

REVIEWS BERLIN

## Michael Rakowitz

Barbara Wien

By Ana Teixeira Pinto ☒

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Michael Rakowitz, *I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze*, 2017/2023, HD video, color, sound, 32 minutes.

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Near the beginning of his film *I'm good at love, I'm good at hate, it's in between I freeze*, 2017/2023, Michael Rakowitz reads a missive to Leonard Cohen (1934–2016): “Dear Leonard, I hope this letter finds you well. I am typing it on your green Olivetti Lettera 22 typewriter, a prize eBay acquisition for which I paid dearly.” I wonder whether Cohen ever read it—if he laughed, cried, or thought about calling the police. He never responded. Vulnerability can be disarming, yet it can also feel like forced intimacy, and Rakowitz wields his like a crowbar. But *I'm good at love* is not a film about parasocial relationships—the technical term for one-sided relationships with celebrities, though Rakowitz uses parasocial interaction to express a double articulation, combining admiration and disavowal.

Cohen was scheduled to perform in Ramallah in September 2009, but the gig was canceled because the Palestinian Campaign for the Academic and Cultural Boycott of Israel objected to Cohen playing a twin concert in Tel Aviv. “Attempts at ‘parity,’” they wrote, “equate the oppressor with the oppressed.” Rakowitz finds boycotts “problematic” and understands that structural contradictions cannot be solved individually, yet his unease with Cohen’s stance leads him to examine how often wrong has been done for allegedly right reasons.

In 1973, Cohen, probably driven by growing tension with his partner after the birth of their son, flew from the Greek island of Hydra to Tel Aviv. There, he reluctantly agreed to play for Israeli troops fighting the Yom Kippur War, masking his personal crisis with a geopolitical one. He never discussed his decision except in a verse of “*Lover, Lover, Lover*,” released on August 11, 1974: “I went down to the desert / To help my brothers fight / I know that they weren’t wrong / I know that they weren’t right”—lines he would excise before the song’s release.

Cohen is not alone in sitting on the fault line between personal experience and historical record. Rakowitz’s grandparents were Arab Jews forced to flee Iraq when the British mandate for the partition of Palestine made their lives unlivable and their identity an incongruity. Yet the artist is not trying to litigate who did what to whom or who owes what to whom. *I’m good at love* is a film about finding intelligible forms for moments when meaning does not properly “line up,” because subjectivity is structured via conflicting sites of identification. As the film, and the letter, come to a close, Rakowitz finally discloses his reason for writing to Cohen: He is seeking permission to restage the canceled Ramallah concert with himself taking Cohen’s role; not because he wants to undo Cohen’s deeds, but simply because Cohen “came from the West and made a choice,” while Rakowitz approaches from the East to “make another.”

It is apt, however tragic, that a story involving so many levels of surrogacy would lead its political conflicts to play out legally as a case of copyright infringement. The manager of Leonard Cohen, on behalf of the estate of Leonard Cohen, rescinded the rights for Rakowitz’s use of his music, leaving the film to be “presented as a ruin,” with voice-over descriptions filling in the gaps for the removed songs. There are now two films, the original one that can only be seen privately and the reedited one recently presented at Barbara Wien. Each has its own merits. In the film you can no longer see, Rakowitz, before an empty theater, sings Cohen’s “If It Be Your Will” (1984), chosen because the song expresses a plea: “From this broken hill / All your praises they shall ring / If it be your will / To let me sing.” The lyrics forebode the subsequent legal challenge, but what is perhaps eeriest is how Michael might be the truer Leonard and give the most haunting rendition of Cohen’s song.