

The New York Times

April 14, 2011

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ROBERT WRIGHT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

THE BED SITTER Kenya Robinson is an artist who has been roaming New York City as an overnight guest for a performance piece.

The Serial Sleepover Artist

By PENELOPE GREEN

THE fitness fanatic in Columbus Circle flaked. So did the performance-artist couple in Greenpoint who said they practiced at-home nudity. Yet Kenya Robinson's odyssey as a serial house guest has been smooth enough so far, and by and large her hosts — friends, colleagues and total strangers — have been happy to share their toothpaste with her.

Ms. Robinson is an engaging, self-taught 33-year-old artist whose work has mostly tweaked gender and racial stereotypes, in pieces involving things like melted Goody combs, synthetic blond hair and women's magazines. In January, she decided to become a nomad for a spell, and call it art. It should be noted that Ms. Robinson deploys parentheses around her last name, as in Ms. (Robinson), but editors discouraged this reporter from

A portrait of a houseguest in cat hair and toothpaste.

doing the same. Inspired by the adventures of Ed Casabian, a financial analyst for an online news site who last year embarked on a 52-week journey around New York City, staying for a week at a time in other people's apartments as a way to recover from painful breakup, Ms. Robinson imagined a 13-week-long performance-art piece, and offered herself up as a guest (10 hours of housework included, but the host must supply the toothpaste) to anyone who would have her. Her proposal went out by e-mail to art world colleagues in Manhattan and Brooklyn, who forwarded it around to widen her pool.

She named the project the "The Inflatable Mattress," for the portable twin bed she carried with her, though by last week (week 10), the mattress had deflated, a casualty of this collision of couch surfing, relational aesthetics and old-fashioned endurance performance art. Ms. Robinson, however, had not.

Animated and gregarious by nature, Ms. Robinson knows that the best guests combine a talent for conversation with a knack for domestic flexibility and extreme self-effacement. Or, as the etiquette expert Emily Post put it way back in 1922: "Courtesy demands that you, when you are a

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guest, show neither annoyance nor disappointment — no matter what happens ... you must learn as it were not to notice if hot soup is poured on your back."

As a young artist living in New York, Ms. Robinson has certainly had practice roughing it. There was the year she lived in her studio space in a commercial building in Sunset Park, bartering her graphic design services in lieu of paying \$500 in rent and sleeping on an army cot with an electric blanket. The floors were concrete and the heat went off every day at 8 p.m. There was a slop sink with hot water in the room, however, so she bathed in a bucket.

"That's the title of my memoir," Ms. Robinson said, "Bath in a Bucket!"

For more than nine months beginning in the fall of 2009, she had a residency at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, which provides unused office space for artists to work in. During that time, she "napped," as she put it, for four-hour stretches in a room filled with file cabinets and worked the remaining hours of each day. "We had 24-hour access to the space," she said. "I didn't want anyone to think I was actually sleeping there, so I just worked the whole time. It was very productive!"

Since June, she has been sharing a one-bedroom apartment in Bed-Stuy with her boyfriend, who is not an artist and can be baffled, she said, by her habits. Last week, he pleaded with Ms. Robinson to come home.

"Why are you doing this?" he said. "Do you really have to finish it?"

ON Thursday, she sat cross-legged in the bedroom of Tom Blunt, who at the last minute had offered a spot on his floor when it became clear to Ms. Robinson that the hosts who had signed up for week 10 were too entangled in work commitments to welcome her, and she had sent out an e-mail scrambling for a replacement. Mr. Blunt, a lanky transplant from Apache Junction, Ariz., was the friend of a friend; Ms. Robinson was meeting him for the first time.

As his three cats stalked in and out of the bedrooms (Mr. Blunt has a two-room apartment in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, that he shares with a roommate), one realized how close these quarters were. Ms. Robinson would be setting up the bulky mattress at the foot of Mr. Blunt's bed. You worried about snoring.

"No one has complained," Ms. Robinson said, noting that three of her hosts to date have had one-room spaces. To accommodate her, Mr. Blunt had changed the shower curtain in the bathroom and performed a quick wipe-down of all surfaces.

"I tried to minimize the cat hair," he said apologetically.

Mr. Blunt said that because he is a performance artist and freelance writer, he felt comfortable opening his home to Ms. Robinson. "I also realized we're both working hard, so expectations are really low," he said.

Peggy Post, great-granddaughter-in-law of Emily, describes the long-term guest as "an agent of change in a household." The most thoughtful guest, she writes in "Emily Post's Etiquette," the 2007 edition, "make a point of immediately saying that no one needs to entertain them and then proving this to be true by having things to do."

Ms. Robinson has used to embody the first directive while practicing the latter. For Simone Leigh (week one, Trader Joe's peppermint toothpaste), a sculptor who lives in Crown Heights, she helped the artist in her studio — Ms. Leigh makes sensuous ceramic objects shaped like missiles, breasts

and fruit. For Bettina Goolbsy (week three, Colgate Triple Action), an actor whose West Village studio was layered with piles of scripts and other effluvia, Ms. Robinson played personal organizer, and decluttered the space. For Legacy Russell (week five, Colgate Whitening), a curator and the studio director of the Bruce High Quality Foundation, the mischievous arts collective that likes to poke fun at the art world, she did the dishes.

"At first, I thought she was couch surfing," Ms. Russell said. "Artists are always in some sort of transition." Ms. Russell shares her Lower East Side two-bedroom with her girlfriend, a lawyer, and a superb collection of artwork received in exchange for her services. (In addition to her Bruce work, she helps artists organize themselves by teaching them to write grants, clean their studios, invoice for their work, and so forth. "I help them help themselves," she said.)

To explain Ms. Robinson's New York City tour, Ms. Russell put on her curator hat: "She's co-opting a social form — couch surfing — that's part of the material fabric of modern life, and then putting it in the public sphere. So what does that feel like? To be honest, it was like having a close friend stay at your house. Plus she was super-tidy. I missed



PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDREW HARRISON FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



HAVE TOOTHBRUSH, WILL DO Dishes

Ms. Robinson's tour included, top, the Bedford-Stuyvesant apartment of Waichi Yeung, a marketer and designer; left, Simone Leigh's apartment, with, from left, Chitra Ganesh, Ms. Robinson, Rashida Bumbray and Ms. Leigh; below, Ms. Robinson tucked into Ms. Leigh's spare room.

crawled through Manhattan on his elbows wearing a Superman cape. "That was all about being a black man, and what does it mean to have to carry all this weight and literally drag yourself around?" she said. "Kenya is referencing all of these things."

"Why is being a guest for 13 weeks an art piece?" "In general, if we say something is an art piece," Ms. Bumbray said gently, "then it is an art piece."

Ms. Russell described Ms. Robinson's project as a "voyeuristic seven-day portal into the lives of others."

THURSDAY was Mr. Blunt's 33rd birthday, and he was celebrating at a club near his house. Ms. Robinson was invited, but went home early, with Mr. Blunt's keys, to get some sleep. This made Mr. Blunt dependent on his roommate's keys.

As he told it: "As hours crept by and he showed no sign of tiring, I finally decided to borrow his keys, run home, pick up my keys and then bring his back to him." All of which meant that Mr. Blunt was jogging from club to apartment and back again covered in silver-and-gold glitter (an attempt, he said, to recreate the makeup style of a new female rapper named Lady).

This activity caught the attention of a policeman on his beat. "What's with the glitter?" he asked. Mr. Blunt explained about his birthday and the keys.

"And he said, 'Mr. Blunt recalled, "Ah, so you're the guy wingman, eh? And I said, 'Yes, sir, I'm doing my best.' And then I ran away, because I am terrified of the police."

When he got home, Ms. Robinson was asleep, but she had left a light on. She woke up to tell him how much she liked his music collection. "And we had a brief conversation," Mr. Blunt continued, "about how perhaps the most useful thing we could do for each other for the next few days was to serve as each other's excuse for wasting out of other obligations ('Sorry, I can't, have to go drop off keys for Kenya-slub-Tom'). Then we passed out. When I woke up this morning, she had vanished. I assume all is well in the republic of Kenya."

Earlier this month, Ms. Robinson learned she had been accepted into the M.F.A. program in sculpture at Yale, which she will begin in September. She'll be looking for somewhere to stay.

'If we say something is an art piece, then it is an art piece.'

her when she left."

Ms. Robinson, who has worked as a fashion designer and a pattern maker, said, "I always thought performance art was a crock." Nonetheless, performance began seeping into her work, she said, as she began playing, for example, with passages plucked from trashy novels she bought on 125th Street, pulp titles like "Histress" or "Candy Liqueur."

And then she saw Marina Abramovic at the Museum of Modern Art last spring.

At the show, a security guard told her, "You're the first black American woman I've seen here," Ms. Robinson recalled. "And I was like, 'What?'"

When she looked around her, and later viewed the photos of the sisters during each performance, which had been uploaded onto the museum's Web site, she saw that he was correct. She gathered a 'group of friends' — 15 to 20 black and brown faces,



mostly artists — and tried three times to sit across from Ms. Abramovic, but they never made it to the front of the line because the crowds were too big.

"I like that she engages other artists in her projects," said Rashida Bumbray, associate curator at the Kitchen, where Ms. Robinson will perform for the third time on April 23, and who visited Ms. Robinson during her week at Ms. Leigh's apartment. "Also, it reminds me of the durational practices that used to happen in the '70s, '80s and '90s."

Ms. Bumbray recalled when William Pope.L