through art practice as an annual encounter of public art to reflect on art creation and society. The premise of the encounter is that “in order to understand each other, we have to meet each other. In order to meet, we have to find each other” (ARTifariti, 2021, About ARTifariti, The encounters, para 1). This dialogical way of doing and making art—in conversation with other artists and communities—makes a point of contact for artists interested in the capacity of art to question and transform reality. It promotes intercultural relations, interchange of experiences and skills between Sahrawi artists and artists from other parts of the world.

The experience during ARTifariti also helped me build up my artistic skills as well as affording me the opportunity to engage in meaningful exchanges with other artists. I participated as an artist and made a calligraphy mural rendered into music-like notes. *La Voce Libre* (The Free Voice) can penetrate the walls of silence and break through isolating situations.⁵ I engaged in conversations and discussions taking place across the festival. Being able to speak English helped facilitate the communication process with the international visiting artists; however, translation is a mentally demanding job and, ultimately, not fulfilling for me. Tired of doing things that were not mentally and spiritually

fulfilling, I had to pause for some time (*A few weeks of doing nothing!*) and rethink everything. I asked myself deep questions about who I am and what I wanted to do with my life. I found myself listening to my inner voice: my passion is to create, to play with things as I once used to do. I knew then that I had to go back to the child in me. I had to become an artist.

Starting from scratch

During the floods of 2015, many of the fragile mud houses were destroyed.⁶ It was after the loss of my own home that the idea to establish a proper space for art in Samara refugee camp started to take shape. During my bike trips around the camp, after the flood, I saw a lot of discarded objects in their current status: dirty, broken, and forgotten by the world.⁷ At the same time, I started to see potential in the broken materials left over from the flood.

I began to develop new habits and tendencies, always getting excited when I saw something on the ground. I'm particularly interested in experimentation, which has become part of my art practice. I began to deliberately put myself into situations of creative limitedness and attune to my reactions and how the process and stories would unfold. All the broken wood and metal parts suddenly started to become valuable. Something was changing: what was trash and with no value was suddenly becoming the center of my attention, and I began deliberately searching for it. I began rethinking the value of objects around me. Even in conversations with my family, I named my new-found objects *raw materials* as their new journey was about to start.

In these moments, I know I am about to witness the beginning of a journey of transformation. Upon such an encounter, I often ask questions like: where did these objects come from? Who made them? How did they end up here? These are not simply questions about the objects' history; these questions bring up the relations we lost with objects and the relations we establish with them. The moment I decide to pick up an object and bring it to the studio, its course of life changes, and so does its history and value. I often spend some time just looking at it, turning it around in my hands before I start tweaking and changing it into something else. The journey of object transformation could start anywhere. The object's character also undergoes big changes from an object of no value that goes through processes to become something else, aesthetic or functional.

To a great extent, this journey of transformation is a metaphor about my personal life and the situation in the camps. How I picked myself up from the *dirt* and transformed myself into something else—an artist. Motif Art Studio was born.

The beginning was very difficult as I did not have funding to build the studio. I had to start from scratch. I resorted to the discarded materials and garbage in my surroundings in order to build the physical space. I began to collect car parts and scraps of wood and other materials. A slow process of upcycling, recycling, and transformation began. The reclaimed materials



Figure 1.2 The building process. Photograph by Mohamed Sleiman Labat/Motif Art Studio

were used to make different parts of the building as well as to make tools and furniture for the studio. The whole process of the construction took one full year, from April 2016 until April 2017. During the 12-month period, I did nothing else; the main task and goal for me was to establish Motif Art Studio. I took my time to accomplish the task, bearing in mind the many aspects of the experience, learning, exploring, and problem-solving as I go.

The studio is 6×6 meters and 3 meters high. It's built almost entirely from discarded materials. The main structure is made from reclaimed wood beams and corrugated zinc. The studio area includes the studio itself, with the floor made with broken tiles, also collected from around the camp. It includes a newly added small-scale family garden, as well as a large junkyard where various discarded materials can be collected and sorted. The interior design of the studio is composed of panels made from scraps of wood.⁸ The composition is visually colorful, but it also serves functional purposes. Each panel is made up of six layers from different materials glued or stapled together. The layers are from scraps of wood, thick plastic, fabric from old tent canvases, and multilayered milk and juice packaging, which serves as insulation. The wall composition makes it difficult for the heat to travel through the multilayered panels.⁹ The studio also has a lot of windows positioned at different heights to allow more air circulation inside the space.



Figure 1.3 Layers of insulation. Photograph by Mohamed Sleiman Labat/Motif Art Studio

My studio design got some of its inspiration from the current Sahrawi tent design which has four main doors facing different directions, a very practical feature in the desert. When sandstorms blow from any direction, the door facing that direction can be closed, and the opposite door can open. Such practical aspects of my art helped me venture into areas where art can contribute to and take part in the everyday challenges and obstacles in the camp, as well as its capacity to help the process of theorizing and producing art in a different way. I am starting to see that art can do more than what it is thought to be capable of.

Motif Art Studio and the role of art in the camps

The process of building the studio was an opportunity in itself to explore different themes around art: its importance and relevance in such a context. Throughout this process, I started to learn that my art can go beyond the traditional boundaries of aesthetics and visual representations to raise questions and address many aspects of the camp's everyday life. The potential of art and art thinking contributing to the creation of solutions is an important step for artists to expand the scope of their art practice in order to address real-life problems and challenges. Art can break through such processes and help us connect with objects, people, and ideas in a different way. Artistic thinking is part of the

solution. Using art to explore different ways to learn has a great potential to help us rediscover the learning process.

Learning how to learn

There is a gap between the theoretical knowledge generally offered in schools and what real life demands on the ground (Rychen & Salganik, 2003). Learning has largely been associated with systemized educational methods, particularly in the classrooms. This, in many ways, creates a culture of limiting the learning process to schools. Learning should happen inside and outside the classroom. Instead, in this part of the world, rote learning is widespread. Students are generally trained to memorize texts, and even sometimes math. The method is extremely unproductive and it contributes to the loss of motivation among students who are usually tested primarily on their abilities to recall those texts and not much on their skills of creative thinking, problem-solving, and questioning. There is little room for interactive and experimental approaches to learning (Faour, 2012, World Bank Group, 2019).

After graduation from school, I started to see art as a way to rediscover *learning* through action and interaction with different mediums. I believe the learning process should continue outside the formal educational system. For example, during the construction phase of the studio, I acquired a number of new skills such as woodworking and metalworking. I deliberately engaged myself in a series of processes and activities that allowed me to freely and flexibly switch between modes of thinking and action. It helped me strike some balance between theory and practice/action, especially when momentarily halting the binary judgment of right and wrong and maintaining the element of fun and the freedom to discover more. The method helped me engage more with the process.

Teaching as a studio practice

After dedicating one full year for the construction of the space itself, I started to create small art projects—solo and collaborative. The whole experience of building Motif Art Studio and these early art projects became an important part of my ongoing creative process and education outside the institution of school. In the studio, I started to host interactive art sessions largely inspired by the activities and questions raised during the building process. I invited children from the local primary school and other youth to join the sessions. The aim of the activities was to provide a participatory environment to engage in and interact with what they were creating, regardless of the medium or type of art. To encourage the sense of discovery through experimentation and to develop skills in problem-solving, I began to encourage playing with mediums and materials that might not seem like they go together. Creating new connections between seemingly unmatched materials or mediums opens up possible solutions and breakthroughs. To experience immersing themselves in the process,



Figure 1.4 Making Africa table. Photograph by Mohamed Sleiman Labat/Motif Art Studio

participants were encouraged to give attention to the task at hand, to the process and what is happening in the moment, and not to worry about the end result; the result will be shaped by what they do through the process.

The motto in the sessions is “The journey is as important as the destination”. This approach is aimed at giving weight to the different parts of the art creation experience, where emphasis is given to the process and not just to the end product. This journey prompts inquiry and helps one explore object-based and process-based art trajectories.

The activities in the studio range from high-level making to low- or subtle-level activities of playing with the materials. High-level performance and actions include heavy-duty tasks of cutting, bending, and drilling metal and wood or other materials. Medium- to subtle-level activities involve arranging scraps of wood left over from other projects and creating different shapes and compositions that can trigger the imagination for future ideas and projects. These creative exercises help us connect with the textures, the colors, or the shapes of the objects we work with. There is a level of meditation and mental nutrition cultivated throughout the experiences. The exercises help make closer connections with the materials and engage the different senses in a multisensory experience.

During some art projects, I allow myself to switch from medium to medium; this helps me learn the importance of bridging/mixing genres in the creative process. It’s the friction between the different mediums that

has sparked my interest in cross-disciplinary approaches. This realization has helped me better understand how best to respond to my situation through art in a holistic way.

Art collaborations and projects

Over the past few years, a number of art collaborations with organizations and individuals have taken place in the studio such as with Olive Branch Arts, a London-based art organization. In partnership with the Sahrawi Ministry of Culture and Motif Art Studio, we ran “Sand & Vision” in 2017, the first round of participatory photography workshops for nine young photographers from Samara Camp. Award-winning photographer Emma Brown led photography workshops, designed to help equip participants with visual skills in photography but also to help them interact with their surroundings, as well as express and capture abstract concepts such as freedom, home, loss, and other notions and ideas.¹⁰

Another important connection that came through Olive Branch Arts was Sam Berkson’s art residency in the camps. Berkson and I worked on collecting and translating the first collection of Sahrawi oral poems into English. The project came out in a book we co-authored, titled *Settled Wanderers, the Poetry of Western Sahara* (2015).

I have also collaborated with musician Matt King Smith, creating musical instruments from the studio’s junkyard for the young singers in the local primary school. We made a guitar, drums, and shakers from scraps of wood, Land Rover car parts, and barrels. The instruments were used by the music students to accompany the school choir.

Mural painting projects with families in Samara Camp serve as a way to add colors to the life in the camps and create meaningful conversations and interventions. I collaborated with American artist and English teacher Jessica Huvel to create the mural *The Year of Colours*, marking the transition from 2017 to 2018. The idea of giving the year a name is inspired by the Saharawi nomadic calendar. The Sahrawi nomads stored certain knowledges of geography, plants, climatic catastrophes, and other events in their collective memory and calendar (Martín & Robles, 2015). Each year is given a name based on a notable event that occurred during that year. The idea was to create 12 murals based on conversations with families, visually recreating their stories as illustrated events or calendar stories on their walls.

Mural collaborations with Spanish artist Ines Aparacio and Bubisher Library¹¹ brought an interesting angle, one involving the kids and the library’s walls as spaces of conversations and artistic exchange; the *Sons of the Sea* mural in Bubisher Library, Samara, and the *Rhizome* mural in Bubisher Library, Dakhla, developed from such conversations.¹²

In 2017, I started a collaboration with public space artist Patricio Forrester from Art Mongers and Sandblast Arts, two London-based art and culture organizations. We created two murals, *The Tube* and *Pixel of the Bigger*

Picture, about the change happening at the school that works with children with disabilities in Samara Camp. We plan to continue these projects in the future.¹³

Waste and want: responding to environmental challenges

My bike trips¹⁴ to the dumping sites outside Samara Camp led me to encounters with incredible pollution levels and waste. The sight is incredibly overwhelming. The extent of plastic pollution, packaging, and waste has reached staggering levels. Part of the response to such problems was through art. In March 2018, I collaborated with Gadiaba Kodio, an international artist and maker from Chez TOI - Design, in Mali and Senegal to provide a series of workshops in artistic recycling taking place in Motif Art Studio.



Figure 1.5 Artist recycling workshop. Photograph by Mohamed Sleiman Labat/Motif Art Studio

Over the course of ten days, 20 young participants joined the workshops to recycle, upcycle, and create different sculptural artifacts from discarded materials found in the neighborhood. The workshops were followed by a group exhibition.¹⁵ Later, I was invited by the Fair Saturday Organization to join their movement creating art with social and environmental impact. For this, I collaborated with Movimiento por la Paz (MPDL), a Spanish NGO in charge of waste management in the Sahrawi refugee camps and Bubisher Library.

The amount of plastic pollution in the camps feels like a tsunami. I was inspired by the Japanese artist Katsushika Hokusai's *Great Wave*. Over the

course of two weeks, I collected different plastic objects from around the camp to recreate the *Great Wave* using plastic waste objects.¹⁶ I invited the kids from Bubisher Library in Samara Camp to take part in the project. We had several collective art sessions, and the kids used plastic lids to create a colorful plastic globe. I was struck by the metaphor of the kids mocking the fragile world we live in. *It's a plastic world.*¹⁷



Figure 1.6 Educational workshops with kids. Photograph by Mohamed Sleiman Labat/Motif Art Studio

Even in such a remote place as the Hamda Desert, plastic pollution has gone far beyond control. Almost all the products coming to the camps are packaged in plastics which have flooded the streets of the camp and its surroundings, generating a lot of problems (Fosse & Osborne, 2019). Most of the international food aid also arrives packaged in plastic. The responsibility is shared between the shops, the buyers, the NGOs, and the authorities.

Thibaut Mirieu de Labarre (2018, as cited in Beltrami, 2018), packaging expert at World Food Programme, states, “When you work to save and change the lives of millions of people, doing it in a way that causes serious harm to the environment would be counter-intuitive” (para. 2). The biggest solid waste sources are probably the plastic packaging and plastic goods and supplies arriving through the local markets, which import goods from neighboring markets in Algeria and Mauritania. These local markets also introduce many new goods to the camps every year, creating new habits of consumption and ownership spreading across the community. Because the majority of the newly introduced products are low-quality plastics, they break down very quickly, contributing directly to the process of waste creation.

This phenomenon marks a shift in practice and perception in the Sahrawi community. As nomads, the Sahrawi had a minimalistic way of living corresponding to their everyday needs. The dislocation of the Sahrawi in the refugee camps, with the dependency on foreign aid, highlights the process of disconnection with their roots, including important ecological practices and rituals.

Unlearning what we learned: to make art is to ask questions

Throughout the period of building Motif Art Studio, my father and I often engaged in important conversations. For example, we would discuss ideas or the thinking behind some parts of a project. The discussions would often bring up certain histories, insights, and critiques as to how much a new creation was connected to or disconnected from the past nomadic life of the Sahrawi.

The critiques are relevant in many ways. They make me ask questions such as, what makes art Sahrawi? Should we name/label something *Sahrawi* artwork because it's made in Western Sahara or because it's made by a Sahrawi? Or can it simply be any creative intervention related to the Sahrawi context in different ways? These are legitimate questions about an ever-changing scene and society.

Currently, much of what the Sahrawi people use or create is made outside the geography of Western Sahara, yet the artwork is created by the Sahrawi and it is linked to the surrounding context and addresses the complexities in creative ways (Delgado, 2018).

Establishing an art studio in the camps, especially in the manner in which I did, created many possibilities of new conversations and exchanges of ideas with the people in my neighborhood and my family. The neighbors come to fix their broken stuff or borrow some tools from the studio. The kids stop by to fix their bikes, and some Land Rover tinkerers think I should become a mechanic! It is in such meetings that conversations and questions arise. I see these encounters as possibilities of contact and friction between me and members of the community. The conversations, questions, and comments play a part in developing the discourse of art and art making in the camps and bring up the question of how to relate to *and preserve* the Sahrawi traditions. In this respect, I understand the Sahrawi traditions as a set of tangible and intangible creations produced by our ancestors as they responded to the context they were part of. Those creations, material and immaterial, were relevant to their time and environment.

The Hamada Desert often feels like a giant crucible. The societal transformation that the Sahrawi people are going through is a great example of the layers of change and evolution taking place. As we live in the Hamada Desert, with its special circumstances, we reinvent ourselves and redefine who we are. Forty-six years after the dislocation of the Saharawi into refugee camps, we see tents turning to houses, we see nomadic camps turning into city-like structures, and we see the minimalist nomads, after settling down, turning into consumerists.

As time and place change, our responses and interventions may need to change as well. The Saharawi are now in a different context and they face new sets of challenges which require new interventions relevant to these times and situations. It's one thing to preserve traditions as an accumulation of human experience and knowledge. We build on it by understanding the parameters that govern how they came to exist and how they were applied and developed. It's quite another thing to inherit those traditions and keep them in their static mode. These are two different ways to look at traditions. The latter may seem like it protects those traditions by means of reproduction, but reproducing traditions in the literal sense may actually contribute to handicapping them from reinventing themselves to move on with time—thus killing them. The first way, however, attempts to revive the Sahrawi traditions and desert knowledge by means of transposition, the ability to apply lessons in different contexts. Such a regenerative characteristic can allow the core, the essence, or the spirit of an idea to outlive its exteriority or shell. After all, the nomadic lifestyle helped the Sahrawi develop some very important skills of adjustment and adaptability to different situations, climates, and geographies.

The Sahrawi indigenous knowledge and oral wisdom, related to time and space, helped the Sahrawi nomads read and navigate their environment. Such knowledge is crucial to survival in the desert. This timeless wisdom is at the heart of the Sahrawi desert knowledge, and the Sahrawi culture has evolved around the oral forms of expression such as poems, songs, stories, and desert wisdom. It's important to understand the development and overlap of geographies and time in the formation of our historical identities across time and generations. Is it by literally replicating and repeating certain material and immaterial traditions from the past nomadic life in Western Sahara, or is it about understanding the essence of being a Sahrawi and a nomad and bringing that sense of understanding to life through new means and processes?

Part of the imaginary identity of the new generation, and the return to the home we have never seen, is rooted in the oral stories and accounts told by the elderly (Farah, 2007; Chatty, 2010). This oral knowledge is disappearing, because of its nature of being oral—undocumented—but also because of the dislocation of the Sahrawi away from their homeland and into refugee camps in Algeria. The dislocation of the Sahrawi highlights levels of material and immaterial disconnection with their nomadic lifestyle and context. If your everyday life in such camps is an endless chain of concrete challenges just to provide for your family, secure enough water, or make sure the wind does not blow away your UNHCR-supplied fabric tent, how can these oral forms of expression or any art ever be an option? Or, can it actually *be the option*?

Preserving Sahrawi voices: the archive

I draw from the Sahrawi traditions and philosophy for my own art practice. In sourcing this rich legacy of Sahrawi traditions, I also am purposefully creating an archive to ensure that future generations will also be able to dip into the

wisdom of the past nomadic life of the Sahrawi, an oral culture that is only stored in the memory of our elderly (Awah, 2010). Through conversations with my father and other people in the community, which are sometimes recorded as part of the Motif Art Studio Archive, we are building a collection of video and audio files of interviews, testimonies often covering subjects related to the Sahrawi past nomadic life and early years of settling in the refugee camps.

Art helps us ask questions that can open up research topics. The archival materials can be used as part of the different art projects in the studio. They are also valuable material for research.¹⁸ The Motif Art Studio projects, activities, and exercises (serious or subtle) have also become good material to be documented through photography, film, or text, which serves as another way for relating to and reflecting on the Sahrawi experience. This documentation process also helps surface interesting things that we did not notice while executing certain tasks, opening up new angles, insights, and discussions.

The past and the future

The past Saharawi nomadic knowledge is still relevant to the social and environmental challenges we face today. Reclaiming and revisioning traditions are possible if we understand their essence and know which parts we keep and which parts we leave. If we understand the wisdom of yesterday, it can help us not only see the untold fate of tomorrow, but actually create it.

Establishing creative spaces such as an art studio in a special context such as the refugee camps helps process the complexities of the situation by creating interventions suitable to the context. Artistic thinking contributes not just to the discussions, but also to the solutions needed, especially with regard to social and environmental challenges.

Art, in this context, is not merely for entertainment. It's one thing to make art for the fun of it; it's a completely other thing to make it because it's the only way out of a displaced refugee situation. It can be hard to process situations where powerlessness, dependency, and stagnation have lingered long enough to be considered normal. It's hard to respond to a situation 46 years old with a straightforward response. Its complexity involves questions about different histories and futures, but most importantly about the present and what we do in it that could help shape those futures which, in turn, will ultimately become histories as well.

Reader questions

- What are the different ways Sleiman Labat is imagining or defining the role of arts and culture in his community, considering the continuous and daily challenges of living and working in a refugee camp?
- How might looking at his work—art practice, teaching, archiving, cultivating a future—as a body of expression, interaction, exchange, and

generosity surface new ways of looking at and informing social transformation in this context?

- How is Sleiman Labat simultaneously preserving and carrying forward traditional practices as well as introducing new ones? How does Sleiman Labat counter and contradict the transnational socio-political forces of oppression that continue to be unresolved?
- Finally, what critique does Sleiman Labat bring in regard to cultural practices? How can he best be supported in his work?
- Juxtaposed with *Desert Voicebox*, a practice which is also situated in the refugee camps, how might Sleiman Labat's work be characterized? Represented? Directed?

Notes

- 1 Motif Art Studio Archive, interview with Sulaiman Labat Abd 18.10.2015 [Original File: Audio segments 07.15/N°01].
- 2 Frente POLISARIO is the Spanish abbreviation for *Frente Popular de Liberación de Sagúia el Hama y Río de Oro*. Established in 1973, it now runs the affairs of the refugee camps and is considered the representative of the Sahrawi by the UN and AU.
- 3 SandShip Meteorological Station Archive (2018). *Climatic Data*. Auserd Camp, Algeria.
- 4 World Food Programme (2018). *Food Security Assessment for Saharawi Refugees*. Algeria.
- 5 ARTifariti (2010). *Construyendo Tierra Libre Catálogo de ARTifariti*, 86–87.
- 6 UNHCR (2015). *Algeria—Tindouf Floods Response, Inter-Agency Operational Update*.
- 7 Up to now, there are no active recycling programs in the Sahrawi refugee camps. The Sahrawi Ministry of Environment started a project to collect and bale fish tin cans from the distributed food aid in order to sell it to private companies in Algeria, but, for security reasons, the project stopped when the Algerian government did not allow the metal waste transfer. The garbage simply gets collected and burned outside the camps. This can cause serious health issues as the wind blows smoke and emissions from the burning site back to the camps (digital source: Fosse & Osborne (2019). *Solid Waste Management in Sahrawi Refugee Camps*, Algeria, p. 6).
- 8 Motif Art Studio Archive (2016). [Sketch & Design Documents, N°3].
- 9 Delgado (2018). *¿Qué es el Arte Saharahui?*, Mundonegro.
- 10 Olive Branch Arts (2017). Sand & Vision participatory photography.
- 11 Bubisher is a Spanish association and a network of libraries and book buses in different camps.
- 12 Aparicio, Ines G. (2017). *De Cómo Llegamos a Los Hijos del Mar*.
- 13 Art Mongers (2017). *Visiting the Saharawis*.
- 14 Riding a bike in the Sahrawi community is still not popular among adults. A lot of people still think of bikes as toys for kids. My bike rides are deliberate; they become performatives for a social change.
- 15 The workshops were sponsored by OXFAM International. At the same time, a training in media was taking place in Rabuny Administration Center, and the media training participants made news stories about the artistic workshop.
- 16 Fair Saturday Event (2018). *The Great Wave of Plastics*.
- 17 Fair Saturday Event (2018). *PlusKids, not Plastics!*
- 18 The Sahrawi Ministry of Culture compiled and printed a number of Sahrawi poetry anthologies in different books. It's part of an ongoing project to document the collective oral memory of the Sahrawi. The books are accessible in the Sahrawi National Library, Rabuny Administration.

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