

Michael Rakowitz
The invisible enemy should
not exist
2007 - ongoing

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Michael Rakowitz
The invisible enemy should not exist
Opening: Friday, April 29, 2016, 6–9 pm
Exhibition: April 30 – July 30, 2016

During the 2003 invasion of Iraq, Baghdad's National Museum of Iraq, the home of a large collection of world heritage objects, was not protected. The unsecured building was looted, and approximately 15,000 objects disappeared, leaving a terrible void in the museum collection and the international collection of relics of human history.

For his first exhibition with Galerie Barbara Wien, Michael Rakowitz presents *The invisible enemy should not exist*, an ongoing project since 2007. It is a direct response to the pillage of Baghdad's Museum, and a stirring homage to its former director, Dr. Donny George Youkhanna, who dedicated his time to recovering the missing artifacts until his death in 2011. It is also a reflection of Rakowitz's own biographical background, as his mother's family fled Iraq in 1946 to settle in the USA. Raised in New York, the artist now lives and works in Chicago.

The project's title is a translation of "Aj-ibur-shapu", which was the name of the main processional street that passed through the Ishtar Gate in ancient Babylon. The history of this legendary gate offers interesting parallels to Michael Rakowitz's project, in part because its new location since its excavation in the early 20th century is in Berlin's Pergamon Museum. In the 1950s, the Iraqi government reproduced a replica made from plaster and wood in Babylon. Michael Rakowitz has also devoted himself to the creation of replicas: true to scale reproductions of the objects looted from the National Museum of Iraq. His replicas are made of papier-mâché plastered with Arabic newspapers and the packaging of Middle Eastern food products sold in the United States. Rakowitz himself had never personally seen the missing objects. He gets his information through pictures and documentation in the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute's database and from Interpol's website. His makeshift relics are mostly displayed upon a table designed to recreate the trajectory of Aj-ibur-shapu.

Black and white pencil drawings annex narrative episodes. In one drawing, for instance, Dr. Donny George Youkhanna appears behind drums, an unexpected position to the ignorant viewer. A caption tells us that the archaeologist used to play in a band called "99%" which covered songs by Deep Purple and Pink Floyd. Thus, the reason for the installation's background soundtrack becomes clearer: Michael Rakowitz commissioned a band called Ayyoub to cover Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" in Arabic, the ubiquitously played song of our time, which tells a story of senseless destruction and loss. (1)

Sites of display hold great importance in Michael Rakowitz's work. His projects are often produced for a specific place and take note of the location's history. For his piece *May the arrogant not prevail* - the title is an alternative translation of Aj-ibur-shapu - he used similar techniques of recycling product packaging to reproduce the Ishtar Gate, this time from the Iraqi government's replica, and then exhibited it in a group show in Berlin's Haus der Kulturen der Welt (2010). This impressive "garbage gate" surely produced a formidable symbolic resonance while on display in Berlin.

Yet, with the ongoing project, *The invisible enemy should not exist*, now on display at Barbara Wien, it is its movability which makes it operate (2): replicas of displaced national treasures are "transformed" into contemporary art sculptures and exhibited in a commercial gallery, thereby introducing them to the art market and potential ownership by collectors or institutions. When the British Museum acquired some of the project's sculptures and displayed them

within their Mesopotamian collection, it created a challenging tension. Rakowitz often plays with these different systems of value and trade with a delicious irony but also a substantive impact.

The artist's commitment to fabricating the entire collection of the missing archaeological objects in papier-mâché could be seen as an almost Sisyphian labor in its absurd materiality. The non-preciosity of his replicas reveals the dreadful loss of the originals. They are evidently not strict counterfeits, but only "cheap" ghostly apparitions that paradoxically signify an absence by means of their own presence.

(Text by Gauthier Lesturgie)

(1) In "Smoke on the Water" the lyrics tell of the fire that members of Deep Purple witnessed from the other side of Lake Geneva when the Montreux Casino burned as Frank Zappa played there on December 4th, 1971.

(2) The project has been shown at venues such as at the Sharjah Biennial (2007), the Istanbul Biennial (2007), the Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-On-Hudson, New York (2008), Modern Art Oxford (2009), the Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (2013), and the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago (2014). Parts of it are held in the following public collections: Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; The British Museum, London; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago, amongst others.

Michael Rakowitz (b. 1973, New York) is living and working in Chicago. His work has appeared in venues worldwide including the Istanbul Biennial (2015 and 2007), the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2014), the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2013), dOCUMENTA (13) and the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012), the 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008), and the Sharjah Biennial 8 (2007). He has had solo exhibitions and projects at the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015), the Tate Modern in London (2010), the Kunstraum Innsbruck, and the mumok in Vienna (2004).

The invisible enemy should not exist is built with the assistance of:

Melina Ausikaitis
Loo Bain
Ken Camden
Chelsea Culp
Steve Davy
Erin Foley
Megan Schvaneveldt Frank
Andrea Fritsch
Daniel Giles
Brooke Havlik
Robert Chase Heishman
Emily Kay Henson
Leonardo Kaplan
Yiran Liu
Aaron Menninga
Charles Miller
David Moré
Aay Preston-Myint
Auden O'Connell
Asli Ozdoyuran
Julie Potratz
Adam Liam Rose
Sana Sohrabi
Schuyler Smith
Min Song
Mauricio Urusquieta
Geraldine Vo
Dedicated to the memory of Selma Al-Radi, Sam Paley, and Dr. Donny George Youkhanna

"Smoke on the Water"
Written by: Ritchie Blackmore, Ian Gillian, Roger Glover, Jon Lord, Ian Paice (Deep Purple)
Commissioned especially for this project and performed by: AYYOUB
Tareq Abboushi (Buzuq, Dumbek, Back Up Vocals)
Taoufiq Ben Amor (Lead Vocals, Daff and Artistic Direction)
Hector Morales (Drum Set)
Zafer Tawil (Violin, Oud and Tabla)
Danny Zanker (Bass)
Adel Hinnawi (Sound Engineering)

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Michael Rakowitz

The invisible enemy should not exist

Eröffnung: Freitag, 29. April 2016, 18–21 Uhr

Dauer: 30. April – 30. Juli 2016

Das Irakische Nationalmuseum in Bagdad, das die Heimat einer großen Sammlung von Objekten des Weltkulturerbes ist, wurde während der Invasion in den Irak 2003 nicht geschützt. Das ungesicherte Gebäude wurde geplündert, ungefähr 15.000 Objekte verschwanden und es entstand eine Lücke in der Museumssammlung sowie der internationalen Sammlung von wertvollen Relikten der Menschheitsgeschichte.

In seiner ersten Ausstellung in der Galerie Barbara Wien präsentiert Michael Rakowitz *The invisible enemy should not exist*, ein seit 2007 fortlaufendes Projekt. Es ist eine direkte Antwort auf die Plünderung des Bagdader Museums und eine bewegende Hommage an dessen früheren Direktor, Dr. Donny George Youkhanna, der bis zu seinem Tod im Jahr 2011 seine Zeit der Rückgewinnung der verschwundenen Artefakte widmete. Es ist auch eine Reflexion von Rakowitz' eigenem biographischen Hintergrund, da die Familie seiner Mutter 1946 aus dem Irak floh und sich anschließend in den USA niederließ. Der Künstler, der in New York aufwuchs, lebt und arbeitet heute in Chicago.

Der Titel des Projekts ist eine Übersetzung von "Aj-ibur-shapu", der Name der wichtigsten Prozessionsstraße, die durch das Ishtar-Tor im alten Babylon führte. Die Geschichte dieses legendären Tores bietet interessante Parallelen zu Michael Rakowitz' Projekt, zum Teil weil dessen neuer Standort seit der Ausgrabung im frühen 20. Jahrhundert sich im Berliner Pergamonmuseum befindet. In den 1950er Jahren ließ die Irakische Regierung in Babylon davon eine Replik aus Gips und Holz produzieren. Auch Michael Rakowitz widmet sich der Herstellung von Nachbildungen: maßstabsgetreuen Reproduktionen der Objekte, die aus dem Irakischen Nationalmuseum geplündert wurden. Seine Repliken aus Pappmaché sind mit arabischen Zeitungen und Verpackungen nahöstlicher Lebensmittel beklebt, die in den USA verkauft werden. Rakowitz selbst hat die verschwundenen Objekte nie persönlich gesehen. Er bekommt seine Informationen durch Bilder und Dokumentationen von der Datenbank des Orient-Instituts der Chicagoer Universität und der Website von Interpol. Seine Nachbildungen werden meist auf einem Tisch ausgestellt, dessen Formgebung den Verlauf der Aj-ibur-shapu-Straße aufgreift.

Durch schwarz-weiße Bleistiftzeichnungen ergänzt Rakowitz den Raum mit erzählerischen Episoden. In einer Zeichnung taucht zum Beispiel Dr. Donny George Youkhanna hinter einem Schlagzeug auf, eine ungewöhnliche Position für einen Archäologen. Eine Bildunterschrift erzählt uns, dass Youkhanna einst in einer Band mit dem Namen "99%" spielte, die Lieder von Deep Purple und Pink Floyd coverte. Dadurch erklärt sich die Tonspur im Hintergrund der Installation: Michael Rakowitz beauftragte eine Band namens Ayyoub, Deep Purples "Smoke on the Water" auf Arabisch zu covern, ein Lied, das eine Geschichte von sinnloser Zerstörung und Verlust erzählt. (1)

Die Ausstellungsorte spielen in Michael Rakowitz' Arbeit eine bedeutende Rolle. Seine Projekte werden oft für einen spezifischen Ort hergestellt und gehen auf dessen Geschichte ein. Für sein Werk *May the arrogant not prevail* - der Titel ist eine alternative Übersetzung von Aj-ibur-shapu - benutzte er ähnliche Techniken der Wiederverwertung von Verpackungen, um das Ishtar-Tor zu reproduzieren, dieses Mal als Replik der irakischen Replik der 1950er Jahre. 2010 war es in einer Gruppenausstellung im Berliner Haus der Kulturen der Welt ausgestellt. In Berlin hatte dieses beeindruckende "Abfall-Tor" eine große symbolische Wirkung.

Im Fall des Projekts *The invisible enemy should not exist*, das zur Zeit bei Barbara Wien ausgestellt wird, ist es auch dessen Beweglichkeit, die seine Wirkung ausmacht (2): Nachahmungen von verschleppten nationalen Schätzen werden zu Skulpturen zeitgenössischer Kunst und in einer kommerziellen Galerie ausgestellt. Dadurch werden sie in den Kunstmarkt integriert und kommen potenziell in den Besitz von Sammlern und Institutionen. Als das British Museum einige der Skulpturen des Projekts erwarb und diese in der Mesopotamien-Sammlung zeigte, entstand eine reizvolle Spannung, die nicht ohne Humor war. Rakowitz spielt immer mit diesen verschiedenen Werte- und Handelssystemen und benutzt dabei eine feine Ironie, die eine nachhaltige Wirkung hinterlässt.

Das Ziel des Künstlers, die gesamte Sammlung der verschwundenen archäologischen Objekte in Pappmaché nachzubilden, kann beinahe als Sisyphos-Arbeit angesehen werden. Die Einfachheit von Rakowitz' Repliken offenbart den Verlust der Originale. Sie sind offensichtlich keine präzisen Fälschungen, sondern lediglich "billige" geisterhafte Erscheinungen, die paradoxerweise durch ihre eigene Anwesenheit eine Abwesenheit aufzeigen. (Text von Gauthier Lesturgie)

(1) In "Smoke on the Water" erzählt der Liedtext vom Brand des Casinos in Montreux während Frank Zappa dort am 4. Dezember 1971 spielte; Mitglieder von Deep Purple erlebten das Feuer von der anderen Seite des Genfersees mit.

(2) Das Projekt wurde bisher u.a. auf der Sharjah Biennale (2007), der Istanbul Biennale (2007), im Hessel Museum of Art in Annandale-On-Hudson, New York (2008), im Modern Art Oxford (2009), im Hiroshima City Museum of Contemporary Art (2013) und im Oriental Institute, University of Chicago (2014) gezeigt. Es befindet sich u.a. in folgenden öffentlichen Sammlungen: Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; The British Museum, London; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Smart Museum of Art, University of Chicago.

Michael Rakowitz (*1973, New York) lebt und arbeitet in Chicago. Sein Werk wurde an internationalen Ausstellungsorten präsentiert, wie der Istanbul Biennale (2015 und 2007), dem Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago (2014), dem Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven (2013), der dOCUMENTA (13) und dem Museum of Modern Art, New York (2012), der 16th Biennale of Sydney (2008) und der Sharjah Biennial 8 (2007). Einzelausstellungen und Projekte realisierte der Künstler u.a. im Museum of Modern Art, New York (2015), in der Tate Modern in London (2010), im Kunstraum Innsbruck und im mumok in Wien (2004).

The invisible enemy should not exist entstand mit der Hilfe von:

Melina Ausikaitis	Aaron Menninga
Loo Bain	Charles Miller
Ken Camden	David Moré
Chelsea Culp	Aay Preston-Myint
Steve Davy	Auden O'Connell
Erin Foley	Asli Ozdoyuran
Megan Schvaneveldt Frank	Julie Potratz
Andrea Fritsch	Adam Liam Rose
Daniel Giles	Sana Sohrabi
Brooke Havlik	Min Song
Robert Chase Heishman	Mauricio Urusquieta
Emily Kay Henson	Geraldine Vo
Leonardo Kaplan	Yiran Liu

Zum Andenken gewidmet an Selma Al-Radi, Sam Paley, und Dr. Donny George Youkhanna.

"Smoke on the Water"

Geschrieben von: Ritchie Blackmore, Ian Gillian, Roger Glover, Jon Lord, Ian Paice (Deep Purple)

Im Auftrag speziell für dieses Projekt durchgeführt von: AYYOUB

Tareq Abboushi (Buzuq, Dumbek, Back Up Vocals)

Taoufiq Ben Amor (Lead Vocals, Daff und künstlerische Leitung)

Hector Morales (Schlagzeug)

Zafer Tawil (Violine, Oud und Tabla)

Danny Zanker (Bass)

Adel Hinnawi (Toningenieur)



Exhibition view / Ausstellungsansicht *The invisible enemy should not exist*, Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin, 2016

Exhibition views / Ausstellungsansichten *The invisible enemy should not exist*, Galerie Barbara Wien, Berlin, 2016



The invisible enemy should not exist

2007 - ongoing

Tables with artifacts from cardboard, Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, museum labels, sound and 4 drawings

Tische mit Artefakten aus Pappe, Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten, Klebstoff, Museumslabel,

Ton und 4 Zeichnungen

Dimensions variable / Maße variabel



The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist - Relief of reclining woman (Mosul Museum) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)

2015

Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue / Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten

71 x 63,5 x 10,2 cm



museum number: unknown
 excavation number: NDI 3468
 provenance: Nimrud (NW 37)
 dimensions: (in cm) height: 5.3, length: 10.0, thickness: 1.0
 material: ivory
 date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)
 description: Remains of a bull facing left with head lowered and crisscross marks on his nose; reverse side has horizontal markings [eye was inlaid]
 status: unknown

Enlaid by an insatiable appetite for Near Eastern antiquities, sites throughout Iraq are being worked daily by teams of looters in search of "merchandise."
 —Selma Al-Radi

The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist - Bull Facing Right (NDI 3468) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)
 2009
 Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue /Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten
 5 x 10 x 2 cm



The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist - Standing male figure; head, shoulders and most of arm missing (IM41016) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)
 2013
 Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue /Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten
 29,8 x 14 x 9,5 cm



museum number: IM42494
 excavation number: Kh. IX 75
 provenance: Khafaje
 dimension(s) (in cm): height: 10; width: 10.3
 material: alabaster
 date: ca. 2600 BC
 description: votive plaque, fragmentary, relief displays seated, long-haired person in flounced garment, wearing a 'horned' cap; left hand holds two objects (maces), right hand a 'feather'-like object
 status: unknown

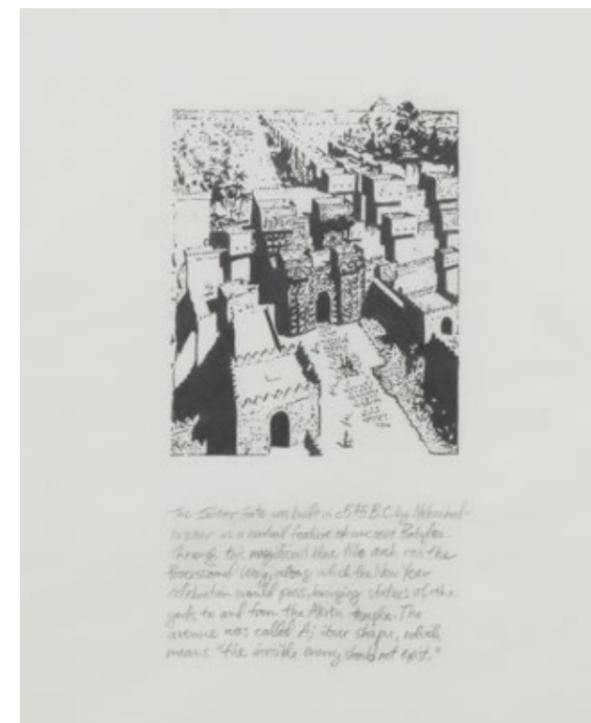
According to Aristotle, tragedy illustrates the universal rather than the particulars of history—illuminating through catharsis what is possible and what can likely happen in the future. We are still waiting for the catharsis that will make sense of this sorrow.

—Micah Garen and Marie-Hélène Carleton

The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist - Horned Cap and Garmented Figure Plaque (IM42494) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)

2007

Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue / Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten
10 x 8,5 cm



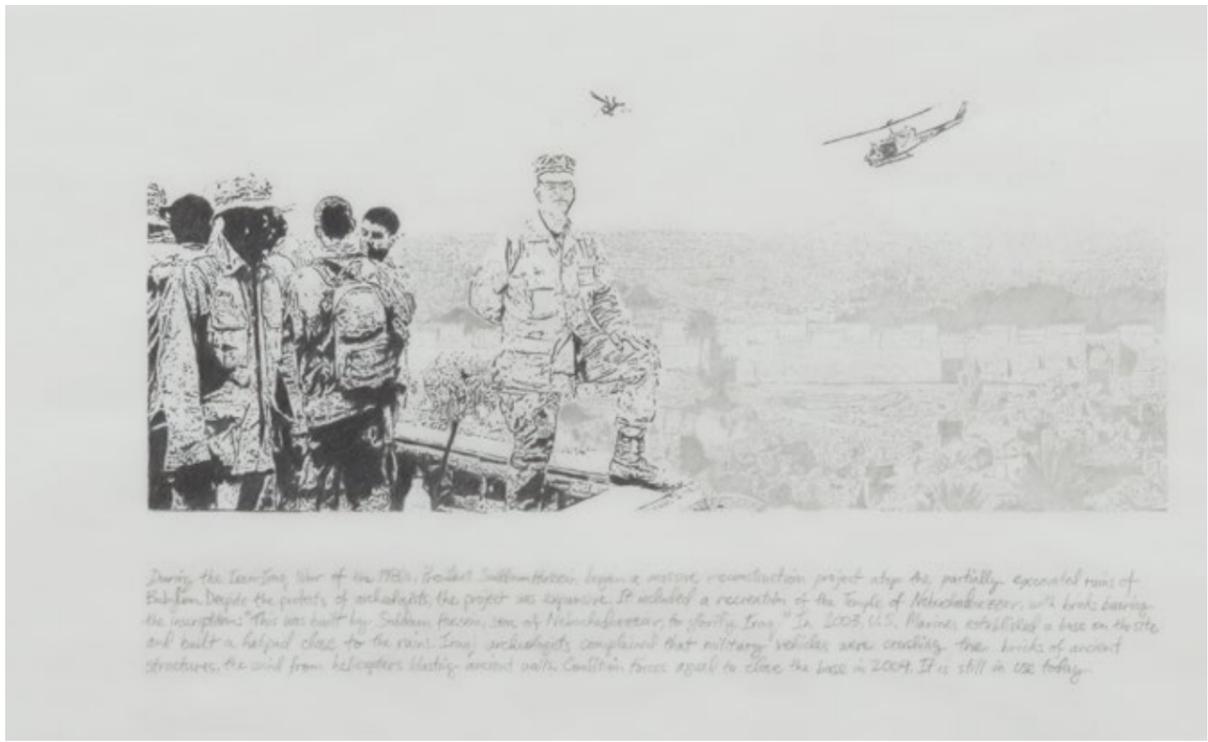
Detail

The invisible enemy should not exist

2007 - ongoing

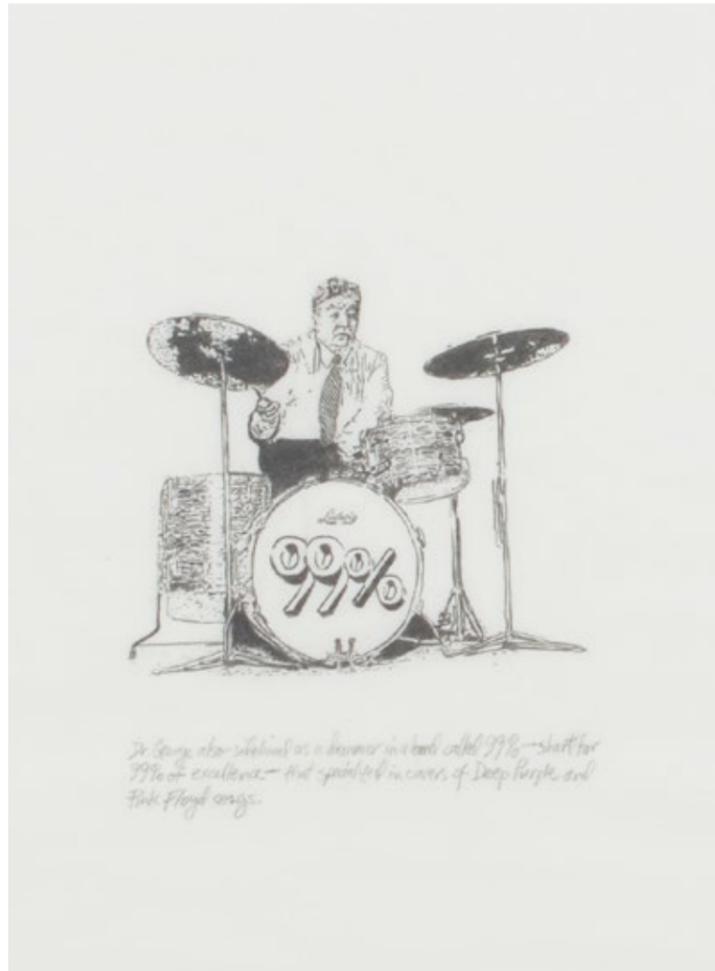
Excavation Extraction (Recovered, Missing, Stolen series)

Pencil on vellum, framed / Bleistift auf Pergament, gerahmt; 71 x 124,5



Detail
The invisible enemy should not exist
 2007 - ongoing
New Babylon (Recovered, Missing, Stolen series)
 Pencil on vellum, framed / Bleistift auf Pergament, gerahmt; 71 x 122

Detail
The invisible enemy should not exist
 2007 - ongoing
The Looting (Recovered, Missing, Stolen series)
 Pencil on vellum, framed / Bleistift auf Pergament, gerahmt; 71 x 134,6



Detail
The invisible enemy should not exist
 2007 - ongoing
The Ballad of Donny George (Recovered, Missing, Stolen series)
 Pencil on vellum, framed / Bleistift auf Pergament, gerahmt; 71 x 230



The invisible enemy should not exist
 2007 - ongoing
 Tables with artifacts from cardboard, Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, museum labels, sound and 4 drawings
 Tische mit Artefakten aus Pappe, Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten, Klebstoff, Museumslabel, Ton und 4 Zeichnungen
 Dimensions variable / Maße variabel



The invisible enemy should not exist

2007 - ongoing

Table with 7 artifacts from cardboard, Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, museum labels

Tisch mit 7 Artefakten aus Pappe, Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten, Klebstoff, Museumslabel
92 x 100 x 92 cm

SOLD



Details

The invisible enemy should not exist

2007 - ongoing

SOLD



The invisible enemy should not exist

2007 - ongoing

Table with 5 artifacts from cardboard, Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, museum labels

Tisch mit 5 Artefakten aus Pappe, Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten, Klebstoff, Museumslabel
92 x 100 x 92 cm



**The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist - Seated Female Statue from Hatra (IM58086)
(Recovered, Missing, Stolen series)**

2014

Middle Eastern food packaging, newspapers and glue
39 x 70 cm



museum number: unknown
excavation number: ND10457
provenance: Nimrud (SW 37)
dimension(s) (in cm): height: 5.7; width (at base): 5.5
material: ivory
date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)
description: Symmetrical arrangement of two lions (heads missing), shown back to back, tails raised; two flowers in background; plant or leaf below lion on left side.
status: unknown

It is our shared history that is at stake, and, in the wake of war, one that is vanishing chapter by chapter.

—Angela M.H. Schuster

The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist - Symmetrical Arrangement of two Lions (ND10457) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)
 2013
 Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue
 5,7 x 5,7 cm



Stela fragment; relief carving shows two men wearing skirt and head band and four animals (lions) (IM23477) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen series)
 2016
 Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue
 Verpackungsmaterial und Zeitungen aus dem Nahen Osten, Klebstoff
 70 x 104 x 52 cm



Detail
Stela fragment; relief carving shows two men wearing skirt and head band and four animals (lions) (IM23477) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen series)
2016



The invisible enemy should not exist
2007 - ongoing
Wall-mounted vitrine with perspex cover; 7 objects from found Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, museum labels
23 x 110 x 23 cm



Details
The invisible enemy should not exist
 2007 - ongoing



The invisible enemy should not exist
 2007 - ongoing
 Plinth with perspex cover; 6 objects from found Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, museum labels
 140 x 60 x 54 cm



Details
The invisible enemy should not exist
2007 - ongoing



The invisible enemy should not exist
2007 - ongoing
Plinth with perspex cover; 6 objects from found Middle Eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, museum labels
140 x 60 x 54 cm



Details
The invisible enemy should not exist
2007 - ongoing

Exhibition view / Ausstellungssansicht *The Way of the Shovel: Art as Archaeology*, Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2013-2014

**Texts about / Texte über
Michael Rakowitz**

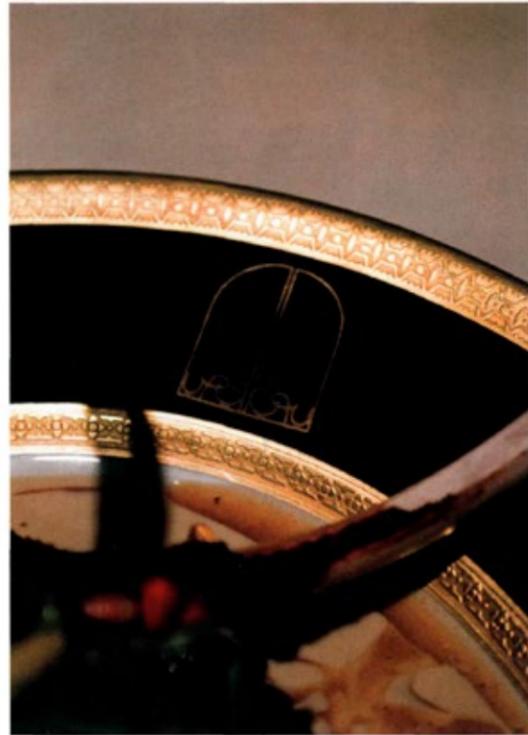


Object to Be Restored

DIETER ROELSTRAETE ON THE ART OF MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

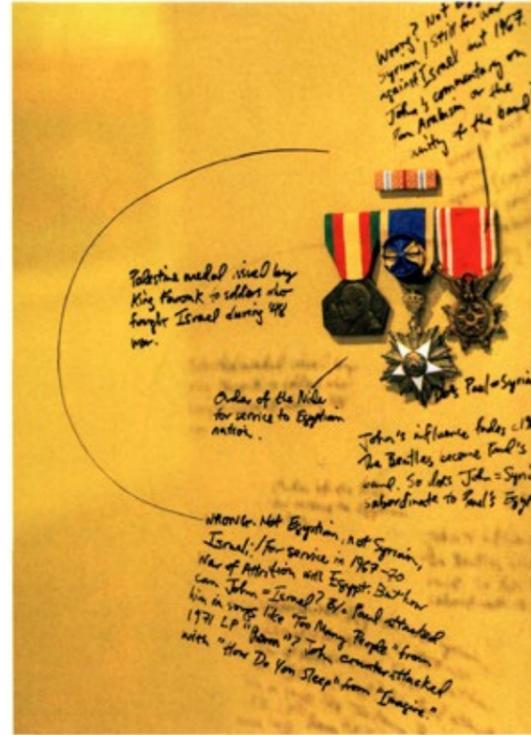
Babylon's ancient Ishtar Gate is reconstructed with contemporary product wrappers; books carved from Afghan stone memorialize a German library destroyed in World War II; Saddam Hussein's dinnerware turns up at a Park Avenue restaurant. In **MICHAEL RAKOWITZ's** projects, cultural fragments are subject to a logic of transformation, replication, and circulation that allows them to telescope across regions and temporalities. If geopolitical conflicts are too often understood in abstract terms—as a “clash of civilizations”—Rakowitz traffics in the particular and the polysemic, prompting social exchange, linking disparate narratives, and opening up the historical enfilade that connects the United States' recent military adventures to imperialism's *longue durée*. In the process, critic and curator **DIETER ROELSTRAETE** suggests here, Rakowitz exposes the fundamental mutability of objects and ideologies alike.

Opposite page: Michael Rakowitz, *May the Arrogant Not Prevail* (detail), 2010, found Arabic packaging and newspapers, glue, cardboard, wood, 19' 7 1/2" x 16' 2 1/4" x 3' 1 1/4".



Below: Plate and food from Michael Rakowitz's *Spills*, 2011. Photo: Christopher Nissock.

Michael Rakowitz, *John (Egypt)* (detail), 2010-12, vintage satin, medals, lacquer, 52 1/4 x 22". From the work *The Breakup*, 2010-12.



Dar Al Sulh was intended to create a place for the placeless and displaced alike, enacting the spatial politics of its hopeful title in the here and now.



Above: Serving platter from Michael Rakowitz's *Dar Al Sulh*, 2013.



Below: Guests at Michael Rakowitz's *Dar Al Sulh*, 2013. Traffic, Dubai, May 2, 2013. Photo: Kamal Rasool.



Guests at Michael Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen*, 2004–. Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, February 15, 2012. From "Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art."



Food being prepared for Michael Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen*, 2004–. Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, 2012.

TWO OF THE LONGEST WARS IN US HISTORY continue to rage to this day, although they do so at very different degrees of involvement and levels of visibility. The most protracted is the war in Afghanistan, which, considering the declared objectives—foremost among them ousting the Taliban and weeding out Al Qaeda root and branch—cannot be said to have been successful; the proposed withdrawal date for the remaining US troops is now set sometime in late 2014, at which point the war will have dragged on for more than thirteen years. Meanwhile, the war in Iraq, despite having been officially terminated nearly eighteen months ago, continues to affect the former belligerent states' home fronts in profound ways. In the Middle Eastern theater of operations in particular, the war's legacy lives on in the institutionalization and normalization of brutality and instability. War, in other words, has been the normal state of affairs for more than a decade now in the great geopolitical arc spanning from the US to the Middle East. Far from being that exceptional state alluded to in Carl von Clausewitz's classical definition of war as the "continuation of politics with other means," it has in fact become the quasi-absolute horizon of our daily existence, rendered awfully, palpably present in the militarization of everyday life as it unfolds in airports, elementary schools, and public spaces around the country, as well as in the appallingly broad acceptance of such practices as drone warfare.

This ongoing "great war for civilization," as the British journalist Robert Fisk has dubbed the "con-

quest" of the Middle East, provides the principal backdrop for much of the work produced by Michael Rakowitz in the last decade or so, and the Chicago- and New York-based artist's recent project *Dar Al Sulb*, 2013, was in fact specifically timed to coincide with the tenth anniversary of the US military invasion of Iraq. The work's title may be translated as "domain of conciliation" (*sulb* means "peace" in Arabic). More precisely, the phrase may refer to the spatial conditions, provided for in historical Islamic societies such as medieval Al-Andalus or the Ottoman Empire, in which all manner of ecumenical dialogue took place, often leading to cultural efflorescence. In Rakowitz's project, *Dar Al Sulb* became the name of an Iraqi Jewish restaurant that operated in Dubai for one week this past May (actually about ten years and two months after the invasion commenced). It was the first such restaurant to open its doors in the Arab world since 1948, the year of the Jews' exodus from Iraq's capital in the wake of the founding of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war. (Today, seven or eight Jews are thought to remain out of a community that once numbered one hundred thousand.) Rakowitz's maternal grandparents were Iraqi Jews—his mother was born in exile in Mumbai, en route to New York—and the restaurant's fare was based on his grandmother's recipes. These dishes, which the artist has likened to fragments of a dead language, were served on traditional Iraqi Jewish dinnerware sourced, in part, from eBay. To the extent that there is a "digital" dimension to Rakowitz's primarily analog brand of

narrative *Soziale Plastik*, it is concentrated in the artist's frequent use of research tools like the aforementioned consumer-to-consumer auction site. His recurring reliance on informal trading routes of this type likewise reflects his interest in a sculptural ethos of recycling and remaking, and in the cyclical processes of production and destruction.

But the restaurant's offerings were not purely traditional—they accommodated both contemporary tastes and, more importantly, new global economic realities. A marked infusion of Indian ingredients reflected not only Rakowitz's grandmother's 1940s sojourn in Mumbai but also the United Arab Emirates' dramatically changing demographics. As is well known, thousands of migrant workers, particularly from the Indian subcontinent, have streamed into the cities of the Gulf in recent decades to help build some of the tallest buildings on earth, which are often constructed at terrible human cost. Many of these workers live in the distinctly charmless industrial part of Dubai where Rakowitz decided to set up shop. Clearly, *Dar Al Sulb*—a collaborative venture involving the roving nonprofit the Moving Museum and Dubai's independent art space Traffic—was not meant to look, let alone taste, like a sepia-toned time capsule for adventurous heritage tourists. Rather, it was intended to create a place for the placeless and displaced alike, enacting the spatial politics of its hopeful title in the here and now via that most immediate and visceral of social connectors, food.

Food, in fact, has been at the heart of a number of



Rakowitz's project hints at a densely woven web of morally checkered histories of expropriation and exchange.

Rakowitz's high-profile collaborative art projects in the past couple of years. It functions in his work not only as a marker of history, a register of cultural exchange, and a means of securing and deepening social bonds, but also—the emphasis on collaboration notwithstanding—as a site of tension or even antagonism. Indeed, the artist has referred to *Dar Al Sulb* as a continuation of his ongoing *Enemy Kitchen* project, 2004–, the most recent manifestation of which was a food truck making the rounds in Chicago as part of the Smart Museum of Art's 2012 exhibition "Feast: Radical Hospitality in Contemporary Art." The truck served a rotating menu of regional Iraqi comestibles made in collaboration with chefs from Chicago's Iraqi community. American veterans of the Iraq war acted as servers and sous-chefs. Food was dished out on limited-edition paper reproductions of dinnerware scavenged from Saddam Hussein's palaces—the very same crockery that featured so prominently in Rakowitz's Creative Time-commissioned project *Spoils*, 2011, and that became the unlikely centerpiece of a minor diplomatic incident.

For *Spoils*, Rakowitz worked with restaurateur Kevin Lasko to produce a dish incorporating Iraqi date syrup as a signature ingredient (an allusion, in



From left: Dinner plate from Michael Rakowitz's *Spoils*, 2011. Michael Rakowitz, *The Breakup* (detail), 2012, collage on found album sleeve, 12 x 12". From the work *The Breakup*, 2010–12.

part, to the artist's 2004 project *RETURN*, essentially an attempt to reestablish his maternal grandfather's import-export company, in which dates played a similarly pivotal role). The plan was to serve meals on Saddam's china—the real thing this time, much of it bought online from a US serviceman who had purchased the items at a flea market near his base in Iraq. Rakowitz's artful menu was available for consumption at Lasko's Park Avenue establishment from September 28 until November 23, 2011; the US withdrawal from Iraq was officially completed on December 18, 2011. Coming to the attention of the Iraqi mission to the US mere days before the completion of the withdrawal, the project sparked an ambassadorial skirmish that concluded with President Obama's presentation of the dinnerware to the Iraqi prime minister. The message of *Spoils*, like those of *Dar Al Sulb* and *Enemy Kitchen*, is doubtless in part a restorative one—in all of these works, Rakowitz reconnects body and soul as well as Americans and Iraqis, Muslims, Christians, and Jews, however fleetingly. Yet the project's ambiguous title clearly hints at something more complex, a densely woven web of morally checkered histories of expropriation and exchange.

IF THESE CULINARY PROJECTS make history material in the most direct, physical way, elsewhere Rakowitz prefers to take a more circuitous, allegorical route through the past—as for example in his work *The Breakup*, 2010–12, wherein the epochal fault lines that have long defined Middle Eastern politics find a most unlikely analogy. *The Breakup's* characteristically meandering narrative departs from the Beatles' widely publicized 1969 split, which Rakowitz maps back onto the spiral of faltering communication and misunderstandings that has dogged Arab-Israeli relations since the Six-Day War of 1967; the waning dream of a secular pan-Arabism is reflected in the dissolution of the Fab Four. Originally conceived as a ten-part radio series (commissioned by the Al Ma'mal Foundation for Contemporary Art in Jerusalem for broadcast by a Palestinian station in Ramallah), the work eventually evolved into a sprawling multimedia installation consisting of video, drawings, a limited-edition gatefold vinyl LP, and assorted pop-cultural and political memorabilia, both real and fictitious. It culminated in a concert by Sabreen, a famous Palestinian pop band who actually started out playing Beatles covers, on the rooftop of the Swedish Christian Study Centre in Jerusalem.



This page: Michael Rakowitz, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (detail), 2007—, wooden table, found packaging and newspapers, labels, four pencil-on-velum drawings, sound, dimensions variable.



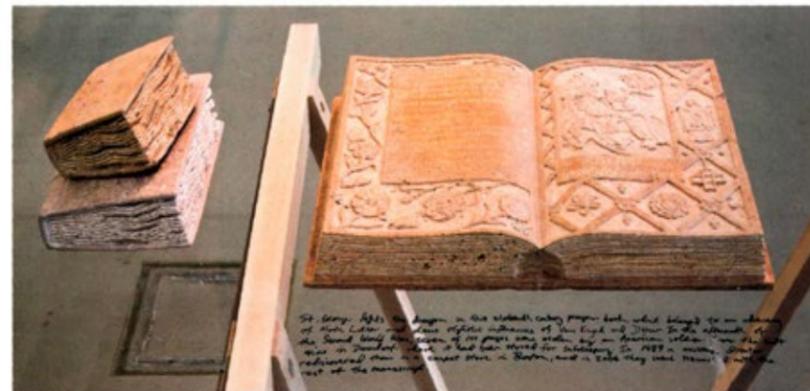
Michael Rakowitz, *What Dust Will Rise?* (detail), 2012, travertine limestone, vitrines, burned books, found objects, lacquer pen, glass, wood, dimensions variable.

This was a wry nod to the Beatles' farewell concert on the roof of the Apple building in central London on January 30, 1969, an occasion that caused tears to flow the world over.

Yet some of Rakowitz's most ambitious works to date have generally struck a more somber, melancholy tone, gloomily reflecting on the irreversible destruction of art and culture rather than their possible regeneration through social ritual and collective experiences (however campy). One tragic episode that made a particularly strong impression on the artist was the 2003 ransacking of the National Museum of Iraq, whose superb collection of Mesopotamian antiquities had long been considered one of the richest of its kind in the world. A mind-boggling fifteen thousand objects are estimated to have been stolen in the chaotic days following the fall of Baghdad in April 2003—among them such prized pieces as the 4,500-year-old golden lyre of Ur, one of the world's oldest surviving stringed instruments—and while a majority of these artifacts eventually found their way back to their institutional home, several thousand have not. This long list of missing artifacts is at the center of *The invisible enemy should not exist*, 2007–, which consists of a procession of to-scale



A spirit of indignation at inequity, a "politics of rage," even, underlies many of Rakowitz's works.



replicas of the objects in question. The replicas, made by Rakowitz and a constantly evolving team of assistants, are fashioned from Arab newspapers and the wrappings of stereotypical Middle Eastern foodstuffs (dates, olives, sardines) instead of the respective treasures' original alabaster, gold, or marble, and are exhibited on a simple wooden table alongside labels that recount each relic's sorry fate.

The work has been shown at a number of venues, beginning with New York's Lombard Freid gallery in 2007. At each site, framed drawings of key episodes of the project's serpentine narrative, in Rakowitz's characteristic loose style, line the walls, and a subdued sound track—a cover of Deep Purple's 1972 hard-rock classic "Smoke on the Water"—fills the room. The song's lyrics refer to destruction of another kind, namely that of a casino on the banks of Lake Geneva that went up in flames during a Frank Zappa gig in 1971. (The incident was viewed by members of Deep Purple from across the lake.) Rakowitz hired a New York-based rock band to play an Arabic cover version of the song in question, thereby paying homage to *The invisible enemy's* real hero: former National Museum director Donny George Youkhanna, who, until his untimely death in 2011, was the public face of the global campaign to restore the museum to its former glory. George was also, as it happens, the drummer in a cover band specializing in 1970s classic rock. His harrowing eyewitness account of the looting of the Baghdad museum provides much of the narrative backbone of Rakowitz's *invisible enemy*. The artist also availed himself of the resources of the University of Chicago's famed Oriental Institute, home to an online database of thousands of images created to aid the National Museum's inventory and recovery

process. Each time a missing object reemerges from the murky depths of the illegal antiquities trade, Rakowitz notes the item's new status on the corresponding label. The dynamic nature of *The invisible enemy* suggests, however symbolically, that perhaps one day the museum's holdings will be made complete again. We are thereby invited to read the installation as a critical reflection on the complex network of relations that connects the politics of collecting and conservation with more philosophical questions concerning notions of authenticity, recycling, and remaking—the latter clearly constituting the governing principles of Rakowitz's social sculpture.

UNMAKING, REMAKING: An even more wanton destruction of cultural treasure—and its physical reconstitution—is the subject of *What Dust Will Rise?*, the multifaceted project that Rakowitz developed for last year's Documenta 13. An invitation to participate in that mammoth exhibition's Afghan chapter led Rakowitz to visit Bamiyan, the location of the infamous demolition of the world's largest standing Buddha statues, a designated UNESCO World Heritage site. Taliban leader Mullah Omar authorized the razing in March 2001 (and in so doing, ironically contrived a singularly spectacular critique of spectacle if ever there was one). Teaming up with a German sculptor and restorer named Bert Praxenthaler and a small band of highly skilled Afghan and Italian stone carvers, Rakowitz used the same kind of travertine from which the Bamiyan Buddhas were carved, quarried from hills and cliffs near the empty niches where the statues once stood, to "reconstruct" a handful of books from the thousands of volumes that perished in the bombing of

Kassel in World War II. (He also conducted a stone-carving workshop in a monastery cave just above the top of one niche.) The handsome stone tomes were shown in the ground floor of the Fridericianum, which once housed the libraries of the landgraves of Hesse-Kassel. They rested on glass slabs on which Rakowitz had jotted down miscellaneous thoughts and observations related to book burning and other iconoclastic entertainments. Much is made of the fact that the citizens of Kassel were predictably shocked by the destruction of their beloved historical library, which took place only a few years after they themselves had engaged rather enthusiastically in book-burning rituals of a different kind, right outside the Fridericianum. Indeed, such circular ironies invariably energize the critical charge of many of Rakowitz's narrative installations and material reconstructions.

One chilling quote ascribed to Mullah Omar is worth repeating in full, if only for the acuity with which it balances an apparently incomprehensible iconoclastic impulse with more ostensibly humanitarian concerns: "I did not want to destroy the Bamiyan Buddha. In fact, some foreigners came to me and said they would like to conduct the repair work of the Bamiyan Buddha that had been slightly damaged due to rains. This shocked me. I thought, these callous people have no regard for thousands of living human beings—the Afghans who are dying of hunger, but they are so concerned about non-living objects like the Buddha. This was extremely deplorable. That is why I ordered its destruction. Had they come for humanitarian work, I would have never ordered the Buddhas' destruction." One almost hears the artist's cautiously muttered approval while transcribing these highly problematic and deeply

conflicted lines onto the glass surface. After all, a comparable spirit of indignation at inequity, a “politics of rage,” even, underlies many of Rakowitz’s projects to date, especially those that have the destruction or dismantling of major cultural artifacts as their subject.

In fact, another work by Rakowitz related to the ongoing “great war for civilization” was included in a 2010 exhibition, simply and effectively titled “Über Wut” (On Rage), at Berlin’s Haus der Kulturen der Welt. Curator Valerie Smith defined the purpose of the project in the following terms: “to explore how artists challenge and channel instances of adversity, injustice, intolerance, censorship, and totalitarianism . . . and existential modes of expressing discontent.” The visitor entered this show by passing through the archway of Rakowitz’s *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*, 2010, a paper-covered plywood remake of Babylon’s fabled Ishtar Gate; the first glimpse of the structure revealed only its bare-bones backside, disclosing the scaffolding that supports a brightly colored facade covered with a startling combination of Arabic script and Pepsi-Cola logos. Since the early ’30s, the original gate has been housed in Berlin’s Pergamon Museum—where it continues to stand, as do so many archaeological artifacts scattered in museums across the Western world, as a towering reminder of the violent colonial prehistory of modern cultural institutions.

But the more direct reference in Rakowitz’s Potemkin gateway is to a scaled-down reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate that was built near the ruins of Babylon sometime in the ’50s, as the entrance to an archaeological museum that never materialized. During the Iraq war this monument served as a perennially popular photo backdrop for US soldiers, many of whom, we may assume, had passed through the military base that was controversially built within spitting distance of the ruins of the ancient city of biblical renown. Today, this Babylon is best remembered as the symbol of all worldly evils (as in the “whore of Babylon”). It is remembered, too, as the site of divine retribution—the Babylon spoken of in Revelation 18 that many around the world, and an overwhelming majority in the Middle East in particular, identify with US hegemony and the concomitant culture of global capitalist decadence. Approached from its inglorious rear, Rakowitz’s rickety gate shrewdly challenges the entwined myths of originary objecthood and imperial permanence: A remake of a remake, it can never return us to the real thing, least of all to the long-lost powers of yesteryear. As such, it is not a portal to the past, but a gateway to the postimperial present. □

DIETER ROELSTRAETE IS MANILOW SENIOR CURATOR AT THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, CHICAGO.



Michael Rakowitz, *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*, 2010, found packaging and newspapers, glue, cardboard, wood, 19' 7 1/2" x 16' 2 1/4" x 3' 1 1/4". Photo: Thomas Eugester.

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Interview

From Invisible Enemy to Enemy Kitchen

Michael Rakowitz
in conversation with
Anthony Downey

Michael Rakowitz is an Iraqi-American conceptual artist whose work is influenced by his cultural origins, not so much in terms of identity, but as a means through which to engage issues that affect cultural production and the loss of culture. An artist with a concern for the economies of exchange that inform social, political and historical events, it is in the contested realm of human experience that Rakowitz situates his practice. However, rather than offering

Michael Rakowitz, Detail of *The Breakup*, 2012, original Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band album cover (1967) magazine color printouts, 12 x 12 inches, 30.5 x 30.5 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery.



solutions to forms of social inequality and historical injustice, or attempting to ameliorate social and cultural loss, Rakowitz's practice is more about agitation and the antagonistic counter-narratives that continue to re-emerge in any accepted version of events.

In this interview with Anthony Downey, he discusses projects such as *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007) and his ongoing project *Enemy Kitchen* that started in 2004. He also talks about his 2012 project, presented at dOCUMENTA(13), and its focus on the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan, the latter having been destroyed in 2001 by members of the Taliban, and *The Break Up*, 2012, which examines the apparently unlikely relationship between The Beatles, the Six Day war in 1967, and the dream of Pan-Arabism.

Anthony Downey: I want to talk to about *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007), in which you recreate objects looted from Iraq's National Museum. It brings into play not only archeological issues, but issues of tourism and repatriation - something I find throughout your work - not to mention issues around cultural looting. Can you talk about how this work came into being and if this term 'recuperation' means anything to you in this context?

MR: The work deals with addressing a void and finding ways of articulating in some visual and spatial sense what everybody says is lost. In 2003, we became a global viewing public with the information that the cultural heritage in Iraq had been wiped off the face of the earth because of the allied invasion. With that in mind, it was almost like the abstract details of it were enough to create what I felt was the first moment of pathos in the war. Whether you were pro-war or against the war, right or left, Iraqi or American, or just somewhere else on the globe, this was not an Iraqi problem, this was a human problem. It was almost a missed opportunity for people not just to be outraged by objects going missing but by actual bodies going missing. It's like what happens when you get a photograph of a

mass grave; you're never able to focus on the individual things or people, it's always just a big abstraction. What was recuperative was this restoring a sense of what each of these things once were. And that is why I set about recreating some of the objects that had went missing. In the process of attempting to remake something that clearly can't be remade there is also this kind of additive effort that comes through when making these things.

I'm also interested in this idea that you can never reconstruct history - we all know that these things are gone forever and these are just surrogates made with the immediacy of detritus being enlisted as a material. It's almost like a futile effort. But I think it was also recuperative. This was the first project I did after moving to Chicago from New York, working with these young artists who are from the American heartland between 2006 and 2007. There was this war that none of us could do anything about, which we couldn't stop, and there was something about the slowness about making this work that allowed for a conversational space to open up where we were actually discussing the war. That moment in 2007 actually feels far enough away now for me to be really able to actually log it as a time when the American psyche was feeling these complicated emotions about complicity and a certain kind of impotence at what could be done, if anything. In making these things, we didn't replace the original things, but there was something recuperative and hopeful about it while, in time, admitting its failure in terms of whether it adequately replaces something that was lost.

AD: It's interesting you use the word 'pathos', which comes from the Greek 'pathetic' and is used to define an appeal to emotions that is ultimately doomed to failure. With *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*, it seems the finished product, whilst important, is not as important as this appeal to an audience to engage but also to the process in making that work with collaborators. Do you think the process is more important here?

MR: You can look at it in different ways, but I'm going to be biased because I'm the maker and I went through the experience of making it in my studio - nobody else experiences that. I don't think it's necessarily the critical moment of the work and I wouldn't, for instance, show a video of the work being made, because I don't think it is always necessary to elaborate on those backstage moments. I'm also very considered in terms of what to put out there for the end piece and I think the objects do speak about their making in a way, because - like you said - there is a certain kind of pathetic quality in terms of what materials are being used. It's the waste: the foodstuffs, packaging, newspapers, detritus, and the discarded moments of culture. I don't think it's necessary to over burden the work with information about how it's made.

AD: Many of your other works play with institutional contexts. They are very much, in this instance, mimicking artefacts within the museological context. They are also invariably not site specific as such but more context-based and in dialogue with the institutions within which it is placed. Does that have purchase on the way you

Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series), 2007, middle eastern packaging and newspapers, glue, variable dimensions, installation view at Lombard-Freid Projects, New York, NY. Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery.



think about the development of these works? I'm thinking about *What Dust Will Rise*, which was shown at dOCUMENTA(13) in 2012.

Michael Rakowitz,
What Dust Will Rise?,
2012, commissioned
and produced by
dOCUMENTA (13)
with the support of
Dena Foundation for
Contemporary Art,
Paris, and Lombard
Freid Projects, New
York. Photo: Roman
März. Courtesy the
artist and Lombard
Freid Gallery.



MR: I'm an artist who started out as a public artist and worked site-specifically. This idea of matching up contexts and working institutionally is another way of being site-specific. It is very much on my mind, but I should talk a little more about *The Invisible Enemy* and how it largely came out of a similar acknowledgement. *The Invisible Enemy* started out as a gallery piece and the museological aspect really bloomed when it went to places like Sharjah or the British Museum or Modern Art Oxford; the site specificity meets there. But walking through Chelsea in 2006, it occurred to me that you wouldn't know that we were living in a war culture in New York City. There was really no work that dealt with the fact that there was a war going on - it seemed to be business as usual. I wanted to address that and jolt people's complacency. For years, I'd been thinking about re-making the artefacts that were lost. But then the more I read about the museum looting, the more complicated it became to cry about missing artefacts: for Iraqis, looting the museum and selling an artefact on the black market was a way to get out of the country. The existence of the antiquities market allowed for the museum to be looted in the first place, and here I am pressured to do another show at the gallery and dealing with the market.

Since the project was born out of selling something from a commercial gallery, being shown for the first time in an institutional setting in Sharjah was the moment it shifted for me. I wasn't sure how a public in the Middle East, as opposed to the United States, would perceive it in a museum only 800 miles from Baghdad with a lot of those artefacts having been trafficked through the United Arab Emirates before ending up in private collections around the world. The British Museum is a really interesting one for me because they bought a grouping of the artefacts created from the project as a way to critique their own history and I'm looking forward to when they put those on display. They are supposed to put the looted artefacts

from their own collection on display with the ones I've made. I'm interested in what kind of tension will be achieved between these two things.

For dOCUMENTA(13), I went in with a twofold project. One was to address the Bamiyan Buddhas in Afghanistan because Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev was doing a whole position of Documenta in Afghanistan. This has interested me even longer than the Iraq Museum because I was trained as a stone carver from when I was fifteen and my teacher actually showed me the Bamiyan Buddhas at that moment in my life. What I did was more or less a tribute to them. But in this case of absence, something different goes on in the Bamiyan Buddhas because when talking to people on the street in Bamiyan, they will tell you that they are still there. In fact, they are even more defined because their absence has re-inscribed their presence more than when they were standing there. It's really incredible to hear people speaking that way and I thought, instead of rebuilding the Bamiyan Buddhas I'd rather re-introduce or re-distribute the skillsets that allowed for them to be made in the first place. That was how the idea of a stone carving and calligraphy workshop came about. For one week, I worked in collaboration with a German sculptor and restorer who has worked on the Bamiyan site since 2004, Bert Praxenthaler. We did this workshop at a cave right near where one of the Buddhas had stood. Students from the area who were not art students - there were six women and six men - and we carved stone. For me that was a piece in itself because you had this redistribution of that skillset happening in the same frame as the absence that marks the destroyed artifact of the Bamiyan Buddhas.

One other part of the project was looking at the Fridricianum in Kassel as a site where this work would be shown. I found myself in the archives and looking at the building after the British had bombed it in 1941 and seeing all these destroyed books. One of the books was the theory of rhetoric by Cicero, which had been previously damaged much earlier because Benedictine monks had scraped away a lot of the text because it was un-Christian. You have all these different levels of iconoclasm that happen either through state rhetoric or religious dogma. I thought about reconstructing those books; burned in these ways that made them look like they became petrified or scared. The idea of carving them in the stone of Bamiyan became a moment of intersecting those two moments: one moment of cultural destruction with another.

AD: There is this book by Raymond Williams Baker, *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: While Museums were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered*. Baker argues that the lootings of the museums in Iraq was not only permitted and enabled by the Allied forces but, because they believed that if you could eradicate culture it would be easier to build a new state, it was actively encouraged. I'm not necessarily saying it chimes with your work but I think it is an interesting way of looking at that looting, not even as something to do with artefacts being circulated on a global level, but the literal evisceration or deracination of Iraqi culture that seemed to be a policy, as opposed to a byproduct, of the invasion of Iraq. One

moment of eradication, the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, being met with another, the looting of museums.

MR: That makes a lot of sense. In *What Dust will Rise* there is this one quote placed in one of the vitrines that houses the relics of the Western Buddha of Bamiyan and it's from Mullah Mohammed Omar, who more or less alludes to the fact that the reason he blew up the Bamiyan Buddhas was not because he wanted to destroy them. In fact - and this is true - it was because he met with the Taliban elders who said that they shouldn't be destroying this because its part of Afghanistan history and it's an essential tourist site. Then apparently, these Swedish archeologists or professionals wanted to give money to have the Bamiyan Buddhas restored for damage. When he asked if they could use that money for food for suffering Afghani women and children they said no because it was for the Bamiyan Buddhas. He thought this was deplorable and decided to blow them up as a result. If they had come for humanitarian work he would never have destroyed them but he thought it was one of these things that needed to happen. Not just as a punishment to the west or some sort of admonishment, but also as a way of getting rid of distractions and redressing what he viewed to be inequities in western approaches to Afghanistan.

AD: I note that a number of commentators often talk about so-called "relational aesthetics" when discussing your work but I see this is as a bit of misnomer. I view your work as being more about aesthetics of relating to specific socio-cultural moments in time, be they submerged or overt in their symbolism. With *Return* (2004) there is a different type of recuperative gesture happening. It is very much about a familial connection: recuperating a relationship that is important to you but, in that moment of recuperating, it is a work that also points to a series of geo-political relations.

Michael Rakowitz,
Return (Brooklyn),
October-December,
2006, Davisons & Co.
import/export company,
529 Atlantic Avenue
Brooklyn, NY. Courtesy
the artist and Lombard
Freid Gallery.



MR: Yes. And I'm not going to get started on relational aesthetics. What artwork isn't relational? There is a certain kind of fluffiness that has risen in this dialogue around work that is based around social practice, which is even worse since it's been reduced down to an abbreviation where people call it 'SO-PRA': this feel-good, almost misplaced kind of ministerial work. What I'm doing in *Return* is to

essentially re-open my grandfather's company because I realised how absolutely impossible it was to move things around, whether it would be sending things to or out of Iraq. The date syrup was something I became interested in because it is an incredibly symbolic food in Iraq and I grew up around it. Then there was also the family photo album; we had such an incomplete archive of the family's history in Baghdad because they had to leave under duress. In a lot of ways the project does do these things where it reconnects those relationships; the reason my grandfather came to be an importer and exporter when he was exiled from Iraq was because he was heartbroken at not being able to be Iraqi anymore so he opened the company to stay in contact with his Iraqi partners. That to me was something that echoes in the work where I'm sort of re-entering the market place as this American businessman, because I did open the company legitimately and rebuilt these connections.

AD: There is a quote where you write, 'I wanted to sit in a place where dialogue would be available', but of course the dialogue itself in *Return* didn't seem to be centred on the shop itself, but the external extraneous, global, virtual participation of individuals. This work comes out of an earlier piece, *Enemy Kitchen* (2004-ongoing), which was a much more overt engagement with the politics or the legacy coming out of the war in Iraq. I feel that work, despite its apparent simplicity, is extraordinarily complex. It offers a platform for people to speak about the politics of war through the aesthetics of cooking.

Michael Rakowitz,
Enemy Kitchen,
2006-ongoing,
performance, Hudson
Guild Community
Center, New York, NY.
Courtesy the artist and
Lombard Freid Gallery.



MR: For me the idea of bringing these things home in a sense is a kind of remote nature of the war, which was something that I was really struck by since the first Gulf war began in 1991. That was when I was really coming into some sense of understanding of where I come from. I was in my senior year in high school and the place my grandparents had fled to was going to bomb the place

they'd fled from and I had grown up with these magical stories about Baghdad. My grandmother used to tell me these stories about singing towers that told the time - minarets - that inspired an earlier piece of mine called *Minaret* (2001- ongoing). Then the first time I actually see Baghdad is through the green tinted images of CNN and unidentifiable pieces of architecture being blown up. That to me was really traumatizing from a distance because I felt split: I was half American, half Iraqi, raised completely in the United States.

My mother would always talk about the way Iraqis had been reduced to being these villains and more or less trivialized. It was a culture that she herself felt connected to, even though her family had been expelled it was still a place where urban planning began, which is one of the reasons why I have such an interest in architecture. She would always make Iraq present at home in some ways through her cooking, but I grew up thinking it was Jewish food because it was what we had at Shabbat or Rosh Hashanah: I didn't even know what matzo balls were until I was in college! All of a sudden, I understood the difference and the sameness that is basically Iraqi food; it was Christian, Muslim, Arab and Jewish. It was all these things that were indiscernible from one another.

AD: You've mentioned this notion of the 'aesthetic of good intentions'. I think the actual phrase is only understandable in the context of your former tutor, *Krzysztof Wodiczko*. His ideal of 'interrogative design' chimes interestingly with the 'aesthetic of good intentions'. I think with *Wodiczko's* work it's this kind of critical design practice, this manner in which it brings to light a marginalization, or marginal social communities - giving legitimacy to cultural issues so that they can be discussed. Are the 'aesthetics of good intentions' and 'interrogative design' central to your earlier work, such as *paraSITE* (1997), for example?

MR: *paraSITE* came out of a visit to Jordan and it was a very important trip for me: the first time anyone from my family had been back to the Middle East. It was 1997 so I must have been 23-years-old and I ended up wanting to study the architecture I'd seen in Palestinian refugee camps. I'd seen a photograph of a family whose home had been bulldozed by Israel and in a kind of oppositional act they rebuilt the entire façade of the house using discarded aluminum and things like that. I wanted to visit these tents but I was on a residency with MIT and Oxford Brookes and the Jordanian government wouldn't allow it. I ended up researching the tents and the equipment of the Bedouin, those who were nomadic through conflict and those who were nomadic by tradition. It came out of looking at the way the tents of the Bedouin were constructed in acknowledgement of the wind patterns that move through the desert and the I saw the wind being blown out of buildings from the external exhaust ports of the heating systems, which gave rise to the thinking behind *paraSITE* as an actual object. It was also meant to be antagonistic: in French 'para' means to 'guard against' so 'parasite' is to guard against becoming a site; against permanence and to look at the celebration of a certain kind of nomadism. One of the misunderstandings of that project is that it is about benevolence, but

it is about creating a moment of comfort that creates discomfort on the street and in those who look at it and the conditions it speaks to and about.

Michael Rakowitz,
*Michael McGee's
paraSITE shelter*,
2000, plastic bags,
polyethylene tubing,
hooks, tape, installation
view in New York, NY.
Courtesy the artist and
Lombard Freid Gallery.



To return to your question regarding 'good intentions': a lot of social practice projects have good intentions, and I'll be the first to understand the critical and negative reception that a lot of that work has had, yet I feel like I need to align myself with those works because I understand the impulse that generates them. I'd been thinking about wrestling with the uneasiness I have with both the work and the critique of the work. But I also have misgivings and scepticisms about putting forward the community alibi. The idea that this was good for the community or the community enjoyed this or was successful because there were all these people that came over for dinner, to me that is not a very convincing artwork. But maybe the aesthetics of good intentions could be that there is something that could rise out of it or maybe it is just bullshit. I'm also interested in the possibility that all of this may play out to reveal something that could be considered an aesthetic or on the way to being something like that. In this sense, perhaps *Wodiczko's* ideal of 'interrogative design' is closer to what I wanted to achieve there.

AD: I want to return to where we began and look again at this notion of historical recuperation, I was fascinated by but sorry to have missed your show at Lombard-Freid Projects, New York *The Break Up* (6th September - 17th October 2012). One of the things that fascinated me about this work concerns what was lost in 1967 following the Six-Day war - the dream of pan-Arabism - that you relate to the break up of *The Beatles*. Could you talk a little bit about that?

MR: I didn't want to produce a polemic on Palestine. I wanted to figure out if there was a way of doing something that could be related directly to the citizens of the city and places beyond the city, something that people could have access to. I thought about radio: something that travels invisibly and goes over boundaries. I also

Michael Rakowitz, Detail of *Study for The Breakup – Maps (The Breakup Series)*, 2010–2012, Beatles map of Liverpool, 1970s; Jerusalem map 1950 printed in Israel printed in Palestine; Jerusalem map, 1936; Michael Rakowitz poster Al Ma'mal, 2010; Brick fragment from Cavern Club, 1963; Stone from the Western Wall, 2010, 2 x 4 ft, 61 x 121.9 cm. Courtesy the artist and Lombard Freid Gallery.



thought about the fanaticism of the city of Jerusalem, thinking about my own fanaticism, located nowhere near religion. My Jerusalem was Liverpool, where *The Beatles* came from. I grew up wanting to visit Liverpool and my grandmother, who had a brother living in London and made many trips there, would tell me it was a terrible port city and I've not to this day visited it. *The Beatles* fascinated me after John Lennon's assassination and I had all their albums. Then, once I had exhausted the albums, it was the bootlegs - I wanted to know everything. The enormous amounts of bootlegs available were primarily from the 'Let It Be' and 'Abbey Road' sessions and you can actually hear the studio chatter. I started to hear arguments and became more fascinated by these arguments. I went to record stores asking if they had any records of *The Beatles* arguing, trying to pinpoint the moment when the collapse happened, as if I could find a moment as identifiable as the bullets that entered John Lennon's body - that very place where the collapse occurred.

In 2003, for 30 minutes on the Internet, 150 hours of *The Beatles* last recording sessions, in crystal clear sound, were uploaded and I downloaded them, wondering for years afterwards what I was going to do with these recordings. For this project in Jerusalem I thought it would be interesting to use these tapes as a narration of the collapse of *The Beatles* as a way of talking about the collapse of Palestine and the Middle East. You had four Beatles and the four quarters of Jerusalem. So I went to this radio station in Ramallah, Radio Amwaj and they said this was a great idea because 'Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band', released in June 1967, was also released four days before the Six-Day War began. They asked me what I had in mind and I said maybe a three-hour programme and they said: 'This is the Middle East, if your going to tell a story you have to go back to the beginning; its very genesis.' They commissioned a ten-part radio series.

When I was producing the shows and listening to the 150 hours

of material, there was one moment when Paul McCartney is creating the whole idea for the 'Let It Be' project, which was supposed to be called 'Get Back'. The Beatles were supposed to return to the stage, which was something they hadn't done since 1966, and McCartney was taking over the leadership role - John Lennon didn't want it anymore and Brian Epstein had died of an overdose. There comes this balkanization of these different personalities making up this one group. Suddenly, it became one Paul, one John, one Ringo, one George. In some recordings, *The Beatles* were talking about going to places in the Middle East, to doing these concerts in places like Tripoli in Libya. There is this moment they're joking about Paul's beard and how they should do a concert in Jerusalem. Suddenly, something that was dealing with allegory and something seemingly disparate was actually a lot closer. These two dual timelines that happened during roughly the same period of time from the 1950s until the end of the 1960s and there were overlaps I thought were completely unlikely. It was a real discovery and it became like an archive project where one unearths or excavates something they hadn't necessarily thought existed before but it was like it had been waiting there the whole time.

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About the author

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