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Graduate Symposium Compendium

2020

Nasher Sculpture Center

Nasher Prize
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COVER:
Michael Rakowitz, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (*Lamassu*), 2018
Installation view, Trafalgar Square, London, 2018 Middle eastern food packaging and newspapers, glue, labels, sound, drawings Photo courtesy of the artist

Nasher Prize
Nasher Sculpture Center

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The 2021 Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium Compendium is published on the occasion of the symposium of the same name organized by the Nasher Sculpture Center, presented virtually by the Nasher Sculpture Center October 27–30, 2020, as part of the Nasher Prize Dialogues series.

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Nasher Sculpture Center

Nasher Sculpture Center is home to the Raymond and Patsy Nasher Collection, one of the finest collections of modern and contemporary sculpture in the world, featuring more than 300 masterpieces by the likes of Calder, Giacometti, Matisse, Picasso, Rodin, and Hepworth. In addition to highlighting the permanent collection in the Renzo Piano–designed museum, the Nasher is host to rotating installations by celebrated modern masters as well as leading contemporary artists. In dialogue with these exhibitions and other sculptural themes, the Nasher hosts lectures and symposia that enrich the museum experience and highlight the Nasher as a catalyst for the study, installation, conservation, and appreciation of modern and contemporary sculpture.

Nasher Prize

In April 2015, the Nasher Sculpture Center announced the creation of the Nasher Prize, the most significant award in the world dedicated exclusively to contemporary sculpture. It is presented annually to a living artist who has had an extraordinary impact on the understanding of the art form. Each winner is chosen by a jury of renowned museum directors, curators, artists, and art historians who have an expertise in the field and varying perspectives on the subject, and the chosen Laureate receives a $100,000 prize, conferred in April of each year. In addition, each winner receives an award object designed by the architect of the Nasher Sculpture Center, Renzo Piano. The Nasher Sculpture Center is one of a few institutions worldwide dedicated exclusively to the exhibition and study of modern and contemporary sculpture. As such, the Prize is

an apt extension of the museum's mission and its commitment to advancing developments in the field.

Attendant with the award aspect of the Nasher Prize is a series of public programs called Nasher Prize Dialogues. These panel discussions, lectures, and symposia are intended to foster international awareness of sculpture and to stimulate discussion and debate. Nasher Prize Dialogues are held yearly in cities around the world, offering engagement with various audiences and providing myriad perspectives and insight into the ever-expanding field of sculpture.

Past Nasher Prize Laureates include artist Doris Salcedo (2016), Pierre Huyghe (2017), Theaster Gates (2018), and Isa Genzken (2019).

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Foreword

The Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium is a highlight for us each year at the Nasher Sculpture Center. Advancing scholarship on contemporary sculpture through deep consideration of each laureate's practice, the symposium is one of the most important ways the Nasher stays faithful to its mission to enrich the body of knowledge about our time's most revelatory and ground-shifting artists, including Michael Rakowitz, our 2020 laureate.

The year 2020 proved to be an unforgettable one, of course, and not just as far as Nasher Prize was concerned—every aspect of life, for people all over the planet, was dramatically altered by the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a year that tested the architecture of every institution, business, family, and individual, dealing out immeasurable loss and hardship to those in every walk of life. To no less a degree, we all experienced isolation—distance from community, fellowship, and the physical presence of many we love. The irony was not lost on us that, when we were all forced to be *apart*, our laureate Michael Rakowitz's entire artistic practice hinges on the belief that great benefits may be reaped and fostered through building community and spanning ethnic, social, religious, and political divides. But, as Michael has made evident though his brave work, unforeseen impediments can often make us more resilient and imaginative, more resourceful, and we found such to be true when it came to shaping this year's Graduate Symposium.

Held virtually, the symposium took place over several days in October 2020 in a series of lunchtime Zoom presentations from students in the United States, Italy and the United Kingdom. Adroitly moderated by Rakowitz's close friend and colleague, Dr. Nada Shabout, Director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI) at the University of North Texas, the conversations spurred by the students' papers and Dr. Shabout's inquiry of them were incredibly meaningful, perceptive and challenging. We are exceedingly proud to present those papers here, as well as the keynote address, delivered by one of the preeminent champions of and scholars on Michael Rakowitz's work, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, Director of Castello di Rivoli in Italy.

I should say, that as one of the extraordinary events of this year—and as testament to the character of the man to whom this compendium's scholarship is dedicated—unbeknownst to the students, Michael Rakowitz himself tuned in to each day's talks, witnessing the research and dedication of these young scholars first hand. He honored them several days later by hosting a virtual lunch for them in which they (albeit from far flung places) shared food and dialogued about their contributions to his own understanding of his work. We share their wonder and gratitude for his good grace and profound commitment to human relationship.

I want to offer many thanks to the Nasher Prize sponsors who made the Nasher Prize Graduate Symposium possible, especially: JPMorgan Chase & Co., the Eugene McDermott Foundation, Nancy A. Nasher and David J. Haemisegger, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Donna Wilhelm Family Fund.

Finally, our sincere thanks and best wishes to each of the students who presented papers this year—we look forward to your continued growth as thinkers and scholars—as well as to Nasher Curator Dr. Catherine Craft and Associate Curator Dr. Leigh Arnold for steering the program and the many Nasher staff members who contributed to the event's success.

Jeremy Strick
Director, Nasher Sculpture Center

Opening Remarks

Dr. Nada Shabout

Director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI) at the University of North Texas

This text has been adapted from the transcript of Dr. Shabout's opening remarks presented during the virtual 2020 Nasher Prize Graduate Student Symposium on October 27, 2020.

Welcome everyone! Thank you for your presence. It is sad that we are not able to be together in the beautiful Nasher Sculpture Center and see Michael's work on exhibition in person, but I am very happy that we are able to gather for this symposium. I take comfort in that we will nevertheless be engaged discussing Michael's beautiful art. Thank you to the Nasher team for making this happen and for inviting me to take part.

2020 has been like no other year. Certainly, the strangest I have lived, in every aspect. A year filled with anxiety as humanity is tested by a global pandemic with its fear, restrictions, and isolations. But equally, a year where the digital and virtual worlds reigned supreme and opened up new global spaces of interaction. It is a year of racial tensions worldwide. Here in the United States, Black Lives Matter tries to fulfill goals invoked by the civil rights movement of the 1960s, reevaluating and rejecting false gains, political correctness, and global conflicts. A year where despite, or perhaps, further fueled by the disparity made more apparent by the pandemic, civil protest that has been gripping public spaces around the world with demands of equity, equality, and freedom continue. Calls to decolonize mind, space, and art history are more encompassing. A year that has witnessed what is classified as one of the largest explosions in history: the Beirut explosion on August 4th. More importantly, it is a year that has clearly demonstrated to us that scholarship, as art, cannot be disinterested hiding behind neutrality and objectivity.

2020 also marks the centennial of the 1920 Great Iraqi Revolution. It is the revolt in which Iraqi tribal and religious leaders united against the British authorities, who at the end of World War I, awarded themselves the mandate of Mesopotamia in April 1920. Demonstration soon turned into a fast-spreading armed revolt around the country in June of that year. The British were brutal

in their attempts to crush it and were able to end it in October at a high cost in both casualties and money. The termination of the revolt also resulted in the Hashemite rule over Iraq, installed by the British in 1921.

This history is the more remarkable in relation to the more recent events. What has been dubbed, the October Revolution, the Tishreen Revolution, that started last year in Iraq, is an occupy movement that echoes the 1920 revolution in its desire to reclaim the country. What you see as my virtual background today, is *Naṣb al-Ḥurrīya*, Monument of Freedom in Tahrir Square in Baghdad that has been the site of this revolution. This monument, which is not only the first monument that many of us who grew up in the country encountered, but also the first in Iraq by an Iraqi artist, Jawad Saleem, commissioned to commemorate the 1958 revolution that was seen to bring hope for better days and for change. Its towering presence is a signification of Iraqi identities. Since last year, the monument provided Iraqi youth with a site to recollect their history, stories, and agency. They reimagined the original monument through outlining it with light. It became a site of "ghosting."

It is within this context and against this background that Michael's work resonates even louder. I cannot remember when exactly Michael and I met, but I feel that I have known him throughout his career. It might have been Beirut in 2004 or 2005. It was also around that time that he accepted my invitation to the University of North Texas to present his work. He brought me Iraqi dates from his project *RETURN* (2004–ongoing). I was conflicted as to whether I should eat them or frame them! I decided to eat them. Our friendship has certainly converged over our love and concern for what had transpired in Iraq. As an art historian, the post-2003 invasion of Iraq with the subsequent looting and destruction of

heritage; that sense of loss, assured an urgent call to search for archives, document, and write. It was personal as well as scholarly. I have lived a good and foundational portion of my life in Baghdad. My memories are distant but real.

For Michael, a similar awareness of loss motivated his work. From his early projects, his sense of justice and respect for humanity were evident. The Gulf War and invasion made it all the more personal and urgent. While Michael did not live in Iraq, that part of his family heritage was always there in the memories that were now threatened. He thus understood the urgency to save his grandparents' stories. I see his work since as his search for his past while equally negotiating his present.

The Nasher Prize has a record of reevaluating and redefining what sculpture is through the work of its winners. Through his work Michael Rakowitz forces us to question materiality, monumentality, and urgency. His is activist performative sculpture, that creates what he calls "situations;" encounters, and conversations that urge dialogues. Michael makes objects that are replacement signs of what was once. He argues that his work "sometimes serves as kind of a reminder and sometimes these kinds of reminders are inconvenient or unwanted." Through keeping memories and conversations going—a restorative act—Michael helps two nations to contend with realities. The act equally keeps his mother's family heritage alive. A heritage that was distant and has then become spectral.

Renowned archeologist and art historian Zainab Bahrani argues that ancient Mesopotamian monuments are understood through the modern context, they thus "traverse time; they project their presence into the future while dwelling in the past."[1] Michael's act of "reappearing," a term I much prefer than remaking or resurrecting, speaks to this traversing; he sees "the past as a way of wielding a blue print for the future." The lost objects of Iraqi history reappear engulfed in their contemporary interpretations, hindered within the act of transgression and destruction.

Today we celebrate the work and practice of Michael Rakowitz. Thank you Michael for continuing to challenge our understanding of materiality, sculpture, identity, representation, and history and for your active positions on justice and rights. I look forward to a week of analyses and dialogues around Michael's work, and questions leading to a deeper understanding of it.

With that I would like to start our first session, "History and the Relation between East and West," with two papers.

Our first speaker is Austin Bailey, who is a graduate student at the University of Texas at Dallas and is pursuing his master's degree in art history.

Our second speaker is Brandon Sward who is an artist, performer, writer, organizer, and doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago.

1 Bahrani, *The Graven Image Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 3.

A Theater Of Western Imperialism: The Politics And Poetics Of Michael Rakowitz

Austin Bailey

University of Texas at Dallas

In his response to the devastation of Iraqi culture, artist Michael Rakowitz commenced *The invisible enemy should not exist* in 2007. It is an artistic endeavor dedicated to the reimagining of art and artifacts looted from the National Museum in Baghdad. The ongoing project began when Rakowitz visited the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, which houses several civilizational monuments that were taken by Western excavators. During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, archeologists from such countries as England, France, Germany, and the United States fixated on the Middle East due to its Biblical relevance. Cultural norms of the time period dictated that the origins of humanity sprung from the Mesopotamian region, so as a result, European and American scholars traveled there to find the monuments of ancient biblical civilizations.[1] In fact, the museum gets its name from the Pergamon Alter, a second century BCE acropolis built in modern-day Turkey that was later excavated by the Germans in the nineteenth century. To this day, it still resides in the Pergamon Museum in Berlin (fig. 1.1).

Even though Rakowitz was aware that the institution contained many pilfered artifacts, there was one in particular that did not expect to see: the Ishtar Gate.[2] This Babylonian monument was originally completed in 575 BCE under the reign of the famous King Nebuchadnezzar II.[3] Standing at over fifty feet tall, it was situated along the northern part of a defensive wall and recognized as one

1 For more on Western archeology in the Mesopotamian region, see *Pioneers to the Past: American Archeologists in the Middle East 1919-1920*, ed. Geoff Emberling (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 2010).

2 Michael Rakowitz, "Wild Talks: Michael Rakowitz on g(hosting)," Concordia University, November 30, 2017, video, 23:37, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lI4KSEbTBmg&t=2510s.

3 "Ishtar Gate," in *Architectural Excellence: 500 Iconic Buildings*, ed. Paul Cattermole (Greene Media, 2008).

Figure 1.1.
TK

of the most important of the eight entrances into the city. The street that passed through the gate and into the city was known as The Processional Way, where statues of gods were brought to the Akitu Temple during New Year celebrations. *Aj ibur Shapu*, the Babylonian name of the street where the processions took place, roughly translates to "The invisible enemy should not exist," hence the title of Rakowitz's project.

Blue-glazed bricks and alternating low reliefs made from polychrome compose the outer framework of the structure. The animals depicted are both real and imaginary: aurochs, a now extinct species of cattle, are illustrated alongside the hybridized, mythical sirrush dragon. Known as one of the seven wonders of the world, the Ishtar Gate eventually fell into oblivion until it was rediscovered in modern-day Iraq by the early twentieth-century German archeologist Robert Koldewey. The gate was meticulously

Figure 1.2.
Scaled-down reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate in Baghdad, Iraq.

dismantled piece by piece, with each brick cleaned, catalogued, and numbered accordingly. They were then transported to Berlin and reconstructed in the Pergamon Museum, infusing the leftover authentic relics with refabricated bricks in order to display the full magnificence of the original gate.

Iraq's government created a scaled-down replica of the Ishtar Gate in the 1950s for a proposed art museum (fig. 1.2). Although the gate was eventually assembled out of plywood and plaster, the museum was never constructed, leaving the gate abandoned. By the time of the second Iraq War (2003-11), the Iraqi Ishtar Gate had taken on a new life. In a text attached to his exhibition drawings for *May the arrogant not prevail* (2010), Rakowitz details how the Western powers became entangled with the facsimile: "American and Polish soldiers used the archeological site as a military base,

covering 4,000 acres with gravel, which contaminated unexcavated areas, and damaged the pavement of The Processional Way with heavy vehicles. The reconstructed gate served as one of the most popular backdrops for US soldiers serving in Iraq."[4] This was a watershed moment for Rakowitz, as he had presumably discovered his first "ghost".[5] The Iraqi Ishtar Gate was cobbled together out of catchpenny materials and stood as a hollow shell of its predecessor, evoking its presence, but nevertheless a pathetic reimagination. When Rakowitz turned his attention to the National Museum of Baghdad and recognized its connections to the Ishtar gate, he gave the Museum's looted objects a similar treatment to the Iraqi government's replica of the Ishtar Gate.

After the fall of Baghdad, the National Museum was looted from April 10–12, 2003 during the fog of war. Valuable art and artifacts experienced untold damage, and over 15,000 objects were stolen, leaving the museum a baron wasteland. Efforts on the part of international police and Dr. Donnie George—former Director General of the National Museum in Baghdad and president of the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage—resulted in the recovery of roughly half of the objects. However, over 7,000 still remain missing, forever drifting in the abyss of black markets and missing cultural heritage. Moreover, the nations that now hold custody of the recovered artifacts refuse to return them to Baghdad, deeming the area unsafe due to regular insurgencies.

4 Michael Rakowitz, "May the Arrogant Not Prevail," in *Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2017), 28.

5 Michael Rakowitz, "Wild Talks: Michael Rakowitz on g(hosting)," 22:52. Rakowitz states in this lecture that he visited the Pergamon in 2006, whereupon he saw the Ishtar Gate for the first time. Therefore, I have presented this hypothetical chronology due to the way that Rakowitz presents his story along with the drawings and images that accompanied the first *The invisible enemy* exhibition in 2007.

Thus, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–ongoing) commenced, and Rakowitz began to reimagine the lost artifacts in the same light as the Iraqi Ishtar Gate.

As of today, Rakowitz has rendered over 900 of the 15,000 works that were stolen. Each one receives roughly the same treatment: the artist and his team of assistants consult a database compiled by the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, which has documented almost every single object that was in the National Museum of Iraq. Rakowitz finds photos from which he garners the true dimensions of given artifacts, and then proceeds to construct its "ghost" with such materials as packaging from Iraqi foodstuffs, local Arabic-English newspapers, and date syrup cans. According to Rakowitz himself, "[The Project] is about these fragments of cultural visibility being enlisted to make these things that are now, for all intents and purposes, invisible."[6] They are not meant to be replacements for the lost original, but rather a garish and tawdry evocation that emphasizes the absence of its counterpart.

Adding to this effect, instead of placing the objects in vitrines or a traditional museum display, Rakowitz lays out the "ghosts" in the same way that recovered originals were catalogued (fig. 1.3). When an item was retrieved, it would be brought back to the National Museum in Baghdad where it was set on a wooden table, documented, and given a number. Rakowitz splays out his ghosts similarly, but he also provides an accession card with all of the information that one might find in the Oriental Institute's database. However, instead of pairing the didactic details with a long paragraph that explains the history of the original object, each ghost is supplemented with a quote from an individual reacting to the looting in Baghdad. Some excerpts are from archeologists

6 Rakowitz, "Wild Talks," video, 30:20.

Figure 1.3.
The invisible enemy should not exist (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series), 2007, exhibition view.

and curators who had close personal ties with the stolen artifacts, while others are from US officials who helped foster the conditions that resulted in the lootings of cultural heritage sites. For example, a quote from Donald Rumsfeld—George W. Bush's Secretary of Defense during the Iraq War—accompanies *IM 74827*: "And, does that mean you couldn't go in there and take a television camera or get a still photographer and take a picture of something that was imperfect, untidy? I could do that in any city in America. Think what's happened in our cities when we've had riots, and problems, and looting. Stuff happens."[7] Additionally, *IM 19771* features the words of Selma Al-Radi, an archeologist of Iraqi descent who pioneered restoration projects in the Mesopotamian region: "With war comes destruction, the loss of thousands of years of human

7 Rakowitz, "The invisible enemy should not exist," 36.

Figure 1.4.
Michael Rakowitz, Illustrations of Dr. Donny George's life in *The invisible enemy should not exist* (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series), 2007–ongoing.

history."[8] Through the incorporation of these quotes, Rakowitz cultivates a dialogue, of sorts, between the protagonists and antagonists of the US–Iraq conflict.

Encircling this conversation, quite literally, is the story of Dr. Donny George, the man responsible for recovering the works robbed from the National Museum. Illustrations depicting different milestones in his life are hung on the walls that surround *The invisible enemy should not exist* (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series) exhibition and are accompanied by an underlying text that details his journey from Baghdad to New York (fig. 1.4). As president of the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Dr. George would

8 Ibid.

regularly participate in archeological excavations under the reign of Saddam Hussein. Unbeknownst to the dictator, Dr. George was a Syrian Christian, so he regularly used excavations as an excuse to avoid Ba'ath party meetings and risk exposing himself. In 2006, Dr. George received an envelope that contained a bullet and a letter threatening to harm him and his family if a ransom was not paid. Out of fear for his life, he fled Iraq with his family, went to Syria, and then found asylum in the US as a Visiting Professor in the Department of Anthropology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. Yet Dr. George was more than just the man who protected Iraqi cultural heritage. He was also the drummer for a band called 99%—short for 99% of Excellence—which specialized in Deep Purple covers. As a sonic homage to Dr. George, Rakowitz commissioned an Arabic band in Brooklyn to record a cover of "Smoke on the Water." When one walks through *The invisible enemy should not exist* (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series) exhibit, the audio of the famous Deep Purple song plays as the accompanied backtrack, conjuring the specter of Dr. George's humanity. Moreover, The song coexists with Rakowitz's ghosts, manifesting adaptations between eastern and western culture through a practice of "covering" or "reimagining".

In its most recent iteration, *The invisible enemy* has taken the form of the Northwest Palace of Nimrud, another archeological wonder eradicated by ISIS. Assyrian monarch Ashurnasirpal II was responsible for the building's initial conception in the ninth century BCE and constructed it as an homage to king and country. It sat squarely in the middle of a walled citadel, taking up roughly 253,500 square feet of space atop a mound that overlooked the Tigris River. The palace was a monolith of modern art and technology—its state apartments composed of gargantuan stone slabs and colorful reliefs that adorned the walls. Like many great buildings in the Mesopotamian region, it fell into dilapidation until

it was uncovered in the 19th century by a Western archeologist. Foreign excavations continued for decades as walls and artistic remnants were taken back to American and European museums. Today, artifacts from Northwest Palace can be found in over seventy-five institutions around the world.

Responding to the histories of colonialism and its relation to the museum, Rakowitz used his "ghosting" techniques to reimagine specific rooms in situ from the Palace of Nimrud. Now on a much bigger scale than the first iteration of *The invisible enemy*, Rakowitz and his team of artists employ colorful food packaging and Arabic newspapers to reconceptualize the magnificent wall reliefs. Each "room" consists of several panels spaced out according to the dimensions of the original area within the Palace. For *Room F*, Rakowitz constructed five freestanding reliefs that feature staples of Assyrian iconography, most of which are detailed with vibrant blues, greens, yellows, and pinks. Two panels depict the demi-god *Apkallu*—a human-bird hybrid that embodied wisdom according to Assyrian mythology—while two others display date palms and white flowers. The artists covered the critical fifth panel in solid browns and greys, alluding to the scars of the panels removed from their original locations.

Similar to all of *The invisible enemy* iterations, each project is site specific. For instance, *Room Z* was on display at the Williams College Museum of Art (WCMA) From September 2019 to April 2020, the very same institution that houses two original stone reliefs from the Palace of Nimrud. The artist's true-to-scale reproduction of *Room Z* occupied one room, while a narrow hall leads down to the Stoddard Gallery, an area which displays the WCMA's originals (fig. 1.5). The "ghost" of *Room Z* sits in dialogue with a displaced autochthon, bringing the past into the present. Adding another layer to *The invisible enemy* project, Rakowitz utilizes the Northwest

Figure 1.5.
Michael Rakowitz, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (Room Z, Northwest Palace of Nimrud). Installation view: Williams College Museum of Art, September 27, 2019 – April 19, 2020. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Palace to illuminate objects and their spatial and temporal variance. It is rare that any object remains within the constraints of its original conceptualization. Much like ourselves, they glide through borders and transcend paradigms, taking on new lives and meanings along the way. I argue that the museum is no different, and through its centuries of appropriation and subjugation of artifacts, it has come to represent a mausoleum for countless cultures across the world. In the WCMA, Rakowitz is manifesting the ghosts of these marauded pasts, making curators and visitors alike wrestle with histories that are often difficult to resolve.

With all of *The invisible enemy* iterations, from votive figures, to the Lamassu and beyond, Rakowitz is forging his own path amongst artists that are responding to conflicts between East and West; yet he is also situating his practice in an existing ontology of art

that utilizes "junk" and "trash". Similar to the artist's culinary endeavors, this project draws connections to postwar Neo-Dada art. More specifically, much of Rakowitz's practice can be traced back to the bricolage artists of the 1960s and the Museum of Modern Art's *The Art of Assemblage* curated by William Seitz in 1961. Although waste was used by Dada artists and Surrealists, MoMA's seminal exhibition allowed "assemblage" art to become an idiom which carried its own practice and audience. Nonetheless, there is a particular distinction that must be made between Rakowitz and the assemblage artists of the 20th century. All the wrappers and materials that compose objects from *The invisible enemy* are not "abject" in the sense of being soiled or torn. Usually, they are clean, carefully cut, and brightly colored. Rather than trash or junk, one might think of them as disposables—their identity in their potential, their state suspended between use and disuse—which cuts to the depersonalizing tactic of objectifying people as disposable to obscure the horror of their injuries and deaths.

Moreover, Rakowitz emphasizes the specific identity of the found object and its relation to an urban environment, a shared quality between himself and postwar Neo-Dadaists. According to Loughborough University scholar Gillian Whiteley, "urban rubbish...acquires a connection not only to the transgressive but, more specifically, to those existing on the outlaw margins of the city, the hustlers and downbeats. Detritus, by association, becomes a signifier of urban alienation, disharmony with nature and social rupture."[9] For Rakowitz, his art embodies these ideas through his representations of marginalized Arabic communities living in the West. The waste that composes objects from *The invisible enemy* is a tautology that signals their moniker as "other", partaking in

9 Gillian Whiteley, *Junk: Art and the Politics of Trash* (New York: I.B.Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011), 127.

Western society but never fully accepted into it. Philosopher and Surrealist provocateur Georges Bataille also makes the connection between trash and the urban landscape through his writings on "base materialism". Not only was Bataille extraordinarily influential for artists across the twentieth century, but the echoes of his work can be seen in objects from *The invisible enemy*.[10] For Bataille, base materialism refers to shapelessness, or those things which lack any sense of form, disrupting patterns that are so often recognized to make sense of the world. All of philosophy cannot help but to "provide a frock coat for what is, a mathematical frock coat."

For artists of the 20th century, these ideas challenged them to create a form of formlessness in order to break down traditional norms of expression. Trash was merely one of the ways that artists attempted to achieve this. Bataille goes on to say that, if one declares the unstructured nature of the universe, then it is "something like a spider or a spittle."[11] Like the froth that the spittlebug leaves on a leaf, waste can generate revulsion due to its vile and grotesque nature. It cannot be classified other than being anti-classificatory, and that very notion poses a danger to the ideological and political frameworks that compose western society. Rakowitz then takes Bataille's base materialism and applies it to "othered" Iraqi communities in the United States. By using "Arab trash" as the skin of his reimagined artifacts, the detritus might be understood as representative of the millions that compose the Arab diaspora across the Western world. Their communities often

10 For more on Georges Bataille's influence on avant-garde movements, see Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000).

11 Georges Bataille, 'Formless' from *Documents* 7, 1929, translated from the French by Dominic Faccini, *October* 60 (Spring 1992), quoted in *Undercover Surrealism: Georges Bataille and Documents*, exhibition catalogue (MIT: Hayward Gallery, 2006), 240.

lack shape, structure, and classification, and are therefore viewed as a "rupture" in Western society. Nonetheless, *The invisible enemy* also owes its existence to the assemblage artists of the 1950s and 60s, whose goals were much more poetic than political.

In MoMA's *The Art of Assemblage*, curator Seitz brought together artists of the historical avant-garde, including Marcel Duchamp, Kurt Schwitters, and Pablo Picasso, and newcomers from the neo-avant-garde, such as Eduardo Paolozzi and John Latham. Not only did the exhibition establish theoretical ties to Dada, but it established new paradigms for what bricolage could be. Seitz centered the show around Jean Dubuffet's theories of assemblage. Credited with coining the term in 1953, Dubuffet's "assemblage" broadened the definition of collage to include three-dimensional works and, in the words of John Elderfield, stressed the "accumulation of found elements in such a way that they remain separately recognizable."[12] Additionally, Seitz used Dubuffet to shift the conversation around collage from politics to poetics, deconstructing the definition of "high art" through exhibiting objects constructed of crude materials. Rakowitz's contribution to the conversation around detritus and the assemblage of waste is manifold, as he subverts, and sometimes coalesces, the theories of Dubuffet, Seitz, Bataille, and Neo-Dada in order to pursue his own agendas.

In *The invisible enemy*, both the poetics of Seitz and Dubuffet merge with the politics of Neo-Dada and Bataille. Rakowitz accomplishes this by staging a theater, turning his bric-a-brac ghosts into props and the museum into a stage. The audience, which Rakowitz caters the exhibition to, is targeted specifically at Westerners and

12 John Elderfield, "Preface," in *Essays on Assemblage, Studies in Modern Art 2* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), 7.

attempts to challenge the cartesian theater of American/British exceptionalism. After the cold war, there is a particular version of exceptionalism that emerges from the Western powers: purge the world of terrorism and spread the values of democracy far and wide. In *American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: U.S. Foreign Policy, Human Rights, and World Order*, David Forsythe and Patrice McMahon argue that this mission to spread freedom around the world is fraught with rhetorical devices and propaganda. Instead of being a beacon of democracy for the world to look toward, America, and to a large extent Britain, peddled "an inconsistent promise [that] became an intentional strategy not only to promote 'freedom' but to advance national interests and secure American primacy."[13]

A kind of separation emerges in the consciousness of the American public during this time period, one that is not dissimilar to a cartesian dualism. Just as René Descartes posited that the body is separable from the mind, Americans often disassociate modern-day atrocities in the Middle East, Latin American, and elsewhere from their own country's culpability. However, this is merely an illusion, one that philosopher Daniel Dennett calls a "cartesian theater".[14] As a leftover of base materialism, cartesian theater operates by utilizing a "tactic of self-protection, self-control, and self-definition" in order to tell stories that connect and control one's identity in their own minds as well as everyone else's. This is precisely what Westerners do in the 21st century when, for example, they see the devastation that has taken place in Iraq. It could not possibly be that an "exceptional" country such as the United States or Great Britain instituted policies that lead to the

13 David Forsythe and Patrice McMahon, American Exceptionalism Reconsidered: U.S. Foreign Policy, Human Rights, and World Order (New York: Routledge, 2017), 41.

14 The term "cartesian theater" was first coined by Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness Explained*, 1st ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1991).

mass suffering of civilians and the destruction cultural artifacts. So instead, they blame the "other," or the "uncivilized" and "barbaric" Arab that is antithetical to Western ideas.

Rakowitz attempts to deconstruct this illusion by placing the ghosts of Arab cultural artifacts in front of the viewer. As the artist beguiles them through the vibrant and playful reimagining of artifacts, a closer examination begins to reveal deeper truths about Western imperialism. In this reflexive tactic, Rakowitz mirrors the dualism of American exceptionalism, demonstrating that looks are often deceptive and never quite tell the whole story. Yet challenging American politics is not Rakowitz's entire ambition. He places ghosts in specific places for specific reasons, and like the assemblage artists, he accosts the very notion of high art and the museums that are built to house it. Cultural institutions in the west have often treated "oriental" artifacts as lesser, viewing them as primitive and categorically separate from the art historical cannon. These attitudes have ultimately led to the mishandling of artistic objects from outside of the west, and many are currently wasting away in the storage houses of prominent museums. What's worse, Western powers have frequently ignored the protection of cultural institutions during times of conflict. The looting and ruination of the National Museum in Baghdad is a prime example of these phenomena, so Rakowitz uses it as the lifeblood of *The invisible enemy* to fuel his polemic against the excesses of war. In turn, Rakowitz creates his vast web in order to collapse binaries and merge disparate collectives; the apparitions of trash, politics, Arabs, and artifacts are brought under the same roof in *The invisible enemy*, all of them haunting others with the goal of creating relational ties that can bind humanity together.

The Politics of Translation

Brandon Sward

University of Chicago

I think my friend has PTSD. He told me about hearing a loud bang near where he works downtown that prompted him to start running; unsure where, unsure why. He tried to catch his breath through gusts of wind and eventually took shelter in an alcove. Gradually I begin to connect these responses to his childhood, revealed to me in slivers. Partly these stories are idyllic tales of preteens wandering the streets of Southeastern Europe, memories of favorite teachers, his mother. But sometimes I learn terrible things, like the biology instructor holdover from the communist period who required total silence in her classroom and graded her students solely on the basis of grueling oral exams she expected to be flawlessly delivered. I hear about children killed by shrapnel. Despite growing up amidst the carnage of the Yugoslav Wars, my friend's eyes were also turned westward. When his mother asked him what he wanted from the US before she went, he requested "anything about Aaliyah" and received upon her return a book about the R&B singer. He tells me about spending time in online chat rooms as a queer child. To this day he has a dog tag necklace sent to him by an older gay man in the US on which the visage of Madonna hovers in ghostly outline.

I meet up with this friend in the small park in front of Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art before going inside. We're attending a dinner hosted by Michael Rakowitz, an artist whose *Backstroke of the West* is currently on view. This dinner, *Enemy Kitchen*, is also a work of art. Rakowitz himself and veterans of the Iraq War serve us Iraqi dishes. An Iraqi-American Jewish artist whose family fled Iraq, Rakowitz is uniquely sensitive to what happens when culture crosses national borders. *Backstroke of the West* references a mistranslation of Revenge of the Sith for a Chinese bootleg version of the film. Although China isn't especially present in the exhibition, there are plenty of surprising connections drawn between the Stars Wars franchise and Iraq,

Figure 2.1.
Installation view, Michael Rakowitz: *Backstroke of the West*, MCA Chicago, Sep 16, 2017–Mar 4, 2018. Work shown: Michael Rakowitz, *The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own*, 2009. Mixed-media installation; overall dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist; Jane Lombard Gallery, New York; and Princeton University Art Museum. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago

such as vitrines that display Darth Vader helmets alongside gas masks and Fedayeen uniforms, the official costume of the paramilitary organization of Saddam Hussein's government. I learn from a comic book accompanying the show entitled *Strike the Empire Back* that Uday, Hussein's eldest son, presented his father with a prototypical helmet for the uniform, an exact replica of Darth Vader's (fig. 2.1).

But this isn't the only Star Wars reference. Consider *The worst condition is to pass under a sword which is not one's own* (2009). The sentence comes from an invitation sent by Hussein for the inauguration of the Victory Arch, a pair of triumphal arches in

Baghdad. The Arches frame the entrances to the Great Celebrations Square, the main square for public celebrations in Baghdad. Giant bronze casts of Hussein's hands wield the Swords of Qādisīyah, the legendary blades of Saʿd ibn Abī Waqqās, who led the conquest of Persia in 636 CE. The blades were forged from the molten steel of the weapons of slain Iraqis, rising above the helmets of the vanquished Iranians. The form of the monument replicates that of another Darth Vader, who crosses two light sabers in his hands on a promotional poster for *The Empire Strikes Back*.

Backstroke of the West is fundamentally about translation, though not as we usually mean the term. Translation is primarily understood as a linguistic activity, whereby one language is converted into another. As such, translation is intimately caught up with meaning. We judge how good a translation is by how well it recreates the meaning expressed in one language in another. Accordingly, we almost immediately run into a problem. Is the best translation the one that reproduces the initial meaning most literally or the one that captures the more diffuse "spirit" of the initial meaning? Within the subtleties of language, we can easily imagine these two imperatives coming into conflict. In "The Task of the Translator," the introduction to his translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*, Walter Benjamin asks us to expand our conception of translation: "Translation is so far removed from being the sterile equation of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own."[1]

1 Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator: An Introduction to the Translation of Baudelaire's *Tableaux parisiens*," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Random House, 2007), 73.

If translation is indeed not about attempting to fit one language into another, certain issues fall away, such as the potential tension between the literal and the figurative. But then it becomes entirely unclear what translation aims for. What does it mean for translation to watch over "the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own"? Benjamin responds, "The task of the translator consists in finding that intended effect… upon the language into which he is translating which produces in it the echo of the original."[2] This answer shifts our attention to a higher level. Rather than merely translating text in one language into another, for Benjamin every act of translation must take into account the entirety of the two languages. Of course, much of a language lies dormant when we translate. Nevertheless, we must always have a language as a whole in mind during translation because the text is never just a text. A text is always written within a language and in this way does not consist merely of what is on the page—the entirety of a language is present in every utterance, if only negatively. The translator's chosen words are fished out of a sea of possibility and the choice of a word is always the passing over of others. Meaning resides not just within a text but just as consequentially outside of it.

Rakowitz's translations, however, have a playful character at odds with the solemnity of the Benjaminian translator, such as in *May the arrogant not prevail* (2010), a replica of the Ishtar Gate, the famous eighth gate of Babylon constructed by order of King Nebuchadnezzar II c. 575 BCE (fig. 2.2). The sculpture was created by a team of assistants out of Arabic food packaging and installed at the Haus Der Kulturen Der Welt in Berlin (a 1930 reconstruction using the original bricks is now shown at the Pergamon Museum, also in Berlin). While *May the arrogant*

2 Ibid., 77.

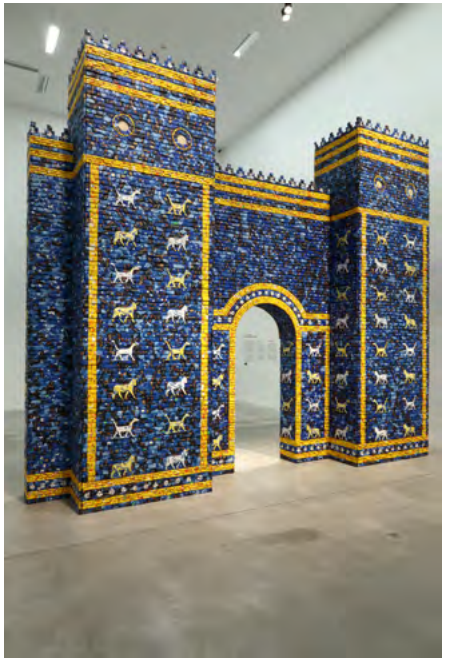

Figure 2.2.
Installation view, Michael Rakowitz: *Backstroke of the West*, MCA Chicago, Sep 16, 2017–Mar 4, 2018. Photo: Nathan Keay, © MCA Chicago, courtesy of the artist.

not prevail is a translation of the Ishtar Gates, the Ishtar Gates are also themselves a translation. Had the Ishtar Gates been reconstructed in the Middle East, they may well have become a symbol of the ancient civilization to which the region is heir, analogous to the Acropolis of Athens or the Colosseum of Rome. But the presence of the Gates in Berlin produces a very different effect— rather than connecting the Middle East to its pasts, the Gates instead perform "Arabness" for a largely Western audience.

As a translation of a translation, *May the arrogant not prevail* potentially has a greater degree of significatory freedom. Rather than faithfully reconstructing a historical past, *May the arrogant not prevail* calls our attention to the inherent artificiality of history. Just as for Benjamin the choice of one word requires the non-choice of others, so too does the choice of one *narrative* require the non-choice of others. For the past several millennia, these narratives have centered a world known as "Western," initially limited to Europe but eventually encompassing the settler colonies of Oceania and the Americas. This Western World was and is predominantly white and Christian, while the non-West was everything else; "the West and the rest." Due to centuries of colonial and imperial expansion, the West has been able to tell history in its own terms; not only due to an extreme power imbalance, but also due to its possession of much of the world's cultural wealth. As a play requires props, so history requires artifacts. But the transfer of antiquities to Western museums has prevented the non-Western societies from telling their own histories. For Rakowitz this cultural transfer is exemplified by the looting of the National Museum of Iraq during and after the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Many of the items stolen during this period still haven't been located. In an ongoing project entitled *The invisible enemy should not exist*, Rakowitz attempts to reconstruct the over 7,000 objects missing from the National Museum (fig. 2.3).

On some level, *The invisible enemy should not exist* is an exercise in Sisyphean absurdism. How much time and effort would it actually take to reproduce all of these, even with the help of a team of assistants? Can we be sure there aren't others? Even if the collection were exhaustive, these recreations aren't the real deal; a fact Rakowitz draws attention to through the makeshift character of these reconstructions. Perhaps the failure of this work to reapproximate reality is part of its power, calling our attention to a break in the chain of history that cannot be repaired completely, just as how *The invisible enemy should not exist* is only a shadow of what was once a robust collection. Unfortunately, this isn't the first cultural casuality of war. Another "Other" of the US was Germany during WWII, which

Figure 2.3.
Figure 2.3. Installation view, Michael Rakowitz: *Recent Projects on Baghdad and Montreal*, SBC Gallery of Contemporary Art, May 13 – June 20, 2009. Work shown: Michael Rakowitz, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series) (detail), 2007–ongoing. Mixed-media installation; overall dimensions variable. Courtesy of the artist; Rhona Hoffman Gallery, Chicago; Jane Lombard Gallery, New York; Barbara Wein Gallery, Berlin; Jack and Sandra Guthman; Lynn Hauser and Neil Ross; Jane Lombard; and private collection. Photo: Bettina Hoffmann, courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2.4.
Michael Rakowitz, What Dust Will Rise?, 2012. Bamiyan travertine, glass, vitrines, bullets, shrapnel, meteorites, Libyan desert glass, trinitite, fragments of the destroyed Buddhas of Bamiyan, and books burned during the WWII. Commissioned and produced for Documenta 13 in Kassel, Germany, and Kabul, Afghanistan, with the support of the Dena Foundation for Contemporary Art, Paris, and Lombard Fried Projects, New York. Photo: Roman März, courtesy of the artist and Rhona Hoffman Gallery

also suffered a great deal of cultural destruction. For example, a fire in the Fridericianum museum in Kassel incinerated state library books during a bombing by the British Air Force on September 9, 1941. For *What dust will rise?* (2012), Rakowitz enlisted Afghan and Italian carvers to produce stone replicas of these volumes out of travertine from the Bamyan Valley, where the Taliban dynamited two monumental Buddhas dating from the sixth century (fig. 2.4).

In *What dust will rise?*, Rakowitz has brought together three enemies of the US (Afghanistan as a result of 9/11 and Germany and Italy as a result of World War II) in order to recover some of what was lost on September 9, 1941. By presenting the work at dOCUMENTA, the famous art fair held every five years in Kassel, Rakowitz dredges up another forgetting that many in the art world would prefer to remain forgotten. The first dOCUMENTA in 1955 was an attempt to showcase Germany as an enlightened country after the madness of National Socialism, and several of the artists of its initial iteration were indeed retrospectively seen as modernist torchbearers: Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso. The same city pummeled for its regression becomes a few short years later the beacon of progression. What

role does art play in the shifting of political alliances under the pressure of war? Apparently state actors thought art was powerful enough to change the image of Germany abroad that they organized and funded an enormous exhibition continuing to the present day.

As a whole, *Backstroke of the West* demonstrates how history is not just what is remembered, but also what is forgotten, and is composed of not just what is present, but also what is absent. In this way, there's much resonance between Rakowitz and Benjamin, who similarly understands translation as attending to both what is and is not on the page. It's as if language is a room and a text is a voice reverberating through it, the bigger the room, the more powerful the voice, the smaller, the weaker. This is why Benjamin rejects translation as a "sterile equation of two dead languages." Instead, translation "produces in it the echo of the original." Each translation stands in relation to the totality of a language, just as each narrative stands in relation to the totality of history. A selection of words, whether in a translation or in a story, is the non-selection of others. While this statement borders on truism, *Backstroke of the West* illustrates how memory and relics are differentially distributed around the globe, with the lion's share going to those countries able to dominate socially, politically, or economically. I'm often told "history is written by the victors," but I'd never wondered why this should be true until seeing *Backstroke of the West*. Stripped of materiality, culture lives only in the mind, where it will eventually waste away.

But what of my friend, driven to run through the streets of Chicago by some unseen force? Translation isn't just cerebral; it isn't limited to the abstractions of language and history. Translation is felt through the body as it passes from one place to another, from one moment to the next. Our bodies record where we've been and carry these impressions with us. Art can bring us back into touch with this materiality. In our digital age, we may be tempted to believe the corporeal is receding in importance, that technology is liberating us from our fleshy sacs. But nothing could be further from the truth. We continue to live intimately with the material, from the clothes on our backs to the roofs over our heads. Art is differentiated from all other materials because it's where the physical and the metaphysical touch. Since art can be anything, what it ends up being tells us a lot about ourselves, providing a vehicle for our anxieties, our hopes, and our dreams. As such, we've been making art, or at least non-functional objects, longer than we've been writing. Early examples include elaborate jewelry buried with the dead, even amid relative scarcity: art as existential scream against the void, luggage for an unknown voyage.

The Culture Of Loss In The Digital Age: Michael Rakowitz's *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* And The Politics Of Reconstruction

Eliza Woods Harrison

Williams College

Figure 3.1.
Still from NorthwesternU, "Michael Rakowitz brings destroyed Iraqi art back to life," YouTube video, 0:44, October 9, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0jXG1cXxE1Y.

A video taken of Michael Rakowitz working on his ongoing series *The invisible enemy should not exist* shows the artist and an assistant in the midst of reconstructing the famous Warka Vase (fig. 3.1), an ancient Sumerian stone vessel stolen from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad during the US invasion in 2003. Behind the in-process reconstruction hang blown-up black and white images of the original vase (fig. 3.2), a three-foot tall object carved completely in alabaster some 5,000 years ago in the ancient city of Uruk. The enlarged photographs reveal that the original vase was carved with four registers of detailed relief decorations that display, from top to bottom, a cultic scene of the ruler of Uruk making an offering to the temple of the goddess Inanna, men carrying offerings, sheep, and plants.[1]

1 "Lost Treasures from Iraq: Objects," The Oriental Institute, museum number IM19606, accessed November 30, 2020, http://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/dbfiles/objects/14.htm.

Figure 3.2.
Warka (Uruk) Vase, Late Uruk period, c. 3500-3000 BCE, alabaster, 41 1/3 in. high (105 cm). National Museum of Iraq. Museum number: IM19606. Courtesy of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute.

Though trained as a stone sculptor, Rakowitz has chosen strikingly different materials in which to "reappear" the vase, which was eventually returned to the museum in fourteen broken pieces

several months after it was stolen.[2] The new vase's body is shaped with cardboard, and its intricate registers are painstakingly papier-mâchéd with Arabic newspapers and Middle Eastern food packaging that stand in as stone carvings.[3] In order to aid him with this material translation, Rakowitz has cut out the various figures and objects from the photographs and pasted them onto the new cardboard vase. In the video, he holds a green and red scrap of packaging up to a bundle of reeds in the top register, pausing in deliberation before moving it up, then down, to see if it might look better somewhere else. As they work, Rakowitz and his assistant appear to consult one another, conferring and considering with shakes and nods; or perhaps they are just chatting. Rakowitz remarks on the conversational potential of the project, stating: "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 conversation space to open up where we were actually discussing the war."[4]

This image of time-consuming and communal artmaking using materials meticulously worked by hand directly links Rakowitz's artistic process to craft traditions. As art historian Bibiana Obler argues in her 2016 essay "Craft as a Response to War," Rakowitz's unique materials crucially distinguish the new objects from the destroyed or stolen originals. In addition to the purposeful material disjuncture between old and new object, the slow and exacting

2 Raffi Khatchadourian, "Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return," *The New Yorker*, accessed October 19, 2020, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/24/michael-rakowitzs-art-of-return.

3 Simon Jenkins, "Simon Jenkins: In Iraq's Four-Year Looting Frenzy, Allies the Vandals," *The Guardian*, June 7, 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/jun/08/comment.iraq.

4 Anthony Downey, "From Invisible Enemy to Enemy Kitchen: Michael Rakowitz in conversation with Anthony Downey," *Ibraaz*, March 29, 2013, https://www.ibraaz.org/interviews/62.

handicraft that goes into fabricating each sculpture renders the project temporally unsustainable when faced with the thousands of antiquities lost during the Iraq War. In reference to *The invisible enemy*, Obler concludes, "Craft's value as a response to war lies… in the way that it can make painfully manifest its own inadequacy and yet signal an effort to keep trying."[5] Implicit in Obler's observation is a connection between durational craftwork and the unending process of grappling with destroyed cultural heritage and memory.

Looking more closely at this implication, I hope to clarify the role that Rakowitz's materials and process play in creating a necessarily ongoing and incomplete archive of loss founded on crafted assemblage, seriality, and material engagement. What began as papier-mâché and cardboard reconstructions of artifacts stolen or destroyed during the Iraq War has since grown to include a reconstruction of a stone statue Lamassu that originally guarded the gates of Nineveh (2018) and reproductions of the reliefs in the Northwest Palace of Nimrud (2018). These continuing iterations express the impossibility of ever creating a complete index of the objects displaced, destroyed, or stolen due to war and Imperialism, even as the never-ending nature of the project simultaneously demonstrates Rakowitz's commitment to this complex act of cultural restoration.

The artist's choice to use fragile, cast-off, and contemporary materials in an intentionally labor-intensive and ongoing process sharply contrasts with many other current efforts to recreate destroyed archeological objects and sites. In the past two decades, the Iraq War, the upsurge of the Islamic State, and

5 Bibiana Obler, "Craft as a Response to War," in Nicholas Bell, *Nation Building: Craft and Contemporary American Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury Academics, 2016), 164.

the ongoing Syrian civil war have given rise to a proliferation of cultural heritage projects which attempt to "recreate" destroyed artifacts and sites using immersive digital visualization and 3D-reconstruction technology. Putting *The invisible enemy should not exist* in conversation with several contemporary digital reconstruction projects illuminates the central role that Rakowitz's materials and process play in creating an intentionally fragile and incomplete archive of absence. Rather than papering over the ruptures of cultural loss with literalist replacements, Rakowitz uses simultaneously disposable and meaningful materials in a deliberately accumulative process to create reconstructions that never reconcile with their originals but instead make visible the ongoing process of understanding cultural loss.

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"[ISIS] is not only beheading individuals, it is tearing out the fabric of whole civilizations... For the proud people of Iraq and Syria—ancient civilizations, civilizations of great beauty, great accomplishment, of extraordinary history and intellectual achievement—the destruction of their heritage is a purposeful final insult."[6] These words were spoken by former US Secretary of State John Kerry at a news conference hosted by UNESCO and the State Department at the Metropolitan Museum in 2014 mere hours before the US carried out airstrikes against ISIS targets in Raqqa, Syria.[7] In the following year, ISIS would continue to destroy numerous artifacts and archeological sites, including the historic city of Palmyra.

6 Josh Niland, "John Kerry Blasts ISIS's Cultural Destruction in Met Speech," *artnet news*, September 23, 2014, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/john-kerry-blasts-isiss-cultural-destruction-in-met-speech-111572.

7 Niland, "John Kerry Blasts ISIS's Cultural Destruction."

Figure 3.3.
Boris Johnson unveils the Institute for Digital Archeology's reconstruction of the Triumphal Arch of Palmyra in Trafalgar Square on April 19, 2016 in London, England. Photo by Tolga Akmen/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images.

A number of cultural heritage organizations have responded to this immeasurable loss, including the Institute for Digital Archeology, an organization shared between Harvard and Oxford with the collaboration of UNESCO and the Dubai Future Foundation. In contrast to the handcrafted sculptures that make up The invisible enemy should not exist, the IDA's first cultural restitution project was a monumental 1/3-scale recreation of the Triumphal Arch of Palmyra (fig. 3.3). Built in the third century during the reign of Roman emperor Septimius Severus, the famously gap-toothed original arch was theatrically destroyed by ISIS in August of 2015. The IDA's reconstructed arch showcases a hands-off method of photogrammetry restoration, carved completely by a seven-axis mechanical arm out of what the organization describes as the

"same Egyptian marble as the original."[8] In footage of the arch's construction in Carrara, Italy, the computer-controlled arm dominates the marble, mechanically stripping away its exterior with a sharpened point that rhythmically moves back and forth while a tool akin to an orthodontist's waterpik wets the stone. Water and marble dust fly in the air to the hornet-like thrum of the machine. On another section of marble, the arm cleanly shaves away the stone as if it were made of Styrofoam to reveal indented palmette ornamentations. The resulting 26,000-pound reconstructed arch was first presented in London's Trafalgar Square in 2016 and has since been shown at New York City Hall, a G7 Summit in Florence, Dubai's World Government Summit, and on the National Mall in Washington D.C.

In highlighting the IDA's Arch of Palmyra, my goal is not to undermine the potential usefulness or historical significance of such a project, but rather to call attention to the troubling way that such a literal and mechanized restoration detaches itself from tangible issues of cultural loss through its automated construction. Boris Johnson inadvertently raised this concern moments before the arch was revealed for the first time when he exclaimed, "It is with great, great pleasure that I hereby unveil the oldest new structure in the history of this city." With a flourish, the arch's gauzy covering fell away, magically erasing the gap between destroyed ancient artifact and new British monument.[9] Taken out of both its historical and contemporary context and paraded around high-power capitals, the new arch disengages from the original arch's erasure and instead becomes a neoliberal signifier

8 "Triumphal Arch: Washington, D.C.," The Institute for Digital Archeology, accessed November 30, 2020, http://digitalarchaeology.org.uk/washington-dc/.

9 Guardian Culture, "Palmyra's Arch of Triumph replica erected in central London," YouTube video, 5:55, April 19, 2016, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bq4_-iBCqp8.

Figure 3.4.
Michael Rakowitz, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (*Lamassu*), 2018.Installation view, Trafalgar Square, London, 2018 Middle eastern food packaging and newspapers, glue, labels, sound, drawings Photo courtesy of the artist.

for advanced technology and a symbolic triumph over terrorism utterly indifferent to the Middle East and its people.

Coincidentally, Rakowitz's reconstruction of the Lamassu that once guarded the Nergal Gate of Ninevah (fig. 3.4) presents another monumental artifact destroyed by ISIS in 2015 that also found itself on display in Trafalgar Square. In contrast to the IDA's attempts to gloss over the complicated losses of war with a sleekly rendered reconstruction, the thousands of carefully cut date syrup cans that make up the colorful Lamassu enact a complex dialogue between the original sculpture and its new manifestation. Facing towards Iraq, the reconstructed Lamassu signals to its ancient Neo-Assyrian ghost even as its medium belongs to contemporary and international Middle Eastern communities.

As culturally marked materials found in the homes of exiles, immigrants, refugees, and their descendants, the date syrup cans are both valuable and common, remarkable in their presence on an international scale and discardable once their contents are consumed. By utilizing materials typically destined for garbage cans and recycling bins to create beautifully wrought surfaces, Rakowitz calls into question traditional notions of what makes an object precious or durable in the face of history. In a kind of endless loop, ephemeral materials have been used to represent an ancient and enduring sculpture that has revealed itself to be more fragile than ever imagined—but perhaps it is not quite so simple. Ultimately, the relationship between the castoff materials, the intricately crafted forms they take in the new sculptures, and the artifacts these sculptures represent introduces a complicated, multi-directional play of meaning that renders *The invisible enemy* simultaneously precious and incomplete.

The thousands of date syrup cans that texture the hybrid creature add to this tension: while on the one hand, they read as durable armor, the disposable quality of the materials also symbolizes the original sculpture's absence. Rakowitz states in one interview, "When I began reconstructing artifacts, I had no desire to replicate them with their original materials: I wanted to capture their physical aura, but to declare them spectral presences, using discarded materials to invoke their loss."[10] Though Rakowitz here emphasizes loss, collecting food packaging and scraps can also be seen as a positive act of double-salvaging, of both the lost, destroyed, or stolen art objects and of the material traces that evidence everyday lives.

10 Evan Moffitt, "Michael Rakowitz: The Invisible Enemy," *Freize*, March 29, 2018, https://frieze.com/article/michael-rakowitz-invisible-enemy.

Like a quilter using fabric from old clothing and scraps, the recycled and reclaimed nature of Rakowitz's patch-worked materials resonates with a tradition of gathering and preserving memory through craft. bell hooks makes vivid the link between materials and memory when she compares her essay writing to her grandmother's quilting. She notes, "To write this piece I have relied on fragments, bits and pieces of information found here and there… Memories of old conversations coming back again and again, memories like reused fabric in a crazy quilt, contained and kept for the right moment."[11] While Rakowitz's fragments of cardboard, newspaper, and cans are less personal and more commercial than a relative's clothing, they are nonetheless material testimony of real lives and histories that positively assert the global presence of Arab and Middle Eastern communities. And much like quilting or writing, his accumulative and laborious process manifests itself in the intricate and repetitive assemblage of the work.

As a traditionally significant food of the region, the date syrup cans also traverse historical memory: while the emptied tins point to the ongoing contemporary international consumption of the Middle Eastern delicacy, dates were also an important food for the ancient Assyrians of the Lamassu's origin. Rakowitz explicitly activates the multi-temporal and international presence of date syrup in his ongoing project *RETURN* (2004–ongoing), in which the artist reopened his grandfather's Brooklyn-based import/export business in an attempt to bring Iraqi-labeled dates to America. Like much of Rakowitz's work, the project expanded to include the unexpected social turns that such a straightforward sounding end-goal incited. In 2006, after traveling through some of the most unstable parts of Iraq alongside thousands of Iraqis attempting to

11 bell hooks, "Aesthetic Inheritances: History Worked by Hand," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 115.

flee the war and ensuing sectarian violence, the dates were turned away from Jordan, moved to Syria, flown to Egypt, and then sent to the US, where they remained held in customs until they spoiled.[12]

While the dates of *RETURN* and the date syrup tins of the Lamassu remind the viewer of the displacement of Iraqi people, the date syrup itself might be seen as an analogue for petroleum oil, another sticky, dark liquid exported from Iraq around the world. In this light, the thousands of empty date syrup cans that make up the Lamassu's armor parallel the barrels of Iraqi oil made available on the global market after the invasion of Iraq, reminding the viewer of one of the key motivations for the US-initiated invasion.[13] Despite the many associations that the medium evokes, the date syrup also remains what it is: a food to be enjoyed. When the Lamassu was first installed on the fourth plinth of Trafalgar Square, Rakowitz sold date cake and his date syrup recipe book from a kiosk across the square.[14]

As a material, the date syrup tins create a complex play of meaning that resists the straightforward and digestible narrative that the IDA's Arch of Palmyra presents. Unlike the falsely timeless

12 Michael Rakowitz, "RETURN," accessed October 19, 2020, http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/return/.

13 Iain Boal, T.J. Clark, Joseph Matthew, and Michael Watts importantly complicate the "Blood for Oil" argument in their book *Afflicted Powers: Capital and Spectacle in the New Age of War* (London and New York: Verso, 2005). Rather than using oil to simplify the reasons behind the invasion and occupation of Iraq, the authors situate it within the complex capitalist expansion of the "military neo-liberalism which characterizes American empire in its twenty-first century iteration" (43). In this context, oil can be seen as one of many transnational flows of capital—alongside big banks and arms dealers—that are part of the neo-liberal restructuring of capital accumulation and dispossession.

14 Adrian Searle, "Fourth Plinth Review: 'My heart is in my mouth,' *The Guardian*, March 28, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2018/mar/28/fourth-plinth-review-my-heart-is-in-my-mouth.

Egyptian marble of the replicated arch, the emptied date syrup tins are rooted in the present even while their contents belong to a longer history of consumption and cultural significance. Moreover, while the arch estranges itself from its Middle Eastern heritage altogether, the date syrup cans evoke both the Lamassu's original homeland and the contemporary diaspora of this region's people and culture, creating yet another play between the ancient object and its new incarnation. This multiplicity of meaning is materially expressed by the beautiful and overwhelming repetition of the thousands of flattened, bent, folded, cut, and screwed together cans that texture the creature's flank like fish scales, evoking the thousands of lives that the materials connect with around the world.

The Lamassu's material relation to a multitude of histories and interpretations gives us a many faceted lens through which to look at some of the more intimate objects that make up *The invisible enemy should not exist*, which in turn further emphasize the importance of Rakowitz's deliberate and accumulative process. This many-faceted lens opens up new formal possibilities in the space between the original and its new creation. Like the Lamassu, the refashioned artifacts are the exact same size as the ancient objects they replace even as they radiate with bright colors that diverge from the subdued and earthy tones of their predecessors. By giving each sculpture a visual uniqueness that boldly separates it from the artifact it represents, Rakowitz's sculptures actively slip between temporalities to form a composite of references that privileges both the original object and its new manifestation. The Arabic script and logos that trace the three-dimensional surfaces of the objects give new depth and detail to the diverse forms. One male figurine—a replacement for a missing limestone statue from ca. 2600 BCE Tell Asmar—wears a flounced skirt made of what appears to be an apricot container cut into intricate pleats,

replicating the original texture of the carved limestone while simultaneously leaving the food packaging legible.

A final brief comparison of *The invisible enemy*'s smaller reconstructions with digitally rendered replicas of smaller artifacts further emphasizes the significant role that Rakowitz's craft process and materials play in communicating irreplaceable cultural loss. While most high-tech reconstruction projects remain invested in monumental architectural sites like the IDA's Arch of Palmyra, the organization Rekrei's focus on creating virtual records of destroyed artifacts from the Mosul Museum offers a digital parallel to *The invisible enemy*.[15] Rekrei was started by two archeology Ph.D. students after ISIS released a graphic video of the destruction of the Mosul Cultural Museum in February of 2015, and the project began much like the IDA as an online platform for crowd-sourced photographs of the artifacts before and after they were destroyed. As with the IDA, these photographs can then be used to create digital reconstructions using photogrammetry technology. By combining multiple photographs of the same object taken from different angles, photogrammetry software connects overlapping features to create a three-dimensional "virtual texture" of the objects.[16] The resulting "virtual texture" of a destroyed Assyrian lion (fig. 3.5) looks like a skin of latex peeled from the surface of the original sculpture and digitally converted into the texture of stone. In Rekrei's online gallery, the model lion is suspended against a dark backdrop and presented "in the round" so that the viewer can click and drag the virtual object to awkwardly zoom

15 The organization was originally called Project Mosul, but changed its name to Rekrei—Esperanto for "recreate"—as the project expanded its geographic scope.

16 PBS NewsHour, "Destroyed by ISIS, artifacts may find new life after 3D reconstruction," *PBS*, August 22, 2015, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/destroyed-isis-artifacts-may-find-new-life-3d-reconstruction.

Figure 3.5.
Stills from Rekrei's "three-dimensional" photogrammetry reconstruction of an Assyrian lion statue that once guarded the Temple of Ishtar in Nimrud.

in and out and spin it around, though in doing so, the lion reveals itself to be a one-sided, hollow mold.

Founders Matthew Vincent and Chance Coughenour readily acknowledge photogrammetry's shortcomings in producing accurate reconstructions, especially when the technology is limited to only a few images that lack controls for color or measurements.[17] Because of the limitations of crowdsourced photos, they are wary of the "potentially misleading aspect of 3D printing," especially its ability to falsify an object's original material.[18] Rather than feeding the photogrammetry data into 3D-printers or computer controlled carving tools like the drill that carved the IDA's arch, Rekrei presents its reconstructions on digital and virtual reality platforms,

17 Matthew L. Vincent, "Crowdsourced Data for Cultural Heritage," in *Heritage and Archaeology in the Digital Age: Acquisition, Curation, and Dissemination of Spatial Cultural Heritage*, eds. Matthew L. Vincent et al. (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2017), 86.

18 Vincent, "Crowdsourced Data for Cultural Heritage," 86.

including a virtual Mosul Museum. Unlike the recreated Arch of Palmyra, whose material construction allows it to masquerade as a replica of the original, the virtual reality reconstructions exist in what Vincent calls a "controlled environment" whose temporary quality forces viewers to "confront the reality of [the object's] loss" when they remove their headset or step away from their phone or computer screen.[19]

However, despite their awareness of the manipulative capacity of digital archeology, Vincent and Coughenour maintain that the process of photogrammetry itself is "like magic."[20] In doing so, they highlight one of the project's major flaws: while the software's ability to seamlessly combine hundreds of photographs in a hands-off process might be seen as a technological miracle, the resulting digital reconstruction erases the potentially elucidating accumulative and human process that made its creation possible. Detached from the original crowdsourced photos and lacking any written historical context in the online gallery, the digital reconstructions exist wholly out of time and place and are reduced only to their static, skin-like state. By rendering an additive process invisible through its material result, the virtual artifacts fail to meaningfully communicate the ongoing play of meaning and cultural memory that Rakowitz's crafted artifacts embody.

In direct contrast to the varied digital reconstructions of Rekrei and the Institute for Digital Technology, the crafted sculptures that make up *The invisible enemy* should not exist visually announce their accumulative and laborious process of making through their composite and patched-together surfaces. At the same time, Rakowitz's use of simultaneously disposable and culturally significant materials gives the new objects a deliberately multivalent presence that allows them to toggle between associations, locations, and time periods. The resulting reconstructions remain intentionally caught between ancient artifact and new creation, leaving the viewer forever questioning the mysterious but profound historical presence of the works. Rooted in the past but definitively of the present, the crafted sculptures are held in temporal suspense, forever waiting for the return of the original objects and for their own manifestation as a total archive of missing artifacts to be complete. As an archive whose goal is to communicate an irretrievable absence larger than the sum of its parts, *The invisible enemy* remains ongoing, additive, and, like its own craft process and materials, infinitely in the making.

19 Ibid., 87.

20 PBS NewsHour, "Destroyed by ISIS."

“They Destroy, We Rebuild”: (Un)Settling Syrian Heritage In The American Museum

Ava Katarina Tabatabai Hess

University of California, Los Angeles

In the wake of September 11, museums in the US sought to counter rising levels of Islamophobia through the increased inclusion of Islamic or Middle Eastern art in their exhibition programming. This phenomenon has been well-documented by cultural critics and scholars, who have helped uncover a paradox in the apparently liberal agenda of many such museum displays. Anthropologist Jessica Winegar, for example, has looked to case studies ranging from exhibitions, film screenings, and musical performances to demonstrate how their visual and textual presentations inadvertently reinforced the rhetoric of the 'War on Terror,' even when the organizing institutions explicitly opposed the Bush administration's military campaigns.[1] Ten years after September 11 marked the beginning of Syria's ongoing civil war, and since 2011, presentations of Syrian art—both historical and contemporary—have proliferated in cultural institutions across the US.

This paper considers three examples of museum initiatives that contextualize their programming within the crises of war, destruction, and displacement unfolding in current-day Syria. Each case study focuses on a different city (Palmyra; Damascus; Aleppo) within a different time period (Ancient; Modern; Contemporary/Future). Despite these differences, a common thread uniting them is that they are all projects of spatial reconstruction. As such, I have taken the opportunity to put them into conversation with the sculptural "reappearings"[2] of Michael Rakowitz. Discourses surrounding Syrian heritage today take up the displacement or destruction of material culture as well as the displacement and resettlement of people, but the artistic interventions of a figure like Rakowitz warn us against simply collapsing the two. It is in this spirit that I turn to these discrepant discourses of displacement, the multiplicities they contain, and the uneven consequences they carry, to ask what underlying assumptions about heritage—and its loss—we might we uncover by interrogating their modes of display and narrative representation.

I. *The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra*

Rakowitz's ongoing series *The invisible enemy* should not exist speculatively reimagines lost objects and monuments, like those looted from the National Museum of Iraq after the US invasion or demolished by ISIS at Assyrian archaeological sites. In one of its iterations, relief sculptures from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud 'reappear' in splendid color through the use of contemporary everyday materials, like Arabic-language newspapers and remnants of food packaging. There is much to unpack about this series, which was begun by the artist in 2007 and continues to grow in new directions, but here I want to foreground a single feature as it relates to the first case study of this paper: how Rakowitz's conspicuous use of modern consumer materials directs our attention to a complex and ongoing relationship between the region's ancient past and its inhabitants today.

1 Jessica Winegar, "The Humanity Game: Art, Islam, and the War on Terror," *Anthropological Quarterly* (2008): 653.

2 Here I borrow the term used by Rakowitz himself, who describes his projects "not as a rebuilding or reconstructing but reappearing," like "good ghosts." See full quotation in Iwona Blazwick, "Michael Rakowitz: A Transatlantic Interview" in *Michael Rakowitz*, ed. Carolyn Christov Bakargiev and Marianna Vecellio (London: Whitechapel Gallery; Turin: Castello di Rivoli; Milan: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 37.

In 2017, the same year that Rakowitz's palace reliefs were first exhibited, the Getty Research Institute (GRI) published its inaugural digital exhibition. *The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra* takes a look at the historic city from the 1st to 3rd centuries CE through the eyes of Europeans who traveled there many centuries later. The exhibition pairs two archives from the GRI's permanent collection: proof-plates of etchings made by architect Louis-François Cassas in the 1700s and photographs taken by Louis Vignes in 1864. Both depict the sites of Palmyra in former states of preservation and their juxtaposition intends to help the viewer mentally reconstruct what the ancient city might have looked like. In reading *The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra* against the work of Rakowitz, I suggest that one resulting effect of the exhibition, however unintentional, is to distance Palmyra's heritage from the Arab people who have lived there for centuries.

The exhibition marks the first time that images from the glass plates made by Vignes, the first known photographs of Palmyra, have ever been published. His compositions deliberately avoid the inclusion of figures, which was typical of 19th-century Orientalist documentation of historic sites and landscapes in the Middle East.[3] For the close observer, however, evidence of the site's active use by local populations inadvertently betrays Palmyra's long history of displacement. In Vignes's views of the Temple of Bel, for example, a mud-brick village appears to be built into the sanctuary courtyard (fig 4.1). The accompanying exhibition texts acknowledge the dwellings' presence in the images but refrain from telling the history of their Arab residents, who

3 Ali Behdad, "The Orientalist Photograph," in *Camera Orientalis: Reflections on Photography of the Middle East*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016: 33-34. See also Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "A photographer in Jerusalem, 1855: Auguste Salzmann and his times," October 18, 1981: 100.

Figure 4.1.
Louis Vignes, *Temple of Bel*, 1864. Albumen print. 8.8 x 11.4 in. (22.5 x 29 cm). The Getty Research Institute, 2015.R.15.

spoke a dialect related to ancient Palmyrene and lived there until forcefully relocated by French archaeologists between 1929–32. By overlooking the European-driven displacement of local communities, the exhibition's narrative runs the risk of divorcing the concept of Syria as a place from that of a people with a right to self-determination and legitimate claims to the land. Instead, it communicates an impression of Palmyra as an uninhabited and even under-appreciated place, waiting for its rediscovery by the Occident.[4]

4 For more on the neo-colonial implications of discourses around Palmyra's excavation and history, see Maïra al-Manzali, "Palmyra and the Political History of Archaeology in Syria: from Colonialists to Nationalists," *Mangal Media*, October 2, 2016, www.mangalmedia.net/english//palmyra.

Figure 4.2.
Simon Charles Miger after Louis-François Cassas, Louis-François Cassas presenting gifts to Bedouin sheikhs, Etching. Platemark: 8.4 x 16.1 in. (21.5 x 41 cm). From Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phoénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte (Paris, ca. 1799), vol. 1, pl. 27. The Getty Research Institute, 840011

Unlike the depopulated scenes of the photographer, the drawings made by Cassas often include figures–and many of them. The etchings made from his illustrations of Palmyra fall roughly into two categories. The first focuses on the ruins as they existed in his own time and include depictions of Bedouins he supposedly encountered on his travels (fig. 4.2). Rendered with dark beards, stocky bodies, and voluptuous, heavy clothing, the figures are mostly sedentary, gathered together densely under crumbling walls. In striking contrast, the second category of prints reimagines the ancient city in its heyday, where fair figures wear light, billowy clothing emphasizing their movement and buoyancy (fig.4.3). The process of archaeological fantasy at work in this visual

Figure 4.3.
Anonymous artist after Louis-François Cassas, Imaginary view of Tetrapylon, ca. 1799. Proof-plate etching. 17.9 x 25.7 in. (45.5 x 65.5 cm). The Getty Research Institute, 840011.

reconstruction locates Palmyra squarely within the classical world of Greco-Roman antiquity that Europe claims as its civilizational inheritance. The rupturing between past and present in the work of Cassas constitutes another way of obscuring the possible connections between Syria's ancient civilizations and its modern inhabitants. It is the reverse of the rupturing maneuver at play in Rakowitz's sculptures, where the past is brought into the present—and vice-versa—through the unexpected play on materials.

The GRI exhibition might have been an opportunity to reflect critically on the bodies of work produced by Cassas and Vignes as a way to discuss representational strategies used by Europeans in the Middle East during the 18th and 19th centuries—and their political, material, and environmental ramifications. Presenting

Figure 4.4.
Damascus Room, Syria, Damascus, AD 1766–67/ AH 1180 Architecture; Architectural Elements. Wood (poplar) with gesso relief, tin and brass leaf, glazes and paint, plaster with stone paste inlays, and multicolored stones. Installation: 240 × 180 × 144 in. (609.6 × 457.2 × 365.76 cm). Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

their work without these critical reflections, however, results in a history of Palmyra's excavation that feels sanitized of its colonial roots, ultimately reinforcing the Orientalist legacy of those credited with Palmyra's 'rediscovery' rather than interrogating it. From its first sentence, "In this 21st century, war in Syria has irrevocably changed the ancient caravan city of Palmyra," the exhibition places emphasis on the place and structures, rather than the millions of human lives, irrevocably changed by violence.[5] Yet, the work of scholars like Winegar reminds us to stay vigilant about how cultural programming might contribute to government rhetoric and foreign policy. A striking example can be found in the case of an exhibition, *Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age*, that included objects from Syrian archaeological sites and whose opening reception in September 2014 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art was used as a platform by then-Secretary of State John Kerry to argue for military intervention into Syria. Noted by one journalist for being "striking for its emphasis on the threat to cultural heritage over the threat to human lives,"[6] Kerry's speech was beholden to an anachronistic preoccupation with the loss of material culture and the West's role in saving this at-risk heritage. How, then, might exhibitions be mobilized to offer an alternative perspective in which the fate of people and material culture are inextricably intertwined?

II. *Damascus Room*

Shifting from a virtual reconstruction to a literal one, the second case study presents the strange path of migration made by a period room that is now in the permanent collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) (fig. 4.4). This section is informed by a process of geopolitical mapping central to Rakowitz's work—one reluctantly engaged, and sometimes obscured, by arts institutions. Mounted on the Fourth Plinth of London's Trafalgar Square in 2018, Rakowitz's Lamassu was constructed out of 10,500 date syrup cans, whose former contents were produced in Iraq and exported through Lebanon by way of Syria. The colorful presence of the cans makes visible the historical contingencies of geography, an environment ravaged by war and imperialism, and the bureaucratic hurdles involved in circumventing sanctions against Iraq, which Rakowitz has—as part of a different artwork—detailed on his blog.

5 The Getty Research Insititute, "The Legacy of Ancient Palmyra," *The Getty*, February 8, 2017: www.getty.edu/research/exhibitions_events/exhibitions/palmyra/.

6 Michael Press, "How Antiquities Have Been Weaponized in the Struggle to Preserve Culture," *Hyperallergic*, December 7, 2017: hyperallergic.com/415471/how-antiquities-have-been-weaponized-in-the-struggle-to-preserve-culture/.

His transparency around the transportation of materials signals the regulations that govern movements across borders, as well as the ways works of art participate in complex networks of financial and diplomatic relations.

The *Damascus Room*'s journey begins in the 1760s in the al-Bahsa neighborhood of northern Damascus, where it was used to receive honored guests in an elite courtyard home. In 1978, the historic house was demolished to make way for a new road, and the room's interior was dismantled and sent to a storage warehouse in Beirut. There, its painted and carved wooden paneling, stone floors and fountain were preserved under layers of dust until 2012, when they were acquired through an auction in London by LACMA's Islamic art curator, Linda Komaroff. The room then traveled to Los Angeles to undergo a three-year process of restoration, during which it was never seen by the public. It was instead unveiled in 2019 in Dharhan, Saudi Arabia, where it was mounted on metal armature and presented alongside other works on loan from LACMA's permanent collection of Islamic art as part of the inaugural exhibition cycle of the King Abdulaziz Center for World Cultures, where it remains today. Also known as Ithra, after the Arabic word meaning "enrichment," this new cultural institution was developed and funded by the national oil company, Saudi Aramco, who also financed the room's conservation in Los Angeles.

Tracking the *Damascus Room*'s movements uncovers the sophisticated choreography required between nations, public institutions, and private companies to preserve this piece of Syrian heritage. At the same time, LACMA's public communications invariably emphasize certain legs of the room's journey over others. Komaroff uses the first in a series of museum blog posts on the room to discuss how Syria's uncertain political situation changed the meaning and value of collecting Syrian art. Focusing on its movement from Syria to California, she writes, "the notion that we would be helping to preserve a small part of the cultural history of one of the world's oldest, continuously occupied cities, intensified my interest in bringing the room to Los Angeles so that its story can be told and appreciated in this twenty-first-century city."[7] Does the urgent need for preservation articulated in Komaroff's account allude to a possible motivating factor behind what would become an unusual partnership between a public museum in the US and a foreign business entity (rather than another non-profit)?[8]

From 2015 to 2017, the museum discussed its partnership with Ithra in positive terms,[9] but this spoken enthusiasm seems to have waned in recent years as mentions of the room's continued presence in Saudi Arabia became less frequent. In 2018, responding to mounting public pressure after the assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, a number of institutions publicly announced they were no longer accepting Saudi funding for Middle Eastern-related programming. LACMA did not make the same commitment, but is it possible that its newfound silence serves in part to publicly distance itself from its Saudi connections? In today's shifting political landscape, museums might foreground an awareness of current events to affirm their relevance while at other times concealing their own vested interests towards the same ends. While many museums

7 Linda Komaroff, "Preserving a Small Piece of Damascus," *LACMA Unframed*, September 24, 2012: unframed.lacma.org/2012/09/25/preserving-a-small-piece-of-damascus.

8 For a critical discussion of this partnership, see Christopher Knight, "Commentary: Why the Desert X art festival deal with Saudi Arabia is morally corrupt," *Los Angeles Times*, October 29, 2019: www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2019-10-29/desert-x-alula-saudi-arabia.

9 E.g. "LACMA and the King Abdulaziz Center for World Culture to Collaborate on Exhibition of Islamic Art in Saudi Arabia," *LACMA*, January 6, 2015: www.lacma.org/sites/default/files/LACMA%20Saudia%20Arabia%20Release%20FINAL%201.5.15_0.pdf.

call on specific curators to act as the public's interlocutors when it comes to inter-organizational partnerships, the entanglements around funding and the complex geopolitical networks through which artworks flow are part of institution-wide phenomena that cannot be isolated to departments related to Middle Eastern or Islamic arts. I began this section by looking to Rakowitz, not for a set of ethical prescriptions on museum partnerships, but to instead consider how the work of a contemporary artist might open up new ways of seeing the participation of artworks in various types of diplomacy that might be cultural, political, or financial in nature.

Works of art also participate in dialogues between a museum and its community, and can help to welcome new communities in. The final blog post in Komaroff's series from 2015 manifests a conceptual and literal effort to make Syrian bodies present in the staging of the room through the accompanying video of a Syrian-American artist who recites a poem while sitting within the *Damascus Room*, evoking the recent displacement of Syrians from their own homes. Komaroff writes of the effects that harrowing political realities have on the individual experience of art—how the "joy" and "comfort" of physically being in the room is "tempered by the sadness of the continuing deterioration of daily life in Syria, the diaspora of its citizens, and the destruction of its historic monuments."[10] Here, a considerable shift can be felt from the anonymous voice of the Palmyra project to the curatorial subjectivity of Komaroff's affective response. The room's physical displacement is thus positioned between museum rhetoric that appeals, on the one hand, to a salvage paradigm not unlike the one presented by the GRI and to the liberal views of its museum

10 Linda Komaroff, "Damacus Room Completed At Last," *LACMA Unframed*, September 21, 2015: unframed.lacma.org/2015/09/21/damascus-room-completed-last.

Figure 4.5.
Mohammad Qutaish, Future Aleppo, 2012-15, paper, wood, colored pencil, and glue. Photo: Alex Kalman / Mmuseumm.

audiences, on the other. The post concludes by referencing the room's "role as a preserver of memories of Syria;" as we have seen, the room also has various roles to play in cultural diplomacy, institutional funding, and connecting with the public's concerns around a growing refugee crisis.

III. *Future Aleppo*

The figure of the refugee appears most prominently in the third case study of a 2016 exhibition titled *Future Aleppo* at Mmuseumm, a small cultural institution in lower Manhattan that consists of two converted freight-elevator shafts. Lit and visible both day and night to passersby, it presented a single object: a four-foot by four-foot model of a city made out of hand-colored cardboard, whose ephemeral qualities share certain resonances with Rakowitz's own sculptures (fig. 4.5).

A five-minute film by a Syrian citizen journalist, Waad Alkateab, first gave Mmuseumm director Alex Kalman the idea for the exhibition. The film follows Mohammed Qutaish, a young boy living in war-torn Aleppo. From the ages of ten to thirteen,

Qutaish used a neighbor's abandoned apartment as a studio to construct his architectural models, which include his favorite buildings as well as recently destroyed ones. Aleppo's iconic medieval citadel is reconstructed in whole rather than the collapsed form of its current real-life appearance, resulting from clashes between al-Assad's forces and the Free Syrian Army between 2012 and 2015. Neither these nor ISIS are directly addressed by the Mmuseumm texts, which follow in the spirit of the Syrian filmmaker's own voice. The second-to-last shot of the film serves as a kind of motto for the project as a whole. It shows a small note pinned above Qutaish's work-desk that reads, in handwritten Arabic, "they destroy, we rebuild." Here, the ambiguity of the pronouns allows us to understand that while the identity of "they"—the destroyers—might change, the collective courage to rebuild and persevere remains. As its title suggests, the exhibition Future Aleppo prefers to focus on the optimism shown by Syrians in the face of uncertainty and hardship in the present. Resilience, particularly that of Syrian children, is a central theme. Qutaish's architectural models, for example, reflect fantasies and ideas for his city's imagined future, replete with parks and green spaces, amusement parks, and solar paneling.

Against all odds, the delicate model made the 6,000-mile journey from Aleppo to New York City, and now continues to travel around the world to venues like the Skirball Center in Los Angeles, the V&A in London, and ArkDes in Stockholm. The exhibition's grand tour is surprising given the particularities of Mmuseumm as a tiny institution, less bound to the conventions of more established ones. Referring to it tongue-in-cheek as a contemporary natural history or archaeology museum, its director advocates for a curatorial style he calls "object journalism," exemplified by exhibits displaying personal items found at the US–Mexico border, the inventions of inmates at Rikers, packaging from fake American fast-food chains in Iran, and other quotidian objects from different walks of contemporary life.[11]

By looking to Syrian voices to propel the narrative rather than act as a framing device, *Future Aleppo* offers a timely counter-model or provocation to institutions of a different museological scale. To be tenable in other contexts, this approach to exhibition-planning requires not only imagination but also a willingness to share platforms and material opportunities, as suggested by a New York Times opinion piece co-authored by Alex Kalman and Mohammed Qutaish in 2016.[12] This collaborative spirit is also engaged by Rakowitz, in both the physical production of his artworks—often achieved through commissioning teams of artisans, students, or other artists to contribute[13]—as well as his use of art spaces to bring people together through communal dinners, workshops, and classes. These events not only provide in-person opportunities for celebration or reflection, but also, crucially, involve financially supporting refugee or migrant communities and industries. Similarly, *Future Aleppo*'s display has also been used by Mmuseumm as a means to fundraise for the Qutaish family, who by then had to relocate to Turkey.

Where *Future Aleppo* may not differ as much from the previous case studies is in the great care and effort taken to relocate a piece

11 "Exhibitions," Mmuseumm, accessed November 2, 2020: www.mmuseumm.com/exhibitions.

12 Alex Kalman and Mohammed Qutaish, "Aleppo Rebuilt, with Cardboard and Colored Pencil," *The New York Times*, December 17, 2016: www.nytimes.com/2016/12/17/opinion/sunday/future-aleppo-mohammed-qutaish.html.

13 Two series of Rakowitz's that depend on collaborative models of production include *What dust will rise?* (2012) and *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007-ongoing).

of material heritage.[14] That the cardboard model crossed so many hands, currencies, and borders to arrive at its final destination bespeaks the great tragedy in the mobility of art, but not people, to make such moves. It is unclear to what degree the exhibition or money raised can truly change the circumstances of the Qutaish family, who continue to seek a way to leave Turkey, or the lives of more than thirteen million displaced Syrians. The programmatic goals of Mmuseumm are humanistic, using art to inspire compassion and the belief that creativity and hope are shared across humanity. Under this universalizing message, on the other hand, is also a story of exceptionalism. Future Aleppo emphasizes one child's aspirations of becoming an architect—a dream that is secular and palatable in different ways to Euro-American audiences, and to their governments who make decisions about who to let in.

Unsettling the Regime

By way of a conclusion, I want to return to analyses of post-9/11 museum displays, and to what art historian Finbarr Barry Flood has characterized as the "exhibitionary regime" that emerged in the following decade. If secular institutions then faced increasing pressures to "locate and provide an appropriate model of Islam," then now, in the context of the Syrian war, these pressures become those of locating the right kind of material heritage and modeling the right kind of refugee.[15] As the museum landscape shifts to this new "exhibitionary regime" for its time, it seems that even small, independent institutions like Mmuseumm may not be free from such pressures.

The constraints faced by museums in reckoning with the troubling legacies of imperialism, or their hesitancy to do so, suggest we look to how such lines of enquiry are taken up by an artist like Rakowitz, who not only interrogates the intersections of art and violent conflict but is also acutely attuned to the exhibitionary regimes in which his own work circulates. Museums are in fact turning increasingly to contemporary artists to tell their own institutional histories including, sometimes, their stories of complicity; Lebanese artist Rayyane Tabet's 2019 exhibition *Alien Property* at the Met, for example, re-presents four 9th-century BC stone reliefs from Tell Halaf, Syria by using clues from his own family's history to weave together a narrative about how they got to be in the Met's permanent collection and why the other reliefs from the same frieze are scattered around the world.[16] Materially embedded within works of art by both Rakowitz or Tabet is an awareness of the political conditions and personal connections that make their own production and display possible. Rakowitz's work also disrupts the act of viewing itself by inviting us "to partake with all our senses in physical manifestations of what can otherwise appear distant, abstract issues," as noted by Nasher curator Catherine Craft.[17] What can these artistic interventions bring to bear for art historians and curators who specialize in regions whose people and material heritage have been, and continue to be, unsettled? How

14 Mmuseumm relied on the generosity of many strangers in Syria and Turkey for the model's transportation, coordinated through email and WhatsApp messaging. See Annie Julia Wyman, "The 14-Year-Old Syrian Refugee Who Built the Aleppo of His Dreams," *Vice*, December 16, 2016: www.vice.com/en_us/article/aevy75/the-14-year-old-syrian-refugee-who-built-a-model-of-aleppo-as-it-once-was.

15 Finbarr Barry Flood, "From Prophet to Postmodernism? New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art," in *Making Art History: A Changing Discipline and its Institutions*, ed. Elizabeth Mansfield (London: Routledge, 2007): 43.

16 "Rayyane Tabet: Alien Property," *Metropolitan Museum of Art*, October 30, 2019: https://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2019/rayyane-tabet-alien-property.

17 Catherine Craft, "2020 Nasher Prize Laureate Michael Rakowitz," Nasher Sculpture Center, https://www.nashersculpturecenter.org/programs-events/nasher-prize/laureates/laureate/id/159

might they in turn unsettle the way we view dichotomies between "destroying" and "building," or between "us" and "them?

As our world grows increasingly displaced, the rate at which museums respond to global events gains speed. This new speed brings a greater urgency to the task of understanding and challenging the relationship between art discourses, methods of display, and modes of knowledge production. Here, I hoped to suggest how the work of a contemporary artist like Rakowitz can inform not only how we read exhibitions, but also how we choose to imagine the possibilities for their future.

Participation and Promise, The Culinary Interventions Of Michael Rakowitz

Sarah Bernhardt

University of Oxford

Over the last two decades, Michael Rakowitz has produced some of the most memorable and emotive works of contemporary art. Critically acclaimed within the art world, his practice is as likely to be featured within mainstream news articles as it is reviewed in cultural publications. While war and politics are so often at the heart of his practice, they are expressed with a genuine sensitivity and complexity that does nothing to limit the poignant "gut-punch" many feel on encountering such work. Indeed, this "encounter" is crucial to appraising Rakowitz's work. Like the majority of current conceptual artists, his works appear in private galleries as well as museums and non-profit institutions, but Rakowitz's longstanding commitment to intervention and collaboration sets him apart from many of his contemporaries and encourages a deeper academic response in ethics or epistemology as readily as it does aesthetics. In light of this assertion, it seems perhaps reductive to state that this paper will be concerned with the relevance of eating and consumption in Rakowitz's practice, but by citing his food-based works within a wider anthropological discourse, the pedagogical and healing aspects of his work can be newly explored and illuminated.

So, where is it that we find "food" in Rakowitz's work? Most obvious are the large-scale projects from 2003 and 2004, which marked the formal initiation of *Enemy Kitchen* and *RETURN*, respectively. The following decade saw *Spoils* in 2011, as well as the cookbook published last year, *A house with a date palm will never starve*. Alongside these performative works we should also add *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007—ongoing), *May the obdurate foe not be in good health*, (2011—ongoing), *May the arrogant not prevail*, (2010), and *RISE* (2001). Although there is a distinction between sculptural works made from food packaging, and more performative works that involve the literal preparation and consumption of food, this paper will focus on the first three interventions Rakowitz initiated. The outlier here is perhaps the intervention *RISE*, which relies on the gallery visitor inhaling the scent of food, without necessarily seeing it.

Aside from its obvious role in sustaining life, something that can be quantified at a microcosmic, individual level, food has an equally complex role in healing that stretches more easily into metaphor, community, and abstraction. This is a topic as readily found in the humanities, as it is the sciences. This paper defines healing loosely as "a reconciliation of the meaning an individual ascribes to distressing events,' within their 'perception of wholeness as a person.'"[1] In other words, a "transcendence of suffering," or, the *considered* improvement to a mental or physical state.[2] In Rakowitz's work there is a combined emphasis; to provide shared meals and thereby promote cross-cultural dialogue as a social remedy, and secondly, to use food itself as a metaphor for the ability to heal and nourish. This paper will argue that although both methods have a valid role in healing individuals and communities, Rakowitz's culinary interventions are also unique in that they show audiences the difficulties and complications in doing so.

Enemy Kitchen (fig. 5.1), first initiated in 2003 as a culinary intervention, is described on Rakowitz's website modestly as a "cooking workshop," which of course it is, but it goes further than that.[3] By compiling Baghdadi recipes with his Iraqi-Jewish mother and teaching them to multiple public audiences, often school students, Rakowitz seeks to: "open up a new route through which Iraq can be discussed—in this case, through that most

1 Thomas R. Egnew "The Meaning of Healing: Transcending Suffering." *Annals of Family Medicine* 3, no. 3 (2005): 255, accessed October 10, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1370/afm.313.

2 Ibid. Emphasis my own.

3 Michael Rakowitz, "Enemy Kitchen," accessed October 10, 2020, http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/enemy-kitchen.

Figure 5.1.
Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen*, 2003–ongoing. Photo courtesy of the artist.

familiar of cultural staples: nourishment. Iraqi culture is virtually invisible in the US, beyond the daily news, and *Enemy Kitchen* seizes the possibility of cultural visibility to produce an alternative discourse."[4] The obvious question arising from this is how effective is food as an instigator of alternate discourse, and how might healing be enabled by such a method? The long and ubiquitous history of "Gastro-diplomacy", makes a convincing case for shared meals as the most delicately persuasive instrument for peace and communication, whereby heads of state or representatives share a highly choreographed meal that both reflects the adeptness of the host, and, more often than not, a menu that reflects some of the history and traditions of the guest. Consider then the link to download the "Enemy Kitchen Iraqi Fried Chicken Recipe", on Rakowitz's website.[5] Opening the document, it becomes clear that it resulted from a conversation that Hyasheem, one of the students at Hudson Guild Community Centre had with Rakowitz: "'Do Iraqis make Southern fried chicken?' I answered no, to my knowledge there was nothing like it in Iraqi cuisine. 'Well, then let's invent it.'"[6] The resulting recipe stands as a testament to the eight weeks of collaboration in a way that simply posting the original taught Iraqi recipes would not. The enthusiasm of Hyasheem to offer his family's fried chicken recipe to be literally fused with Iraqi flavours is a clear celebration of the joy and delight to be found in multiculturalism. It is also symbolically beautiful; to counter the paucity of Iraqi restaurants in America, Rakowitz and his mother become the de-facto representatives of Iraqi-Jewish cuisine when they share their culinary heritage. The healing qualities of communal dining have already been discussed, but there is another dynamic at play here: an emphasis on the maternal. By relaying his mother's Iraqi-Jewish recipes to American children, Rakowitz adopts a familial model of communication: this isn't just about visibility, or pedagogy, but is markedly allegorical. While this intervention might not heal a generation's misunderstandings or reluctance to engage with a culture different to their own, Hyasheem and his peers have Rakowitz's permission to create something else, together.

A few months after Rakowitz taught the students of Hudson Guild Community Centre, *Enemy Kitchen* took a different physical form as a food truck in Chicago (fig. 5.2). Rather than Rakowitz teaching alone, Iraqi chefs would work with veterans from the Iraq war, who in turn worked as sous-chefs or served the food. This 'scaling up' maintains the ethos of the earlier iteration: to foster dialogue

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.

Figure 5.2.
Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen*, 2003–ongoing. Photo courtesy of the Smart Museum of Art.

across communities and to give his mother's recipes metaphorical form. However, by working with immigrants and veterans there is the unavoidable confrontation of past trauma: for those who left Iraq to make America their home and looked back to a country still at war, for those who were part of the armed forces, and for American citizens who had varying levels of conflict awareness. If we can talk separately of psychological healing and somatic healing, it is far harder to quantify remedial developments to the mind than the body. This subjectivity means that it is impossible to evaluate Rakowitz's work in terms of its efficacy, even with first-hand accounts or interviews. What we can ascertain is that the repetitive and exhaustive framing and re-positioning of his work allows all those who come into contact with it the ability to reconcile themselves with a difficult past, with the option to consume a more benign present.

An argument against such a neat reading of Rakowitz's work is that by generating the spectre of historic trauma or using food as a panacea for such loss, it mitigates the gravity of the situation. However, this ignores two vital points. The first, summarised aptly by Rakowitz, is that he would "often hear Americans say the Iraq war ended in 2011—but it continues for the Iraqi people. I'm adamant about making that understood and visible."[7] If anything, *Enemy Kitchen* does not lessen the gravity of the situation but challenges a popular assumption that a war fought far away is fixed and resolved by state-prescribed dates. Secondly, by working with veterans, Rakowitz highlights the other unseen casualty; the effects still wrought on the military returning home. While not an explicit critique of post-traumatic stress, it is worth considering the domestic arrangements many veterans are left with. A research paper from 2014 found that food insecurity among war veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan was close to 27%, notably higher than the comparative US population figure of 14.5%. Very low food security among veterans was in fact double the national rate.[8] It is impossible, and perhaps unethical, to draw conclusions about how effective this is at healing. Talking about his earlier work, *paraSITE*, that provides temporary shelters for the homeless, Rakowitz concedes that they "can do little to address the societal problems that make *paraSITE* necessary in the first place."[9] In a way this is also true of *Enemy Kitchen*, in that even if it continues to be radically scaled up, it is unlikely to fix the global and endemic structural inequalities at their roots. However, what this culinary intervention

7 Jonathan Rinck, "Ghost Stories: A Conversation with Michael Rakowitz," *Sculpture*, October 2019, 63.

8 Rachel Widome et al., "Food Insecurity Among Veterans of the US Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan," *Public Health Nutrition* 18, no. 5 (May 8 2014): 847, accessed October 9, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1017/S136898001400072X.

9 Stephanie Smith, "'A Visionary Dream, Unrealized': The Drawings of Michael Rakowitz." *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 21 (2009): 77.

Figure 5.3.
Michael Rakowitz, *Spoils*, 2011. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 5.4.
Michael Rakowitz, *Spoils* (detail), 2011.

does in the service of healing is to provide, in microcosm, each social grouping with tools and agency to heal together.

In comparison to *Enemy Kitchen*, *Spoils* (fig. 5.3) also reflects on the immunity of social groups to process or engage with the consequences of war, but is less concerned with imparting intimate personal heritage, and directly conjures the power of the state and gross political upheaval. In Rakowitz's collaboration with the chef Kevin Lasko in New York, diners visiting the Park Avenue restaurant in the fall of 2011 could order venison on a bed of Iraqi date syrup and tahini (debes wa'rashi), with a less mouth-watering proviso: they were served on looted plates from Saddam Hussein's palaces. The plates themselves, predictably regal in appearance, and somewhat banally made by Wedgwood and Bernardaud, had been sourced from two sellers on eBay: an American soldier serving in Iraq and a refugee now based in Michigan (fig. 5.4).[10] The provenance of the Wedgwood china has the added history of belonging to Iraq's last monarch, Faisal II, assassinated in 1958.[11] Where *Enemy Kitchen* provided employment for oft-neglected groups, *Spoils* recalls that famous quote by Brillat-Savarin, "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are,"[12] and a later rendition by the writer Norma Clarke, "we are what we are seen to eat."[13] To this, we might also add: show us what you are prepared to eat off of and let us see your stance on ethics. While many diners were outraged and the restaurant received official

10 Uri Freedman, "Eating Off Saddam's Plates: Iraqi Militaria as a Hobby," *The Atlantic*, October 14, 2011. https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2011/10/eating-saddams-plates-iraqi-militaria-hobby/336734/.

11 Ibid.

12 Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, *The Physiology of Taste: Or Meditations on Transcendental Gastronomy*, translated by M. F. K. Fisher (New York: Vintage, 1949), 15.

13 Norma Clarke, "Meat is Metaphor," *Times Literary Supplement*, no. 6132 (October 9, 2020): 4-5.

complaints, there were many who ordered the dish despite initial reluctance or distaste.[14] The coda to *Spoils* was in fact both formal and more definite; Nuri Al Maliki, then serving as Prime Minister of Iraq, requested the repatriation of Saddam Hussein's crockery on December 15, 2011 as Coalition Forces left the Republic of Iraq. Rakowitz documented this transaction on video and regarded it as "a sign of possibility: that Iraq is perhaps moving toward putting an end to systematic amnesia regarding its societal problems."[15] For the citizens of Iraq, and indeed the diners of the Park Avenue restaurant, perhaps this offered a 'reconciliation' of sorts towards distressing events; at the minimum it demanded a formal acknowledgement for everyone involved.

While in theory sharing food between different cultural or social groups should work to establish or maintain positive relationships, in reality this is predictably more complicated. As food is an unquestionable necessity to all human life, the experience of consumption is always correlated with patterns of power, knowledge, and environment. In terms of migration, these dynamics can still be subtle, but are pushed far closer to the surface. Leaving aside negative responses, reluctance to engage with, and systematic racism that still sadly shapes experience of food and immigration, the embrace of multicultural food is not without problems. In his work on Lebanese food culture in Australia, the anthropologist Ghassan Hage warns that the celebration of migrant dishes constitutes a "gastro-tourism" that does not necessitate real engagement between ethnic groups, in essence, a "multiculturalism without migrants." Other issues

14 Hanae Ko, "The Sweet and Bitter Road: Michael Rakowitz," *ArtAsiaPacific* 78 (2012) http://artasiapacific.com/Magazine/78/TheSweetAndBitterRoadMichaelRakowitz.

15 Ibid.

that wholly negate food and consumption as healing processes are the exploitation of migrant labour in the food and catering industry, and the risk that even well-meaning anthropological studies carry, by defining ingredients and meals as sourced from specific regions, or attributed to certain groups, i.e. "our food from here", and "your food from there", they treat migrant identities "as singular and fixed." Emma-Jayne Abbots pointedly asks, "who does the work of (re)producing migrant identities and mediating between host and home, and to what extent does this change over time?", an interesting question especially in terms of Rakowitz's practice. Who indeed is the mediator? Conservatively we might ascribe this role to Rakowitz himself, as the instigator of these culinary interventions, especially in his work *RETURN*. In 2004, Rakowitz initiated another artwork that examined the diasporic experience for Iraqis living in America, although its gestation period and history stretches back into the middle of the twentieth century, when Rakowitz's grandfather and family were exiled from Iraq. Leaving in 1946, we find Nissim Isaac David later running an import and export business in New York. Named Davisons & Co., the business shut down in the 1960s, to be reopened by Rakowitz in 2004 in Queens, later in the Bronx, and in 2006 in Brooklyn (fig. 5.5). The company in its first itinerations functioned "symbolically as a drop box," and grew holistically to a "full-fledged packaging centre and sorting facility."[16] For the Iraqi community, many of whom might have found themselves in Nissim's position, in a very different landscape and wondering about the connection to the country they left, it served as a benevolent gesture whereby packages could be sent to Iraqi recipients free of charge. The project later expanded again to function as a food store for Iraqi foodstuffs. As one would expect with Rakowitz's work, the setting

16 Michael Rakowitz, "Return," accessed October 10, 2020, http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/return.

Figure 5.5.
Michael Rakowitz, *Return*, 2004 – ongoing, Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning, Queens (2004), Longwood Art Center, Bronx (2005), Storefront at 529 Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn (produced by Creative Time (2006). Photo courtesy of the artist.

itself is evidence of an exhaustive attempt to render complex histories with all that is available; different types of dates were set out on a table to be purchased, and around them evidence of Iraq's turbulent past. Various brands of date syrup originating from Iraq but purposefully mislabelled to avoid import restrictions in the US were displayed, as were various Iraqi flags showing changes to nationhood, and a plethora of paperwork documenting the fate of the original ton of dates Rakowitz had attempted to import. The majority of the dates never made it to the shop, having been stopped repeatedly after leaving Bagdad and beginning to ruin in the heat. The 'solution' to this was twofold: for the start of the project Rakowitz relied on Californian dates, which can be traced back to original imported specimens from Iraq, and the replacement dates, a modest ten boxes compared to the original ton, arrived via DHL to the US later.[17] It is easy to read the dates metaphorically for the plight of Iraqi refugees and migrants attempting to move to the US, and the pathos generated might remedy static or unkind attitudes towards those affected. However, it is worth looking towards the intersection of memory and taste to evaluate how healing might also take place.

In his work on food and memory, the anthropologist Jon D. Holtzman asks "Which kinds of memories does food have the particular capacity to inscribe, and are there other ways that food may be implicated in a conscious or unconscious forgetting?"[18] Briefly acknowledging the ubiquity of the Proustian madeleine across scholarship and literature, it is the sensuousness of food" that strongly ties it to memory and of course emotion.[19] When Rakowitz was being interviewed during the arrival of the Iraqi dates, he was asked why he hadn't eaten one. Rakowitz's poignant reply, that they weren't for him, that "They're for a lot of people. They're for the Iraqis in exile," is very telling.[20] For diasporic Iraqis in America, not only consuming the dates, but recognising their legitimate labelling as 'product of Iraq', rather than furtively attributed to another Middle Eastern country, allows them a legitimized experience of the past, and permits them agency to reframe it.

A further argument can be made that this healing mechanism extends to those who might not have tasted Iraqi dates, either in

17 Sofía Hernández Chong Cuy, "Storytelling," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 21 (2009): 80-88, 85.
18 Jon D. Holtzman, "Food and Memory," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 35 (2006): 361-378, 363.
19 Ibid., 365.
20 Brian Boucher, "Babylon Without Borders," *Art in America* (April 2007): 123-127, 127.

America or Iraq. Holtzmann makes a distinction between nostalgia as the reencounter of a lived past, and nostalgia for something yet to be experienced.[21] For an American audience encountering the work, partaking in such a ritual or experiencing any sort of loss might be viewed as exploitative or voyeuristic, and there is a considerable amount of literature that suggests eating ethnic food is bound to form a "kind of false colonial nostalgia," or "eating the Other."[22] In the case of *RETURN*, there are several contextual factors that challenge this. Firstly, by encouraging a wide participation in the work, Rakowitz focuses *Return* simultaneously on education and research, alongside empathy. It is impossible to remain impartial to Iraq's history while either purchasing or consuming the dates, or even casually perusing the store. Secondly, the length of time that Iraq has suffered from international war and sectarian violence has meant that many who left, left a long time ago and did not return. Thus, it is perfectly possible, as well as sobering, to think that for at least a generation of expatriates, an Iraqi date labelled as such is a perfectly new phenomenon. Finally, what *RETURN* does not shy away from is the conditions in Iraq that shape the work itself. Iraq's recent history has had dramatic implications for the food and nutrition available to its populace. Over three quarters of Iraq's land mass is unsuitable for agriculture, owing to both climate and soil composition.[23] Moreover, decades of conflict that stretch almost non-stop from the Iran-Iraq War in the 80s, Gulf War in the 90s, and American Invasion from 2003, has left the country frequently reliant on imports to feed its population.[24] It is hard to imagine the distress felt as the UN applied several years of heavy sanctions to what was already a humanitarian catastrophe.

In her study of Iraqi-Jewish communities in Quebec, Norma Baumel Joseph focuses on the ritual consumption of t'beet. Understood as the "quintessential Sabbath food" for Iraqi Jews, she noted that t'beet began to be consumed in this community far more frequently and outside of its designated Saturday mealtime.[25] While she argues that immigrants might "quickly lose their language of origin," cooking and eating often remain steadfast in the face of a significant change in environment, and, in this specific example it became a way for this community to engage with a lost past.[26] In addition, it is worth considering that [in America] "in the public sphere ethnic food is a palatable form of multiculturalism, in contrast with the conformity expected, demanded, or even legislated in areas such as language and clothing."[27] This remains largely true across the western world; there is of course no culinary equivalent to France's "Burqua Ban" in 2010, or language-based immigration assessment such as is routine in England and Australia.[28] Is this because the availability of a globalized menu is hard to radicalise and make threatening? It could also be because food is simultaneously such a private and public activity, in terms of sourcing, preparing, and consuming it.

These arguments broadly suggest that for immigrant communities in America, ethnographic food histories can be preserved at a

21 Holtzman, "Food and Memory," 367.

22 Ibid., 368.

23 Gibson, Glen R. Gibson, James B. Campbell, and Randolph H. Wynne, "Three Decades of War and Food Insecurity in Iraq," *Photogrammetric Engineering and Remote Sensing* 78, no. 8 (August 2012): 885-95, 887 https://doi.org/10.14358/PERS.78.8.895.

24 Ibid.

25 Norma Baumel Joseph, "T'beet: Situating Iraqi Jewish Identity through Food," in *Everyday Sacred: Religion in Contemporary Quebec*, 99-126, edt. Hillary Kaell (Montreal: McGillQueens University Press, 2017), 111.

26 Ibid, 113.

27 Holtzman, 373.

28 *Loi interdisant la dissimulation du visage dans l'espace public*. "Law of 2010-1192: Act prohibiting concealment of the face in public space."

local level and give agency to groups to "maintain a historically validated ethnic identity."[29] But what happens when a key ingredient to a nation's history cannot be obtained? Rakowitz's stress on the difficultly in sourcing Iraqi dates goes to the heart of this. While many ethnic restaurants and food businesses have flourished in cosmopolitan cities in the US, the ability to import certain ingredients needed in the creation of Iraqi family meals, let alone businesses and restaurants, curtails both personal ritual and communal enterprise. If partaking in these processes is vital for communities to heal, both to offer reconciliation for past trauma and to improve lived experience in the present and future, then Rakowitz offers us a nuanced way of understanding this relationship to history.

Claude Levi-Strauss described our relationship to food as "one of the few universal truths of human activity," and it remains one of the most illuminating and rich sources of insight into human behavior, history and experience.[30] What Rakowitz achieves in his culinary interventions is to consistently set in motion both localised initiatives to enable healing in communities, with the potential to increase in scale and reach, and the consistent dedication to cross-cultural dialogue. More than this, his work also offers a nuanced approach to the difficulties in enacting such change, and while there is a modesty and embrace of the limits of these interventions, Rakowitz's dedication and commitment ensure "we're not going to get shut down for uninteresting reasons."[31]

29 Holtzman, "Food and Memory," 366.

30 Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Culinary Triangle," *The Partisan Review* 33 (1966): 568-596, 568.

31 Nicole J. Caruth, "Food Hazards," *Public Art Review* 23, no. 2 (2012) 28-32, 29. Rakowitz was discussing the labor intensive preparation required to grant *Enemy Kitchen* extensive city licensing.

Michael Rakowitz's Projects of Reappearing

Amalia Nangeroni

Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

On the influence of the Ancient.
This story is fairytale
To tell.
Ghost story for adults.

—Aby Warburg, *Mnemosyne. Grundbegriffe*, II, July 2, 1929[1]

Reappearance is a fundamental notion for interpreting Michael Rakowitz's artistic practice in relation to a selection of sculptural works that simultaneously fuse antiquity and contemporaneity. This essay examines the ongoing project *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007–ongoing) and the work *What dust will rise?* (2012) in which images of lost ancient artifacts, monuments, or books reappear in a new materiality through a complex operation of translation operated by the artist.

It is not a process that aims at imitating the lost works; rather, it focuses on the evocation of the past. Through the *reappearance* of lost or stolen artifacts or monuments, Rakowitz faced the theme of the destruction of cultural heritage and consequently, the trauma experienced by people who survived events of iconoclasm, libricide, looting, and any other forms of disappearance.

On the occasion of an interview, Rakowitz stated that the idea of "reappearing" destroyed monuments came to him after reading an article about the looting of Iraq's National Museum occurred in 2003.[2] "This was a loss for all of humanity," he argued, yet Rakowitz was struck that the concern for the lost objects did not extend to the Iraqi people, and he wondered how he could bring back the looted artifacts in a way that summoned both the cultural and the human loss.[3]

The project *The invisible enemy should not exist* and the work *What dust will rise?* were conceived in relation to different events of disappearance. From the archaeological expeditions conducted between the 19th and 20th centuries in the Mesopotamian area, which led to the removal of ancient artifacts from their original locations, to the pillage of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad following the US invasion in 2003, which caused the dispersal of numerous artifacts; from the loss of thousands of ancient books of the state library of Hesse-Kassel due to a bombing of the Fridericianum Museum by the British Royal Air Force during the Second World War, to the destruction of many works by ISIS in the last decades such as the monumental buddhas in Bamiyan Valley, some sculptural reliefs of the Northwest Palace of Nimrud and the Lamassu kept in the Mosul Museum. In Rakowitz's works, the iconographic references to the lost or stolen artifacts are evident, and through the materials used and the exhibition choices, the artworks appear not as simple reproductions. When Iwona Blazwick asked Rakowitz about 'rebuilding the monument' as a recurrent motif in his work, the artist stated: "I understand these projects not as a rebuilding or reconstructing but as *reappearing*. They can only ever be ghosts of their originals and, like all good ghosts, their job is

1 My translation; the German original follows: "Vom Einfluss der Antike. / Diese Geschichte ist märchenhaft / To vertellen [sic]. / Gespenstergeschichte f[ür] ganz Erwachsene," in Georges Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante. Histoire de l'art et temps des fantômes selon Aby Warburg*, 2002, it. trans. Alessandro Serra (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2006), 9.

2 Raffi Khatchadourian, "Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return," *The New Yorker*, August 17, 2020, online, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2020/08/24/michael-rakowitzs-art-of-return, accessed Nov. 27, 2020.

3 Khatchadourian, "Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return."

to haunt."[4] I find this statement particularly inspiring. Also, in many other occasions, Rakowitz links the concept of reappearing to these figures that become visible again through the materiality of his works.[5] These entities who survive the loss of the *medium* to which they once belonged, appear to haunt the present.

I consider this assumption especially significant in the light of the way in which Aby Warburg defined the history of art as the history of images, i.e. a "ghosts' story for adults."[6] In fact, Georges Didi-Huberman has unearthed the thoughts of the German art historian about the concept of image as phantom.[7] According to him: "The image is what survives from the past and returns to disturb the gaze since the history is a tense story that has, as its object, an unstable dynamic of latencies and awakenings, a wriggling and inextricable tangle of times."[8]

In this sense, it could be said that Rakowitz draws from art history involving its phantoms. The images of lost ancient artifacts, monuments and books, appear to haunt the present, revealing themselves in a new materiality that in Rakowitz's works is always connoted by multiple meanings related to contemporary times. In

4 Iwona Blazwick, "Michael Rakowitz: A Transatlantic Interview," in Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev and Marianna Vecellio, eds., *Michael Rakowitz* (London / Turin / Milan: Whitechapel Gallery / Castello di Rivoli / Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 37.

5 Omar Kholeif, *Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West* (Chicago, III. / Munich-London-New York: Museum of Contemporary Art / DelMonico Books-Prestel, 2017), 27; *Wild Talks: Michael Rakowitz on (g)hosting*, lecture at Concordia University, Montréal, youtube, Nov. 30, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lI4KSEbTBmg, accessed Nov. 27, 2020; Raffi Khatchadourian, "Michael Rakowitz's Art of Return."

6 Didi-Huberman, *L'image survivante*, it. trans., 9.

7 Ibid., 11-108.

8 Ibid., second cover.

fact, specifically in the project *The invisible enemy should not exist* and in the work *What dust will rise?*, different semiotics systems are present. They become visible through the iconographic references, the materials used, and the display choices adopted by Rakowitz. These systems interact with each other revealing a co-presence of past and present that allows the reconfiguration of the meaning of both. Hence, this implies a re-vision of the past and, at the same time, a new awareness about the present.

In this regard, I see a remarkable connection with the concept of "preposterous history" conceived by the cultural theorist and artist, Mieke Bal.[9] She wrote about it in relation to the re-visions of the Baroque art into contemporary artworks. According to her, art is an active reworking, and the artwork performed by later images, obliterates the older images as they were before. The past does not determine the present. Instead, the present determines the originality of the past and its contemporary value. This reversed direction of historical reflection is exactly what she means by preposterous history. She wrote: "This reversal, which puts what came first chronologically ('pre-') behind ('post') its later recycling as an *after-effect*, is a preposterous history. It is a way of 'doing history' that carries productive uncertainties and illuminating highlights. A vision of how-to re-vision the past from today's perspective."[10]

9 Mieke Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio. The preposterous history* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

10 Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio. The preposterous history*, 6-7. I think it is important to specify that Bal has dealt with the co-presence of certain concerns in the shared time of art from a substantially formal and semiotic point of view, in a specific dimension of Baroque and neo-Baroque vision. In my analysis I propose to investigate works that are not expressions of continuity of a precise artistic language, but which re-elaborate works from a wider chronological period.

In my opinion, this concept is particularly interesting when put in relation to the way Michael Rakowitz deals with history. In the project *The invisible enemy should not exist* and in the work *What dust will rise?*, the object of re-vision is not just a question of a language, a style, or a migration of iconographic motifs from the past, but of entire works of art as systems and functions of a cultural imaginary. But not only that, the subject of the re-vision is also the reception of ancient artifacts, monuments, and books over the centuries, particularly in contexts where the cultural imperialism of the West has dominated. If, according to Bal, it is the present that determines the originality of the past and its contemporary value, Rakowitz's works call for reflection about how Western museums have created their itineraries to tell their own visions of the culture. In Rakowitz′s works, the critical position regarding the dispersion of the cultural heritage that occurred in the name of the archeology and the history of art is evident. At the same time, these artworks remind us that it was precisely the value that the West attributed to certain works, whether they were ancient artifacts, monuments, or literary works, to be the cause of their destruction.[11] As a consequence, these considerations then lead to investigating the role that the project *The invisible enemy should not exist* and the work *What dust will rise?* play in the narration of the history today and the role of Rakowitz himself as storyteller.

In this regard, I consider interesting also the comparison between artist and historian that George Didi-Huberman expressed in his

11 I refer to the Mullah Mohammad Omar's position on the distruction of Bamiyan Buddha expressed on the occasion of an interview in 2004. Rakowitz quoted an excerpt of the Mullah's statement in the work *What Dust Will Rise?*. The quote is also included in Blazwick, "Michael Rakowitz: A Transatlantic Interview," in Christov-Bakargiev and Vecellio, 46.

essay *L'image brûle*.[12] He wrote: "The artist and the historian would therefore have a common responsibility, namely to make tragedy visible in culture (so as not to separate it from its history), but also culture in tragedy (so as not to separate it from its memory).[13] In my opinion, this statement is particularly relevant in relation to Rakowitz's practice because in his works, artistic creation and historical narration coexist, and this is particularly evident in the narrative drawings that accompanied his artistic projects. These works are truly expressions of tragedy in culture because they are linked to dramatic events of history and still they are texts of culture, created in times of tragedy, which offer new interpretations of the past and at the same time, they create new narratives by intervening in the memory of the observer.[14]

The invisible enemy should not exist

The invisible enemy should not exist (2007–ongoing) (fig. 6.1) is an evolving project of the *reappearance* of lost, looted, or destroyed objects. It unfolds as an intricate narrative about the artifacts stolen from the National Museum in Baghdad, in the aftermath of the US invasion in 2003; the current status of their whereabouts; and the series of events surrounding the invasion, plundering, and

12 Georges Didi-Huberman, "L'image brûle", in Art Press, n. 25 special issue (2004).

13 My translation; Georges Didi-Huberman, "L'immagine brucia," in Andrea Pinotti and Antonio Somaini, eds., *Teorie dell'immagine. Il dibattito contemporaneo* (Milano: Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2009), 253.

14 "Text of culture" is a notion conceived by Jurij Lotman, the founder of the Semiotics of culture. According to him, culture is meant as text in all of its expressions, even when it manifests itself as an image. In Lotman, *Struktura khudozhestvennogo teksta* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1971), his theory is based on the axiom that each system intended for communication can be defined as a language. If art is a special means of communication, a language organized in a particular manner, then works of art, messages in this language, can be viewed as texts.

Figure 6.1.
Michael Rakowitz, *The invisible enemy should not exist*, 2007–ongoing. Installation view, Istanbul Biennial, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist.

related protagonists.[15] The centerpiece of the project is an ongoing series of sculptures that represent an attempt to make the looted archaeological artifacts reappear.

Using reference material from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago's "Lost Treasures of Iraq" database of thousands of objects, as well as images posted on Interpol's website, each sculpture is carefully constructed on a 1:1 scale of the lost artifact, using Arab newspapers and detritus from food packages that circulate in the diasporic Arab community in the US.[16] In this comprehensive project, the materials are fragments of cultural visibility being enlisted to make visible things that

15 Kholeif, Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West, 43.
16 Nora Razian, "A Particulate History," in Christov-Bakargiev and Vecellio, 84.

are invisible.[17] They are vectors of a multitude of messages and their provenance is key information. In fact, the everyday objects included in the artworks implied a reflection on Arab diaspora and illuminates a range of socio-political issues. The use of packages of food that circulate in the Arab communities around the world points to the economies of exile and the desire for the original, as the exile looks for authentic flavors linked to what they recognize as part of their identity.

In the exhibition space, the sculptures are installed in an unusual display, placed on tables reproducing a scale model of the *Aj ibur shapu*, the ancient Processional Way in Babylon, which means "the invisible enemy should not exist", along which the New Year celebrants would pass carrying statues of the gods to and from the Akitu temple. Each artefact is accompanied by a museum label listing the museum number, provenance, and other identifying facts. However, the narrative information about each lost object is replaced with quotes by Iraqi archeologists, American military commanders, and others in response to the looting. The result is a fragmented dialogue that spreads across the work's presentation.[18]

Other elements of the project take the form of drawings and short hand-written texts that provide a narrative framework for the war in Iraq and the looting of the National Museum in Baghdad. Different protagonists appear in this narration, but the most important is Dr. Donny George, the museum director who led continuous efforts to recover the stolen artifacts. The drawings tell of the strategy Dr. George implemented to avoid

17 Michael Rakowitz interview at Malmö Konsthall, youtube, December 11, 2019, 10:10, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YHfLomAASgU, accessed Nov. 27, 2020.
18 Kholeif, Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West, 35.

compromising himself with the Iraqi regime. He worked at archaeological sites and in Baghdad secretly performed with a band specializing in cover songs from the rock group Deep Purple. In this way, Rakowitz identifies Dr. George as his artistic alter ego: while Dr. George makes copies of Western cultural products, the artist makes copies of Eastern cultural products.[19] This reciprocal approach shakes up stereotypes around the "other Arab" as an "enemy." Rakowitz extends this idea by adding a particular soundtrack to one installation of *The invisible enemy* that; t that included the sound of a cover of Deep Purple's track, "Smoke on the Water," performed by an Arab band based in New York.

Relate to *The invisible enemy* should not exist is also *May the arrogant not prevail* (2010) (fig. 6.2). It is a scaled-down reconstruction of the still-standing replica of the Ishtar Gate, made by the Iraqi government in the 1950s, which served as one of the most popular photo backdrops for US soldiers during the Second Gulf War in Iraq. The monumental installation is built out of plywood and wooden beams and clad with newspapers and color-correct packaging of Arabic foodstuffs found in Berlin, where the work was presented for the first time.[20] This work is likewise accompanied by a series of narrative drawings in which Rakowitz narrates historical facts that highlight the genesis of the work. These references link the figures represented in Rakowitz's gate to those depicted on the original Ishtar Gate and reproduced on its reconstructions in Iraq and at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. Thus, they appear as lions, bulls and the *mušḫuššu* dragons, the mythological creatures considered sacred to Ishtar, the Akkadian goddess of fertility, love, sex, and war.

19 Nicola Setari, "Pourquoi l'Ennemi invisible ne devrait pas exister," in Jean Gagnon, ed., Michael Rakowitz. *Projects récents sur Bagdad et Montréal* (Montréal: SBC Galerie d'Art Contemporain, 2009), 18-19.

20 The work was unveiled in 2010 on the occasion of the group exhibition *Über Wut/ On Rage* at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt.

Figure 6.2.
Michael Rakowitz, *May the Arrogant Not Prevail*, 2010. Installation view, MCA Chicago, 2018. Image courtesy of the artist and MCA Chicago. Photo: Nathan Keay, courtesy of the artist.

On the bases of the information included in the drawings, the viewer also becomes aware of the story of the original Ishtar Gate of ancient Babylon, through whose arch ran the Processional Way *Aj ibur shapu*, whose secondary translation is *May the arrogant not prevail*. It was excavated by a German archeologist at the beginning of the 20th century, who then transported it to Berlin, where it was installed at the Pergamon Museum. In this way, Rakowitz questions Western cultural supremacy, which for centuries has allowed the expropriation of works of art from numerous countries. The process of dislocation of the works has generated a decontextualization that implies a new writing of their history.

Part of *The invisible enemy should not exist* are the *Rooms F, G, N, Z of Northwest Palace of Nimrud* (2018–19) (fig. 6.3). They are a series

Figure 6.3.
The invisible enemy should not exist (Room F, section 1, Northwest Palace of Nimrud), 2019. Installation view: 2020

of sculptural reliefs created in relation to the walls of a banquet courtyard within King Ashurnasirpal II's palace built in the ancient Assyrian city of Kalhu, in current-day Nimrud, Iraq, destroyed by ISIS in 2015. The Rakowitz rooms present papier-mâché panels that follow the architectural layout of the originals. They are made using packaging from North Iraqi products, cut and arranged like vividly colored fabric. The installation of the works manifests a rhythm of fullness and emptiness. In the exhibition space the artist exhibits only the effigy of the panels destroyed in 2015, leaving vacant spaces for the extant reliefs that are now displayed in the most prestigious museums of the Western world, following their removal from the original site in the twentieth century by archeologists. Empty spaces visibly dominate inasmuch as only one-third of the total reliefs have been destroyed by ISIS since 400 of the 600 originals were removed during archeological expeditions. The gaps among the reliefs acknowledge the continued history of displacement in Iraq,

Figure 6.4.
Michael Rakowitz, *The invisible enemy should not exist* (*Lamassu*) (detail), 2018. Installation view, Trafalgar Square, London, 2018 Middle eastern food packaging and newspapers, glue, labels, sound, drawings Photo courtesy of the artist

creating what the artist calls "a palimpsest of different moments of removal."[21] Even in this work, the labels in the exhibition space do not provide information about the reliefs as typical labels in a museum do, but they include comments from archeologists, journalists, and historians.

Part of *The invisible enemy should not exist* is also the *Lamassu* (2018) (fig. 6.4). It is a work conceived by the artist after the destruction of the sculpture of the protective deity Lamassu, the Assyrian human-headed winged bull created around 700 BCE, that once graced the entrance to the Nergal Gate that led to Nineveh, Iraq, claimed by ISIS in 2015. Rakowitz's sculpture stood proud on the Fourth Plinth in Trafalgar Square, London, where it remained

21 Michael Rakowitz interview at Malmö Konsthall, 8:00.

for two years until 2020. The placement of the work itself was particularly significant because the London square represents the center of what was once the colonial metropolis of the British Empire. It thus refers to the archaeological campaigns promoted in the Mesopotamian area that removed the ancient artifacts from their original sites to place them at London's British Museum, among other cultural venues in the West.

Rakowitz's Lamassu stands out for its bright colors given by materials the artist used, which are in contrast to the pale stone of the original sculpture. In fact, the artwork comprises thousands of colorful empty date syrup cans from an Iraqi industry brought to its knees during the Second Gulf War (2003–11) and the recycled packaging from Middle Eastern foodstuffs sold in the West. In this way the reincarnated Lamassu simultaneously fuses antiquity and modernity and tells the story of the damage inflicted by the war on Iraqi people and the cultural, economic, and ecological disasters caused to their land. It also considers how the war-derived soil pollution and the bomb blasts affected the landscape once characterized by a multitude of date palm trees.

What dust will rise?

What dust will rise? (2012) (fig. 6.5) is a site-specific installation commissioned for dOCUMENTA (13) and conceived for the Fridericianum museum. It re-creates books from the state library of Hesse-Kassel that were destroyed in a fire in the German museum during a bombing by the British Royal Air Force in 1941. With the help of stone carvers from Afghanistan and Italy, Rakowitz made these lost volumes reappear out of travertine quarried in the Bamiyan Valley, where two monumental sixth-century sandstone Buddhas were dynamited by the Taliban in 2001. In the exhibition space, they are displayed along with fragments of the destroyed Buddhas of Bamiyan and the books burned during the bombing of

Figure 6.5.
What dust will rise?, 2012. Installation view, dOCUMENTA (13), Kassel, 2012. Image courtesy of the artist and Jane Lombard Gallery. Photo: Roman März, courtesy of the artist.

the Fridericianum, but also with a fragment of the meteorite Arbol Solo, which fell to Earth on September 11, 1954 in the province of San Luis, Argentina, and with a piece of Libyan Desert Glass, which is literally a piece of the Libyan Desert that was turned to glass from the heat of a meteor that struck the site 26 million years ago.[22]

Even in this installation, the museological display is significant. The fragments of Buddhas are housed in protective showcases while the books re-created from Bamiyan stone are exhibited on glass tables with wood legs. Rakowitz wrote directly on the glasses with a paint marker information regarding the artifacts, so in this way, his handwriting differentiates the labels from the typical printed museum label. The written information provides the story of the

22 Marianna Vecellio, "Ties That Bind," in Christov-Bakargiev and Vecellio, 72.

artifacts and also includes quotes that create moments of tension, for example, the one by Taliban member Mullah Mohammad Omar regarding his reasons for destroying the Buddhas. Again, the reference to the West is not blameless.

In addition to the installation *What dust will rise?* Rakowitz also led a workshop in Bamiyan as part of the "Afghan Seminars" series organized by dOCUMENTA(13) . Along with a sculptor and a conservator, the artist-led the workshop taught the art of stone carving, which has been part of the heritage of the Hazarajat region for centuries, to a group of local students. The aim of the project was to recuperate the traditional skill of stone carving. In this way the cultural trauma provoked by the loss of the Buddhas of Bamiyan, as well as the volumes burned in the Second World War at the Fridericianum, is addressed through the creation of culture. As the artist said: "Acknowledgement and accountability are important to a process of healing."[23]

As highlighted by my detailed analysis of the artworks, the translation of cultural trauma provoked in the history by different forms of disappearance, is a central theme for Rakowitz. In this regard, I would like to return to the concept of "preposterous history" to add a new level of interpretation to the Rakowitz projects of reappearing. By applying Bal's concept of ″doing history″ to Rakowitz′s artistic practice, I propose to consider that in these analyzed works, the object of re-vision is also the past of destruction that caused cultural trauma to the people who survived moments of iconoclasm or libricide. In these works, the trauma is embodied, since the ghosts from the past appear through the images that take place in new media.

23 Blazwick, "Michael Rakowitz: A Transatlantic Interview," in Christov-Bakargiev and Vecellio, 47.

This particular "embodiment" of the image was questioned by the art historian Hans Belting.[24] According to him, images are like nomads because they move from one medium to another. The meaning of an image becomes accessible not only by considering its iconic aspects but also by taking into account the factors of the medium and the body. This triad image-medium-body is the basis of his theory. The medium is the tool through which images are transmitted and hosted and the body is the element that allows their perception. The concept of the image, on the other hand, is more problematic in definition. He wrote, "The images are neither on a wall (or on a screen) nor just in the mind. They do not exist in themselves, but they happen; they take place whether it is moving images or static images. They happen thanks to transmission and perception."[25] And following these considerations, the concept of "image as phantom" of Warburg is still intriguing in relation to the notion of ghosts in Rakowitz's projects of reappearing.

The concept of the medium is actually relevant in Rakowitz's works. Previously, I analyzed in depth the importance of the materials and their meanings according to their provenance. Furthermore, his display choices and his museographic references are essentials to address the perception of the artworks by the viewer. On the other hand, the body, the mind of the viewer, is significant, too, because it configures the memory of the lost artifacts through the mediation of Rakowitz′s works.

According to Jurij Lotman, the founder of the "semiotics of culture," the memory is not like a generator that reproduces the past, that generates a conceptualized reality that the mind transfers to

24 Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," in *Critical Inquiry*, 31, (Chicago: The University of Chicago, Winter 2005), 302-319.

25 Hans Belting, "Image, Medium, Body: A New Approach to Iconology," 302-303.

the past, but, he wrote: "Memory is the tool for thinking in the present."[26] And this is, in my opinion, what happens in Rakowitz's works. The original artworks, monuments, and books will no longer be perceived as before. Their traumatic connotation, their reference to their destruction or damage are translated into something different through a new awareness. Coming to this consideration, it is the way in which the artist acts on memory that makes possible a new writing of history and different versions of culture.

In conclusion, *The invisible enemy should not exist* and *What dust will rise?* are projects of reappearing that act on collective memory. Ghosts of past images haunt the present to shake a reaction. The traumas suffered as a result of all kinds of disappearances are dealt with as in a healing process, thus aiming to create a new writing of history that implies a greater awareness of the present.

26 Jurij Lotman, *Universe of the Mind. A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990), 272.

Keynote Address

Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev

Director of Castello di Rivoli, Italy

This text has been adapted from the transcript of Christov-Bakargiev's keynote address presented virtually on October 30, 2020.

Thank you. Hello. I'm very, very happy to be here with you today to give a keynote lecture about the art of Michael Rakowitz the award winner of the Nasher Prize. Sadly, due to the restrictions and the health emergency, I'm unable to be with you today, but I am there in spirit. And as I am alone here, I will take my mask off in order to read you my lecture. I'd like to thank the Nasher Sculpture Center for inviting me and I'd also like to thank Michael Rakowitz for wishing me to hold this lecture.

What makes a person want to be an artist today and what kind of an activity is that of the artist? Artists tend to have many mirror neurons. They are often able to put themselves in other people's shoes and feel the world from the perspective of the people and places with whom they engage and of the materials they use. What does the stone, the toy, the sculpture, or the tree feel? Artists frequently train this skill of empathy or *einfühlung*, becoming ever more one with their subject matter. We live in a world that is characterized by disembodied digital experiences, by an increasing amount of time spent communicating on small handheld cell phones, by an exponential divide between a small number of extremely affluent people and a growing number of poor and wretched ones living on an ever more dirty and ecologically unsound planet characterized by wars, necropolitics and forced migrations, as well as by the loss of material and immaterial cultural heritage and of so many crafts.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many people would have gone into active politics to try and change the world over the last 30 years. However, some, like Michael Rakowitz, have instead joined the forces of art with a practical goal of bettering the situation, of achieving a result in terms of social change. Now, what that implies is that in many ways we are returning to a period of avant-garde art where urgency was important and also, at the same time,

to a pre-art period of civilization when art was not autonomous and when the decorative, the useful, and the aesthetic were one and the same, when sculpture was attached to a church or a temple that sheltered you from the rain. And a pot was a vessel reminiscent of the womb, but also a container with which to share our food. Art, therefore, for Michael Rakowitz, but generally is defined as much as by what it is as by what it is not, by what it does or can do, as by what it does not or cannot do. It is even defined by what it fails to achieve. Art has played a major role in social processes of healing and recovery throughout history, and imagination has been a crucial force in those processes. Sometimes it fails, and sometimes Michael Rakowitz's goals are not achieved. Sometimes they are. But the beauty and the core of its existence lies also in that chaotic attempt.

Michael Rakowitz cares for people. Their material and spiritual lives and the spaces and shelters that we build together with them. But Rakowitz wonders whether good intentions are enough. He wants to protect, save, and repair, but asks whether the connections he makes are interesting enough, whether his storytelling is engaging enough or poetic enough. His doubts are deep rooted as he repairs and mends without wanting to hide and forget the social, historical, psychological, and physical wounds that move him to make art and do the mending. His doubts are what keeps the process open and fragile and uncertain enough for the entire process to be humble, and yet never humbling, to be ethical, and yet never self-righteous.

I imagine Michael Rakowitz, as a little boy being taken to the museums to learn about past civilizations through the traces of their material cultures, while the peoples of those past worlds have long since turned to dust; his, therefore, is a post-museum art. Or an art that takes into consideration in the display of his works the

context of what a museum display was in the past and could be again in the future. In his oeuvre, "things"—the generic stuff of the world—become objects, the specific stuff of the world. In other words, "things" become objects when they are embedded with meanings projected onto them by people. They become heirlooms resonant with memories. They become enchanted things thanks to which we direct our lives symbolically as well as experientially.

His objects are often damaged, broken, stolen, or burnt goods. Sometimes they are objects at risk. His goal seems to be to find ways by which their embedded meaningfulness may emerge and flourish again. And his proposition is that this can happen only if we work together with others. Therefore, animistically objects have agency, and they speak to us like mirrors of our souls. But they do so ritualistically and in a nexus of people, but never in a solitary fashion. Crafts and the objects they produce are embedded with stories and are able to become active agents of transformation in peoples' lives. Full of magic, they have a transformative potential. Through our associations with these objects, we see patterns emerge. And in these patterns, some solace is found in the shape of an imagined cosmic order. With humor, this order is at times farfetched, and implausible connections are created through leaps of the imagination in time and space, linking together, just to cite a few examples, the Art Nouveau of Istanbul made by Armenian craftspeople during the Ottoman Empire and the bones of stray dogs who were exterminated on Sivriada Island in the Bosphorus during the ominous prefiguration of the Armenian genocide, along with a connection with the exuberant Chicago architect Louis Sullivan, or the utopian revolutionary vision of Vladimir Tatlin and the architectural, anarchitectural principles of Gordon Matta-Clark, as well as the tearing down of a dilapidated house in Sydney, Australia, in the case of another artwork of his.

In addition to these linkages that construct webs of interrelated stories through objects, in most of his exhibitions, we also find a plurality of things and objects. The many low-cost, custom built shelters for the homeless of *paraSITE*, which he began in 1998 and is ongoing. The hundreds of papier-mâché remakes of lost artifacts wrapped in Middle Eastern food packaging of *The invisible enemy should not exist*, which he began in 2007 and is ongoing. The many stone carved books of *What dust will rise* created for the dOCUMENTA in 2012, or the assembly of plaster casts of architectural decorations in the above-mentioned *The flesh is yours, the bones are ours*, in Istanbul, made for the Istanbul Biennial in 2015.

Since 1998 for his first project of note, the ongoing *paraSITE*, he has made indeed a series of shelters out of cheap plastic bags, custom built according to the needs of the homeless people that he individually has interviewed before, producing each tent, which attached to the HVAC outtake vents of buildings, creates an inflatable low-cost and nomadic home. I remember reading about these in the Metro section of the *New York Times* in 1997 and consequently inviting him to do a project at PS1 MOMA where I was at the time curator. On that occasion he created *Climate Control*. It was 2000, a new installation that temporarily introduced climate control into one of the second-floor galleries of the old PS1 building where I was working. What he did was something useful for the contemporary art center. In other words, we could have shown a Van Gogh in the room. And prior to his invitation, PS1 had no climate control, and thus he reversed the normal relationship between a young emerging artist and an important art institution, transforming his installation into a service. For the project, *The invisible enemy should not exist* that began in 2007, he has been remaking life-size versions of the 15,000 ancient artifacts that were looted from the National Museum of Iraq after Baghdad's fall to American troops in 2003 during the Iraq War that brought down

the regime of Saddam Hussein. Up to today, Michael Rakowitz and his collaborators have remade about 900 of these papier-mâché sculptures covered in Arabic English newspapers with Arabic food wrapping. He reconstructed these figures thanks to the detailed images he found on a website called "The Lost Treasures of Iraq," and it is hosted by the Oriental Institute in Chicago that was set up to educate people about the losses incurred during the Iraq War and also to help law enforcement agencies track the lost objects. But there were a plurality of objects also on the occasion of the dOCUMENTA (13) in the Fridericianum Museum building of Kassel, where he exhibited the well-known *What dust will rise?*—Michael Rakowitz titles are always extremely poetic—which included a large number of stone carved books presented on glass tables. Carved in Northern Italy by master craftspeople into the shape of ancient books originally belonging to the collections of Kassel, but that had burnt during World War II bombings, they were made out of the Afghanistan Bamiyan Valley rock, where the large Buddhas had been blown up by the Taliban in March 2001.

In *The flesh is yours, the bones are ours* in Istanbul, he produced an enormous number of small plaster casts from moldings originally used by Armenian craftsmen during the Ottoman Empire to decorate the city in floral Art Nouveau style, along with new molds of decorative patterns made in the shapes of bones and ground bones, as we all know, are part of the materials used originally in such casts. These 450 objects lay on the floor of a former Greek school, creating a link between the Armenian genocide of 1915–23 and another community that had been eradicated from multicultural Constantinople, which was the name of Istanbul at the time of the early years of the Ottoman Empire, eradicated from the multicultural Constantinople and today Istanbul in the 1960s, in order to transform it into the more ethnically homogeneous Turkish Istanbul of today.

Although objects, their fabrication, their accumulation, and their exhibition thus form a major part of Michael Rakowitz's practice, this aspect of his work is in counterpoint with a very important other part, which is an immaterial and relational component, less readily visible in his exhibitions, but very substantial in his practice as an artist who makes public art. In many of his projects, indeed, a dialectic is set up between the care for and production of material heritage and objects on the one hand, and the attention to the immaterial heritage and its production on the other, as I mentioned at the beginning of this talk. Although his art is therefore focused on objects and object making, these objects make sense only insofar as they are relational objects, transitional objects. There is always an original lost object from which people have been disconnected and his enchanted objects are relational insofar as their coming into the world occurs through their reconnection in an embodied manner via a collective of real fabricators and not the ethereal distances of digital communication. They are indeed transitional objects that mediate a relationship with the world and teach us how to love each other.

It was Donald Winnicott, the well-known psychologist and psychiatrist who poignantly described transitional objects first in the 1950s as those things that an infant invests with special attention. The first "not me" possessions. They mark the transition between a symbiotic identity with the mother, a period in which the child feels one with the world able to magically control and create the world at will in a condition where desire finds immediate satisfaction, as if the objects of desire could be created simply by evoking them: "Mom, I'm hungry," and the milk flowed and an autonomous identity separated from the world, yet in relation with it. Sometimes a transitional object is a doll or a stuffed animal, a thumb or a blanket cuddled affectionately. And that must never be changed unless the child who uses it

over a period of time becomes anxious. For Winnicott, this intermediate state between a baby's inability and growing ability to recognize and accept reality is the substance of illusion. Although hallucinogenic, the transitional object is important for its actuality, for its physicality, for its materiality, and not only for its symbolism. It is not an internal object like a mental concept. It is a possession. Yet, for the child, it is not an external object either. It is not the object that is transitional. The object represents the transition from a state of being merged with the mother to a state of being in relation to the mother as someone who is separate and outside. The use of the object, therefore, symbolizes both the union of the two and the separation of the two, and therefore, the initiation of their separateness, something somehow close to the concept of the matrixial that Bracha Ettinger has since the 1970s so poignantly described in her essays and in her art. Existing in the space of play, neither inner psychic experience nor external reality, the transitional object lies at the boundary of its separateness, which gives rise to a quality in our attitude when we observe such objects. Winnicott describes something very interesting in relation to understanding Rakowitz's oeuvre. He describes how the infant will damage and destroy or attempt to destroy the transitional object, tear apart the doll. But he explains it only to verify its survival, its continued existence, even after the aggression. He explains how this condition of survival, of something which has been aggressively attacked, creates the possibility for an understanding of the object as a form of reality separate from the self and also as a form of reality that can be repaired, that can heal.

From such a perspective, Michael Rakowitz's objects never function as singular transitional objects, but rather multiply from the outset. They function as a chorus of props in what are effectively his social sculptures, to use a Beuysian term. Since they mediate between many people at once and connect them

to the rituals of transformation, they are able to carry us beyond earthly transactions. The fact of having been bought and sold, stolen, removed, or broken, he reimagines them as gifts, tokens of appreciation in a utopian vision of a world without wounds and without pain, a world with more justice, beauty and shared joys between people and places. In this sense, all of his oeuvre is an attempt, perhaps also fueled by hints of a survivor syndrome. Indeed, what is ontologically projected onto a US-American-post-Holocaust Jew from the Arab world as a double or even triple "other," always an "other." Fueled by hints of survivor syndrome to shift the function and usage of these objects by transforming destruction or removal into replacement and reparation.

Each of the projects I have described above as object based also indeed have a more public, collaborative, relational, and performative part which does not remain visible once his installations are set up in a museum or a gallery space, but that inform all the work that he creates. In some ways, his installations are only residue, material remains of the encounters, which lie at the core of his collaborative, performative work and social sculptures to make his *paraSITE* shelters, indeed, Michael Rakowitz spent an enormous amount of time entering into relationships, personal relationships, with each of the homeless individuals for whom he makes or has made a tent: Mr. Joe H, Mr. Bill S., Mr. George L., or Michael M., among others. Some of them asked for lots of pockets on the inside of the structure in order to place books in them; others wanted a black plastic shelter to be repaired from the gaze, from outdoor gaze, while others wanted, on the other hand, two separate sitting rooms within the shelters.

Another example: to make the papier-mâché reproductions of the lost objects of *The invisible enemy should not exist* and its offshoot projects like *May the arrogant not prevail* in 2010 or *Room N*

Northwest Palace of Nimrud (2018), he brings together lots of people, groups of people, and organizes workshops as well as setting up collective food rituals, including the *Enemy Kitchen*, which has been going on since 2003 to promote Iraqi cuisine. During these rituals and these events, conversations take place. Relations are built. To make, for example, *White man got no dreaming*, the piece he created for the 2008 Sydney Biennial in Australia, he involved a large part of the Aboriginal community in the neighborhood, Redfern, in downtown Sydney. When I tried to define what activist art means, actually, I often think back to this artwork, White man got no dreaming. I remember when he found out from the curator and friend, Hetti Perkins, curator at the time at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, the first indigenous curator to take care of Aboriginal collections in the museum, I remember when he found out from her that the Block, the so-called Block, that's the name of the neighborhood in Redfern, a very important neighborhood for the Aboriginals in downtown Sydney, was slated to be demolished and gentrified, in order to lodge a proposal and compete for the renewal of the neighborhood, an applicant had to own a certain amount of property in that neighborhood. Over a number of years, the Aboriginal Housing Community, an association of neighborhood inhabitants, had succeeded in quietly amassing the required amount of property. But just as they were about to launch their own design, the city of Sydney introduced a tax that would make it impossible for them to compete. At that stage, Michael Rakowitz intervened, creating a montage of poetic and historical associations, and worked closely with the community to tear down themselves one of the houses in advance as a ritualistic, sacrificial endeavor. At the Redfern Community Center, the parts of this demolished house reappeared in a new shape under the guise of the avant-garde Russian artist Vladimir Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* (1919), which, as we all know, had never been actually built in the early 20th century. The tower was

then deconstructed at the community center and ceremoniously brought downtown to the Art Gallery of New South Wales and reconstructed by the architects of the Pemulwuy Project and other members of the community itself. This new sculpture, this "Tatlin Tower" made of old building materials from a torn down house in Redfern, was reminiscent of Gordon Matta-Clark's early 1970s visions of anarchitecture and was able to draw attention to the urgent issue at hand concerning the future development of Redfern. Inside this sculpture, at the same scale as the original Monument of 1919, as in Tatlin's original plan, a broadcast repeater for Koori radio, the Aboriginal radio, was concealed and basically it worked as a way of listening to Koori radio, also in the posh area where the art gallery was located. The sculptural tower and the transmitter itself of Koori radio, along with drawings and a handwritten text telling the story of a number of people involved, as well as a monitor with a video by Gordon Matta-Clark were exhibited. Shortly afterwards, the city cancelled the tax to launch proposals for the urban renewal of Redfern and the local community was thus able to take part and compete. To this day, the Block, a location for ancient corroborees or sacred meeting grounds for thousands of years, is still an open field in the heart of Sydney, surrounded by the homes of Aboriginal people, and the friendships and stories initiated with this project remain, while the tower and some drawings were donated by Giuliana Setari, who had produced the sculpture for the Sydney Biennale, to the Van Abbe Museum in Holland. Therefore, Michael Rakowitz did not earn anything by selling the tower, nor does he with the plastic shelters of *paraSITE*, so Rakowitz pursues an ethical project within all his oeuvre.

From my dOCUMENTA (13) exhibitions in Kabul and Kassel, he responded instead to the devastation of cultural heritage that had taken place in World War IIand more recently in Afghanistan. Like

other artists of the dOCUMENTA, he accepted my invitation to go to Kabul, to Afghanistan, to understand what in Latin one would say, *brevi manu* or *diviso*, directly, what on earth had happened in Bamiyan, where the Taliban had blown up several giant and ancient Buddhas in spring 2001, several months before the Twin Towers, as if the destruction of those cultural artifacts could ever erase a past, the people of that past, their craft or their memory. The Bamiyan Valley is the area inhabited by the Hazara, as we know, subject to racism in Afghanistan by the dominant communities and singular individuals, including, at the time, the Taliban.

War creates facts, that we know, but art too can create facts of a highly different order. I remember we discussed at the time at length with the artists, including Michael Rakowitz, the question of whether or not to engage in projects in Afghanistan, in a location clearly under siege in the post-Taliban era, but still under siege both by insurgent Taliban, as well as occupied by the liberating forces of Afghanistan, so very similar to what Germany was after World War II, immediately in 1945 or 1946. Afghanistan, at the time, was also in a state of hope, retreating and more than almost anywhere in the world on the stage in the media worldwide—if a pin fell in Kabul or in Bamiyan in those days it was on the news, it was on CNN. Afghanistan had suffered the Soviet occupation and then 20 years of civil war from 1978, the totalitarian regime of the Taliban from 1996 to 2001, and an occupation by foreign, European, and US forces beginning in late 2001. This was the perspective of the people there. We wondered whether organizing artistic projects in war zones or occupied territories ran thus the risk of being instrumentalized by the forces that wish to normalize such outrageous events. Or could such an engagement be a form of alternative action keyed towards enacting and testing the potential of art to intervene effectively and decrease violence, injustice, and conflict in those places? To answer that, one could ask whether

art and its display system through exhibitions is not always somehow instrumentalized, and if so, why? One would question such an instrumentalization only in non-European or non-Western contexts, ignoring those same agendas in the West.We made the decision, whether it was right or not, we made the decision to act in ways that do not isolate people even further than they were, but that would provide opportunities for the opposite. And so, in the spring of 2012, in the archaeological area and UNESCO, a training center in Bamiyan inside a large upper cave close to one of the two niches on the cliff where the giant 6th-century Bamiyan Buddhas had stood for centuries before their destruction in March 2001, Michael Rakowitz collaborated with the archaeologist Bert Praxenthaler and the Afghan artist Abbas al-Adad on a workshop with local Hazara students. His aim was to recuperate the traditional craft of stone carving intrinsic to Afghanistan's Hazara region, using the stone of the Bamiyan area as well as lime tuff stone from the nearby Dragon Valley and the area around the Bandeamir lakes. The final results of the seminar were presented in the dOCUMENTA (13) exhibition in Kabul, together with a small stone book that he had carved himself.

The title of his project, *What dust will rise?* was derived from a proverb on cooperation. What dust will rise from one Horsman? Obviously very little. In Kassel, What dust will rise? consisted in the recreation from Bamiyan stone of a number of the books that were destroyed in a fire in the Fridericianum Museum building during the bombings of 1941. In other words, the projects that were developed in the stone carving workshops in Bamiyan were exhibited in the Queen's Palace Exhibition of dOCUMENTA in Kabul and not in Kassel—they were not transported as exotica. While in Kassel, the works made in the north of Italy by master stone craftsmen were exhibited and what those were, were objects in the form of the books that had been destroyed in the fire of

1941. Some of these were donated to the National Museum of Afghanistan that was severely damaged in the 1990s and 2000s. He also referred to the edict of Ashoka, a rock inscription by the Mauryan Emperor in 269 BCE installed at the entrance of the museum that features a text pleading for a more peaceful coexistence, like a message from the past to overcome the traumas of today.

I'd like to conclude with a very recent work. One of Michael Rakowitz's beautiful and strangest works is his first video, the 2017 work called *The Ballad of Special Ops Cody*. Made using a stop motion animation technique to film a doll inside of a vitrine containing Mesopotamian votive statues at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, his hometown. This unusual work, a distorted Winnicottian fantasy of transitional objects, is based on a true episode that occurred in February 2005 when a video was released by a group of Iraqi insurgents called the Mujahideen Brigades, showing what appeared to be a captive US soldier with a gun pointed at him, whom they were threatening to kill unless Iraqi prisoners were released within 72 hours. Now, the US company Dragon Models recognized that the figure in the video was a hoax, since it was in fact their collectible toy soldier called "Special Ops Cody," a sort of Ken [doll] of the time made in China in an edition of four thousand in 2003 to sell on military bases in Kuwait and in the Middle East. Soldiers stationed on armed forces bases bought the Special Ops Cody Doll generally to send back to their children as gifts, perhaps as a surrogate of themselves.

In this film, the male soldier doll with the female voice of a real US veteran of the Iraq War, climbs into the glass museum case and apologizes to the small Mesopotamian statues, urging them to escape from the museum. The war veteran speaks in a flow of consciousness, only half remembering the traumatic events she witnessed while in Iraq. And the voice is actually that of a female Iraq War veteran that Michael Rakowitz invited to collaborate on this project with him. And she says:

> Where am I? Why am I here? Who am I? What are these things doing here? I never knew things like this really existed. But when you see these things close up, there are no words. Sometimes you feel something. You know, the last thing I remember I don't want to think about that. I remember faces. I remember the faces. I remember it was back in 2005. It was February when those people were working in there in the admin. They were too squeamish to do the retinal scans because they didn't want to touch the body of a dead detainee, a dead Iraqi. He said, 'I did the whole work alone, but I don't remember.' You look at them. The blood had ceased running through their veins. They had formed clots on the cuts, so it dripped onto the floor. I'm sorry, why do you look at me like that? Like we're different? Look, I said I was sorry. We're not different because we're also the same because we were created. We were sold and created. We have stories to tell. Just keep talking, I guess, to myself, because you're not answering, you guys. Why are you here? Don't you want to go be free? I can't get you all out of here when I see you. Your faces without eyes. And I think of that day, they were broken, but we destroyed them. You are broken. So we keep you locked up, though, in temperature-controlled places, always gloved. I will always be gloved and never again shall blood coursing through my veins.

She's obviously mixing, talking to the sculptures and, should she be a curator or conservator, she would be gloved, and her memories of dealing with dead bodies in Iraq. So, the immobile still statues ignore the soldier's words, the little doll speaking, the Special Ops Cody, until a curator comes into the frame of the video to shut the glass vitrine and Special Ops Cody is transformed into a static museum artifact right alongside the other objects in the vitrine.

Now, I'd like to read at the end what Walter Benjamin in 1936 in "The Storyteller" noted of the soldiers that had been traumatized in World War I. He wrote:

> With the World War, a process began to become apparent, which had not halted since then. Was it not noticeable at the end of the war that men returned from the battlefield grown silent, not richer, but poorer, in communicable experience. What ten years later was poured out in the flood of war books was anything but experience that goes from mouth to mouth. And there was nothing remarkable about that. For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds. And beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

In other words, the traumatized soldiers came back less able to tell their stories, not more able, which is typical of post-traumatic disorder after wars, which didn't have a name at the time: PTSD. So, what does it mean that the fragile Cody, a mere object, a mere doll, restitutes a voice and a story like a ventriloquist's puppet through the displacement of experience onto an enchanted thing, a toy? Through the ventriloquism of this video, Michael Rakowitz proposes a way out of the silence, the silence that Walter Benjamin was talking about. And I think all of his art really lies—the core of his ar—lies in this intent and in this moment when the human and the inert or apparently inert object intersect and the object and the human both begin to speak again.

Biographies

2020 Nasher Prize Laureate Michael Rakowitz

Michael Rakowitz was born in 1973 in Great Neck, New York; he is lives and works in Chicago, Illinois and is professor of art theory and practice at Northwestern University. He studied at Purchase College, State University of New York, where he received a BFA in 1995 and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, graduating with an MA in 1998. His recent retrospective opened at the Whitechapel Gallery, London, in 2019, traveling to Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Rivoli-Torino and the Jameel Art Centre, Dubai. It was preceded by Backstroke of the West, a survey exhibition at the Museum of Contempory Art, Chicago in 2018.

He has exhibited in venues including dOCUMENTA(13), Kassel, Germany and Kabul, Afghanistan; Museum of Modern Art, New York; MoMA PS 1, New York; MassMOCA; Castello di Rivoli; the 10th Istanbul Biennial; the Sharjah Biennial 8; the 2008 Sydney Biennale; the Tirana Biennale; and Transmediale 05. Rakowitz is the recipient of many awards and honors, including the 2018 Herb Alpert Award in Visual Art, the 2012 Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Biennial Award, a 2008 Creative Capital Grant, the 2007 Sharjah Biennial Jury Award, a 2006 New York Foundation for the Arts Fellowship Grant in Architecture and Environmental Structures, the 2003 Dena Foundation Award, and the 2002 Design 21 Grand Prix from UNESCO.

Keynote speaker, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev
Director of Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea, Italy

Curator, researcher and scholar Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev is director of Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea and of the affiliated Fondazione Francesco Federico Cerruti. She holds a visiting professorship at Northwestern University, and has taught at the University of Leeds, at the Goethe Universität Frankfurt Am Main and at Harvard University. She served as Senior Curator at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center affiliated to MoMA in New York (1999-2001). In 2008 she curated the 16th Sydney Biennial, followed by dOCUMENTA(13) in 2012, and the 14th Istanbul Biennial in 2015. The following year, she returned to Turin where, until 2017, she directed both GAM Galleria Civica d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea and Castello di Rivoli Museo d'Arte Contemporanea. Among her major publications is the monograph *Arte Povera* (London, Phaidon Press, 1999).

Moderator, Dr. Nada Shabout
Director of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative (CAMCSI) at the University of North Texas

Nada Shabout is a professor of art history and coordinator of the Contemporary Arab and Muslim Cultural Studies Initiative at the University of North Texas, Denton, Texas. She is the founding president of the Association for Modern and Contemporary Art from the Arab World, Iran and Turkey. Shabout was the Project Advisor for the Saudi National Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2019. She is the author of *Modern Arab Art: Formation of Arab Aesthetics*, University of Florida Press, 2007; co-editor with Salwa Mikdadi of *New Vision: Arab Art in the 21st Century*, Thames & Hudson, 2009; and co-editor with Anneka Lenssen and Sarah Rogers of *Modern Art in the Arab World: Primary Documents*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018.

She is the curator of *Sajjil: A Century of Modern Art, Interventions: A dialogue between the Modern and the Contemporary, 2010; co-curator of Modernism and Iraq*, Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2009, and curator of the traveling exhibition, *Dafatir: Contemporary Iraqi Book Art*, 2005-2009. Her awards include Writers Grant, Andy Warhol Foundation 2018; The Presidential Excellency Award,

UNT 2018; The American Academic Research Institute in Iraq fellow 2006, 2007; MIT visiting Assistant Professor, spring 2008, and Fulbright Senior Scholar Program, 2008 Lecture/Research fellowship to Jordan.

Editor, Leigh Arnold, Ph.D.
Assistant Curator, Nasher Sculpture Center
Leigh Arnold is associate curator at the Nasher Sculpture Center, where she curates temporary exhibitions and presentations of the permanent collection of modern and contemporary sculpture. Most recently, Dr. Arnold curated *Elmgreen & Dragset: Sculptures*, the first major US museum exhibition of work by the artist duo, and *Sightings: Anne Le Troter*, the French sound artist's first exhibition in North America and her first work in the English language. Arnold is currently working on a historical reinterpretation of Land art that focuses on women who were involved in the movement. She received her doctoral degree from the University of Texas at Dallas in 2016, where she wrote on Robert Smithson's unfinished projects in Texas.

Editor, Dr. Catherine Craft
Curator, Nasher Sculpture Center
Catherine Craft is curator at the Nasher Sculpture Center, Dallas and a scholar of Dada, Abstract Expressionism, and Neo-Dada. In 2018, she curated *The Nature of Arp*, the first North American museum survey devoted to the work of Jean (Hans) Arp in three decades, which subsequently traveled to the Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice in 2019. She was curator of the 2015 traveling retrospective *Melvin Edwards: Five Decades*, and of *Paper into Sculpture*, a presentation of works by contemporary artists who treat paper as a sculptural material. Craft holds a doctoral degree from the University of Texas at Austin and is the author of *An Audience of Artists: Dada, Neo-Dada, and the Emergence of Abstract Expressionism* (University of Chicago, 2012) and *Robert Rauschenberg* (Phaidon, 2013).

Presenter, Austin Bailey
University of Texas at Dallas
[bio needed]

Presenter, Sarah Bernhardt
University of Oxford
Sarah Bernhardt, born 1989, Canterbury, U.K., is a researcher and artist based in London. She has a BA in sculpture from Central Saint Martins, and a Masters in History from St. Catherine's College, University of Oxford, where she studied scent in the twelfth century. She has broad research interests across art, politics, and literature, and is particularly interested in the visual and material culture of health and wellbeing. She has written about the cultural history of the senses, especially touch, scent and taste, and has explored diverse periods and sources from the High Middle Ages onwards. She has also worked with museums and galleries on collaborative exhibitions, including the V&A, New Museum, and Lisson Gallery. As an artist, her work has been featured in exhibitions at White Cube, Mason's Yard, Castor Projects, London, and MOSTYN, Wales.

Presenter, Eliza Harrison
Williams College
[bio needed]

Presenter, Ava Katarina Tabatabai Hess
University of California, Los Angeles
[bio needed]
Presenter, Amalia Nangeroni
Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Italy

Amalia Nangeroni is a scholar and curator based in Venice, Italy. Her academic interests engage Early Medieval, Modern, and Contemporary Art History with a focus on the relations among Europe, North Africa, and Middle East. In 2013 she graduated in Conservation of the Cultural Heritage and Management of Cultural Activities from Ca' Foscari University with a dissertation on Persian Sassanid influences on early Byzantine Art. She also attended classes in art history and literature from Stockholm University, Columbia University, and Venice International University professors. She is currently completing an MA in Art History and Conservation of the Artistic Heritage at Ca' Foscari University with a dissertation on the work of Wael Shawky analysed through the semiotics of culture by Jurij M. Lotman.

Presenter, Brandon Sward
University of Chicago

Brandon Sward is an artist, performer, writer, organizer, and doctoral candidate at the University of Chicago who lives and works in Big Timber, Montana. He was a quarterfinalist for Ruminate Magazine's 2018 VanderMey Nonfiction Prize, an honorable mention for the 47th New Millennium Writing Awards, a finalist for the 48th New Millennium Writing Awards, and was shortlisted for Disquiet International's 2020 Literary Prize. His work has been awarded residencies by Alternative Worksite, the Hambidge Center, the Institute for LGBTQ+ Studies at the University of Arizona, Main Street Arts, NAVE, the Sundress Academy for the Arts, the Vermont Studio Center, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, the Wassaic Project, Western Montana Creative Initiatives, and the Woodstock Byrdcliffe Guild. Group exhibitions include: "Angelespuma" at NAVE in Guayllabamba, Ecuador; "Seasons Change" at the Wassaic Project in Wassaic, NY; and "Utopian Living" at the Kleinert/James Center for the Arts in Woodstock, NY. His criticism has appeared in *Flash Art*, *BOMB Magazine*, *The Point*, *Full Bleed*, *aqnb*, *Hyperallergic*, the *Chicago Reader*, the *Chicago Review*, *Contemporary And*, *Newcity*, *The Seen*, *ASAP/J*, *Post45: Contemporaries*, and the *Quarantine Times*.