GHOSTS AND HAUNTINGS OF WESTERN IMPERIALISM

THE ART OF MICHAEL RAKOWITZ

by

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To my family for their unrelenting support

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THESIS

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This thesis analyzes the art of Michael Rakowitz, contextualizing it within an array of subjects including but not limited to: Western Imperialism, immigrant communities, social sculpture, museum history, and collective memory. More specifically, it argues that his culinary projects (*Enemy Kitchen, RETURN*) and reimagining of destroyed cultural artifacts (*The invisible enemy should not exist*, *May the arrogant not prevail*) stage a theater in which they act as conduits of abject remembrance. These "ghosts", as Rakowitz calls them, evoke notions of otherness, absence, and displacement in order to "haunt" those that have participated in the creation and destruction of countries in the Middle East.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As is commonly known, the 1930s and 40s were a harrowing time in Jewish history. With the Nazis rising to power, Jews were persecuted worldwide, and the Middle East was no exception. Iraq in particular was caught in the middle of the volatile Pan-Arab and Zionist movements. The tension between to two came to a climax with pogroms of 1941, where roughly two hundred Jews were murdered in Baghdad and two thousand more injured. Nissim Isaac Daoud bin Aziz (eventually anglicized to David), was witness to these terrible events and made the decision to leave Iraq with his wife and two children. Bouncing around from city to city, the family eventually settled into a home on Long Island that overlooked the North Shore in New York. Almost thirty years later, artist Michael Rakowitz was born to Yvonne David, Aziz's daughter, and her husband Frederic Rakowitz. He spent his youth in Great Neck, New York, learning about the customs and cultures that his family had left behind in Baghdad. His parents took him on journeys from the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico to the Gaza Strip in Israel/Palestine, where he learned along the way about the great natural beauty and singular culture of these landscapes. As a young boy, he also keenly noted the suffering and poverty that afflicted these areas. Rakowitz's travels and experiences with his immigrant family were extraordinarily influential and became the foundation for his ambition to become an artist.

Now, in the twenty-first century, Rakowitz has become one of conceptual art's most notable practitioners. Since his famous *PARAsite* project of 1998, which was inspired by nomadism and the artist's observance of refugee camps in Jordan, he has continued to make compelling art that has both challenged and reaffirmed issues facing migrant and immigrant

populations. Moreover, Rakowitz has frequently utilized his American-Iraqi-Jewish heritage to bridge the gap between fractured communities of Middle Easterners living in the United States. As an artist, he uses mechanisms of enticement in order to draw his audience into the less inviting world of otherness, absence, and displacement. Definitionally, these three words are distinct but frequently coexist in the world of Western hegemony in the Middle East. Twentieth-century neoliberalism has manufactured a paradigm where citizens of Arabic countries are often displaced from their homes due to incessant and unrelenting warfare. When refugees arrive in Western countries seeking asylum, they often caricatured and othered by way of their association with the "orient". In the words of Edward Said, theorist who coined the term "orientalism," "Arabs…are thought of as camelriding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers whose undeserved wealth is an affront to real civilization."[1]

Resisting this caricature and othering of immigrants from the Middle East is a ubiquitous quality in many of Rakowitz's projects, but it is most prevalent in his culinary endeavors: *Enemy Kitchen* (2003-ongoing) and *RETURN* (2004-ongoing)*, as well as in his visual works of *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007-ongoing)*. Ella Shohat writes that they dig deep "into the recent and distant pasts, engaging the remains and what could be re-membered out of the fragments left in the wake of several wars."[2] At its very core, the work of Rakowitz is inherently

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1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 108.

2. Ella Shohat and Michael Rakowitz, "Culinary Ghosting: A Journey through a Sweet and Sour Iraq," in *Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2017), 47.

political; Yet, it is more than moral grandstanding or statements of injustice. His art subverts the

viewer-participant's expectations while simultaneously providing a pathway into abject

memory—or that which disrupts the conventional concepts of identity and culture. In other

words, Rakowitz acts as the siren of Greek mythology, pulling Westerners in with the allure of a

delicious meal or a beautifully reimagined work of Assyrian art. It is not until the objects reveal

their true identity and purpose that they devour the viewer with confrontational realities of

imperialism and cultural destruction. Therefore, the audience participates in an exercise that they

otherwise would not have. Take for instance Rakowitz's recollection of conversations had at

Enemy Kitchen, a project that began with American students cooking Iraqi dishes and later

transformed into a food truck on the streets of Chicago:

> One day, a girl came in frustrated and said, "Why do we have to cook this nasty food?
> They blow up our soldiers every day and they knocked down the Twin Towers!" Another
> student spoke up and said, "The Iraqis didn't knock down the Twin Towers, it was Bin
> Laden." Then, it went further. From the stove, another kid said, "It wasn't Bin Laden, it
> was out government." It was incredible to see this unfold week after week. The students
> were not really discussing it in school because many teachers regarded it as too touchy an
> issue.[3]

There are a few key observations that can be gleaned from these interactions. Firstly,

Rakowitz is acting as parent/teacher figure, teaching them to cook the dishes, as his mother did

for him. Moreover, he is inviting his audience to wrestle with issues of power, an unjust war, and

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3. Michael Rakowitz, "Don't Choke on History: Reflections on *Dar Al Sulh*, Dubai, 2013," a joint conversation between Regine Basha, Michael Rakowitz, and Ella Shohat, Creative Time Reports, New York, Jun 28, 2013, published in Ella Shohat, *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements* (London: Pluto Press, 2017).

untold collateral damage in the way of hundreds of thousands of dead Iraqi civilians.[4] Instead of obscuring a taboo issue, he invites discussion and participation. Later on, when *Enemy Kitchen* evolves into a food truck, Rakowitz flips the traditional U.S./Iraqi power dynamic by creating an opportunity in which Americans serve "enemy" dishes. Here, Rakowitz mediates through being both facilitator *and* enforcer. He facilitates conversation and enforces the reversal of roles while putting the absent and displaced in a position of dominance. The same subject matter is present in *RETURN* as well but executed in a distinct manner.

Figure 1. Michel Rakowitz, *RETURN* Shopfront, Atlantic Avenue, Brooklyn.

Rakowitz's *RETURN* shifts the spotlight away from the Westerner and onto the Iraqi. In 2004, Rakowitz opened a temporary shop in Brooklyn called Davisons & Co. (Fig. 1) that

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4. To view a collection of studies that estimate the number of civilian deaths as a result of the US-Iraq War, see the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's "Iraq: the Human Cost" project: http://web.mit.edu/humancostiraq/.

imported Iraqi goods. The name originated from the business of his grandfather who brought his

company from Baghdad to New York, running it for almost fifteen years before it closed in the

1960s. Due to tensions between Iraq and Israel, Rakowitz's grandfather was never able to return

to his homeland, just as many displaced Iraqis living in the U.S. today are unable to return to

theirs.[5] The store initially began as a virtual "return" to Iraq, offering to act as a liaison between

Iraqis in the United States and their families back home, packing and shipping goods.

From the American perspective, it is often the case that Iraqis are lumped together into a

conglomerate "Muslim" or "Arab" identity which is perceived as antithetical to Western

interests. Scholar John Esposito points out that "coverage of Islam and the Muslim world [in the

US] concludes there is a monolithic Islam out there somewhere, believing, feeling, thinking and

acting as one."[6] Thus, Rakowitz attempts to restore and individuate Iraqi identity by importing

date fruits, one of the most important ingredients in their cultural cuisine. However, this

endeavor turned into something much more than merely importing food. *RETURN* became a

project that resembled Joseph Beuys' social sculptures. For the postwar German artist, social

sculpture was an action-oriented practice made up of people, objects, and events aiming to

transform communities through a combination of art and dialogue. Via something material, in

this case, date fruits, humans are able to have a potentially transcendent or life-altering

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5. For more about the difficulties that Iraqi refugees face when attempting to return home, see Elizabeth Ferris, "Returns to Iraq: Questions and More Questions," *The Brookings Institution-University of Bern Project on Internal Displacement*, December 19, 2008, https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/1219_iraq_ferris.pdf.

6. John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 180.

experience. The arrival of the dates was, for some, decades in the making. They were able to have their first nostalgic taste of a home long gone but never forgotten, constructing a road back through wistful sentimentality.

In *The invisible enemy should not exist* (2007-present), Rakowitz continues this theme of revivification, but in this on-going project, it is through the reimaging of destroyed cultural artifacts. In the midst of the United States' invasion of Iraq, the Museum of Baghdad experienced untold damage and devastation. Over fifteen thousand objects were looted in 2003, and only about eight thousand have been recovered since. Using everyday "junk" such as newspapers, food wrappings, and cardboard, Rakowitz remodels some of the lost objects to scale. For example, take *Bearded Male with Skirt Holding Vase* (Fig. 2), which is a reimagining of a votive figure that was looted and subsequently recovered from the Museum of Art in Baghdad. Standing at just over 18 inches tall, the sculpture is rendered in bright, vibrant colors, a quality not traditionally found in ancient Middle Eastern sculptures. The figure is constructed of recyclable material, and stands upright on a small platform holding a vase in front of its chest. It wears only a skirt that covers roughly half of the lower body.

Figure 2. Michael Rakowitz, *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist – Bearded Male with Skirt Holding Vase (IM19753) (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)*, 2007

The figure's upright posture contrasts with its delicate, everyday material form, exemplifying its dichotomous nature. It is all at once present yet absent, imbued with character but simultaneously hollow. Rakowitz rightly calls it a ghost, a shell of something that once was.

The iconic, ancient form stands in contrast to the bright colors of food packaging not typically associated with Near Eastern votive figures, rooting it in the present day. Cast-off materials, such as wrappers, bags, and boxes, reference two sides of consumerism: the engines of modern capitalism which create them and the scholarly practice of archaeology which involves digging through "trash" of ancient civilizations. It is this very dialectic of detritus that lies at the heart of this thesis. Rakowitz is a facilitator of "ghosts" that are bound spatially and temporally to their fraught histories. Moreover, the artifacts from *The invisible enemy* and the food from *RETURN* and *Enemy Kitchen* all serve a purpose only if they reach a specific audience at a specific time. Like all good ghosts, these projects are meant to haunt, and this thesis will characterize whom they haunt and how they do so.

In order to do this, the thesis traverses several subjects. The first section will set the stage for the socio-political contexts that drive Rakowitz's art. Histories that the artist wrestles with—the Western Imperialism, Middle Eastern wars, and refugee crises are all complex and varied, so it is necessary to give them a proper examination. In addition, even though not all of the specific events discussed in this section are explicitly referenced in the work itself, they are nonetheless vital for contextualizing Rakowitz's artistic motives. A logical starting point is the destruction of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I which resulted in a cascade of events that eventually lead the Middle East into its current global standing. Important milestones such as the Balfour Declaration, the Sykes-Picot Agreement, the Anglo-Iraqi Treaties were all Western-centric geopolitical frameworks that sowed divisions and established foundations for the wars of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Of course, this only perpetuated the long history of the orient-as-other—an idea popularized by Edward Said—in the West and ultimately

resulted in the marginalization of refugee communities all around the world. In addition, a study of Iraq in particular reveals the inward destruction of cultural heritage sites, monuments, libraries, and museums in the Middle East, which are just as crucial to Rakowitz's work as the exodus of its citizens.

The next section delves into the artist's works themselves and examines the culinary aspects of Rakowitz's practice through the lens of avant-garde artists and writers such as Walter Benjamin and Daniel Spoerri. In particular, this thesis will assert that *RETURN* and *Enemy Kitchen* continue an established food-art historical narrative by operating as a theoretical successor to Spoerri's restaurant galleries. Not only that, Rakowitz incorporates Beuys' concept of social sculpture in order to invite audience participation and foster a dialogue around the issues of American-Arabic relations. Rakowitz is not copying his predecessors, but rather using their tactics to create something wholly original, connected to the twenty-first century. Much like a recipe, one can take individual ingredients and combine them to make a novel and innovative dish.

Finally, *The invisible enemy should not exist* can be understood as inherent to the lineage of junk art. Rakowitz certainly uses throwaway objects to convey a particular message, but there is a deeper common thread of commenting on the contemporary industrialized world through the enumeration of the everyday. Much like *RETURN* and *Enemy Kitchen*, *The invisible enemy* does not copy or plagiarize the works of avant-garde artists, but rather uses them as a springboard to further his own agenda of creating a theater. The objects of *The invisible enemy* objects act as props for the stage of the Western museum, generating a mirror effect that reflects back toward a Western audience. By using this technique, Rakowitz attempts to reveal the "ghosts" of the past,

as it were, and dissolve the cartesian dualism of Western exceptionalism, breaking down the barrier between imperialistic atrocities and Western culpability.[7]

In totality, Rakowitz, his work, and the histories that they deal with are not entirely separable. The artist's projects, culinary and visual, bisect history, politics, art, and an endless number of disparate subjects. Sometimes they crossover, and other times they remain detached, but Rakowitz manufactures connections with a surgical precision. It would be impossible to give them all credence in this thesis, so it will have a particular focus on the West (American and Europe), and its relations with Middle Eastern countries. As someone who is American-born but ethnically Iraqi-Jewish, Rakowitz sees himself as a bridge between two diverging worlds, so he creates art in order to bring them together. Unfortunately, their melding does not always go smoothly, revealing troubling realities that are harsh, but nonetheless must be confronted.

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7. For more on Descartes' ideas on Dualism, see W. D. Hart, "Dualism," in *A Companion to the Philosophy of Mind*, ed. S. Guttenplan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 265-67.

CHAPTER 2

SETTING THE STAGE: HISTORICAL CONTEXT FOR

MICHAEL RAKOWITZ'S ART

Iraqi culture, its visual and culinary arts, architecture, universities, etc., has been all but completely erased both inside and outside of the region since the U.S. occupation. Assassinations of academics, lootings of museums, and library burnings were all directly or indirectly a result of the Iraq war. With that being said, the primary component of this section is to recount occurrences and details of this cultural desolation as accurately as possible. If Rakowitz is conjuring the "ghosts" of Western imperialism, then one must understand who or what those "ghosts" are, where they came from, and how they "died". Further, there exists a sequence of events that has brought Iraqis and marginalized refugee communities—throughout America and elsewhere—into the situation they are currently in, and to pinpoint a beginning is problematic at best.

Perhaps the Western destruction of Middle Eastern culture began in fifteenth century when the Moors were forced out of Spain during the Inquisition, or before in the eighth and ninth centuries when they pushed out the Visigoths, who themselves overtook the Romans in the fifth century. Appropriation began when Western excavators took objects from Middle Eastern cultural heritage sites in the 1700s, filling their own showrooms and museums with artifacts from an oriental, faraway land. Regardless, the most immediate event that pertains to the work of Michael Rakowitz is the conflict between Iraq and the United States. Make no mistake, this was a war on many fronts: ideology, economy, geopolitics, culture, and Western hegemony. On September 11, 2001, their strife reached its climax when two hijacked planes flew into the Twin

Towers. Despite most of the attackers being members of the Saudi Hezbollah group, the United

States used 9/11 as a justification for a preemptive strike against Iraq. However, launching a

military operation was only a link in a long chain of tension between the two countries that goes

back to the early 1990s.

From 1992 to 2001, there was a bipartisan initiative that attempted to wrangle Saddam

Hussein's regime. With aid from the United Nations, the US implemented oil embargoes, no-fly

zones, economic sanctions, and enabled any and all Iraqi oppositional groups. Under Clinton and

his predecessor George H. W. Bush, this was billed to the public as a policy of containment

similar to that of Soviet Russia in the Cold War. Just as the spread of Communism must be

limited, so should the dangers of a totalitarian Islam. In the words of George H.W. Bush himself:

"This is not, as Saddam Hussein would have it, the United States against Iraq. It is Iraq against

the world…Out of these troubled times, our fifth objective, a new world order can emerge. A

new era, freer from the threat of terror, stronger in the pursuit of justice, and more secure in the

quest for peace."[8]

However, the imposed sanctions did not have their intended effect. In fact, they had

brutal consequences for Iraqi civilians that are still felt in the present day. In one of the only

academic texts that attempts to illuminate the true destruction of an American presence in Iraq,

Christian P. Scherrer's *Iraq: Genocide by Sanctions* meticulously details how the U.N., U.S, and

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8. George H. W. Bush, "George H.W. Bush describes the New World Order in his address to the US Congress on the Crisis in the Persian Gulf," November 11, 1990, Washington D.C., United States, https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4528359/user-clip-george-bush-defines-world-order.

U.K weakened Iraq on every conceivable level. The author bluntly states that "the cut-off sanctions were characterized by most serious violations of international law while being manipulated over 12 years and 10 months (August 1990– May 2003) by US-UK with the intent to result in starvation, malnutrition and preventable mass death of Iraq's children."

These allegations levied against the perpetrators carry a heavy weight, but nonetheless, evidence exists to substantiate a claim of direct intent on the part of Western entities. In 1995, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UAO) estimated that over one million Iraqis, 567,000 of which were children, had perished as a result of the brutal economic sanctions imposed on the country.[9] In addition, 4,500 children under the age of five were dying each month from hunger and disease.[10] This is not to mention the untold environmental and ecological destruction that putrefied soil, poisoned water supplies, and ruined sewage and electrical plants. Information regarding the consequences of U.N./U.S. sanctions was readily available for governmental officials to see, but yet they continued to impose the harsh sanctions. Declassified documents produced by the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA) proves beyond a reasonable

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9. Barbara Crossette, "Iran Sanctions Kill Children, U.N. Reports," *The New York Times*, December 1, 1995, https://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/01/world/iraq-sanctions-kill-children-un-reports.html.

10. Barbara Crossette, "UNICEF Head Says Thousands of Children Are Dying in Iraq," *The New York Times*, October 29, 1996, https://www.nytimes.com/1996/10/29/world/unicef-head-says-thousands-of-children-are-dying-in-iraq.html.

doubt that there was there was clear intent on the part of the United States government to inflict inhumane damage and death onto Iraqi citizens.[11]

The documents show that, not only were the U.S./U.K. bombings in Iraq meant to destroy water supplies, but that they had hoped to keep "conditions favourable for communicable disease outbreaks."[12] In 1991, the U.S. air force bombed reservoirs, dams, pipelines, and plumbing stations, and then subsequently blocked any humanitarian aid that could be used in restorations. When sickness began to break out due to lack of sanitation, medicine and chemical supplies that could purify Iraq's water were banned from being sent to the country, thus beginning the viscous cycle of death and disease. Thomas Nagy, the whistleblower who revealed the DIA document, expounds upon the nature of this strategy implemented by the United States: "The result of following the guidance of IWTV has not been the destruction of the top ranks of the Iraqi government. Rather, implementing the strategy outlined in IWTV has killed hundreds of thousands of civilians and not merely any civilians, but those civilians farthest removed from either the military or political arena: the very young, the very old, the ill."[13] The U.S. went to extraordinary lengths to contain Saddam Hussein or usurp his regime, even if it meant severely

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11. Thomas J. Nagy, "The Secret Behind the Sanctions: How the U.S. Intentionally Destroyed Iraq's Water Supply," *The Progressive Magazine*, September 2001, https://ratical.org/ratville/CAH/UScahIraq.html.

12. For breakdown and summary of declassified document, see Thomas J. Nagy, "The Role of 'Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities' in Halting One Genocide and Preventing Others," June 12, 2001, http://www.casi.org.uk/info/nagy010612.pdf.

13. Nagy, "Iraq Water Treatment Vulnerabilities," 9.

damaging the Iraqi people and their land. These consequences were only exacerbated when the U.S. shifted its policy of containment to direct regime change.

In 1997, a neoconservative nonprofit called Project for the New American Century (PNAC) emerged as one of the most powerful and influential groups in American foreign policy. Among their members were Paul Wolfowitz, Dick Cheney, Paula Dobriansky, Lewis Libby, Zalmay Khalilzad, Donald Rumsfeld, and Eliot Cohen, all of whom went on to become prominent members of George W. Bush's cabinet. Their goal was simple: "We aim to make the case and rally support for American global leadership" through a policy of military strength and moral absolution.[14] If American was going to build on its past successes, it had to ensure security and regulate any entity that was antithetical to its own interests. PNAC would go on to solidify and publicize this position of unilateral regime changes through articles in the *New York Times*[15] and even direct letters sent to the office of the president.[16] By 1994, this new conservative ideology, otherwise known as neoconservatism, had made its way into congress after republicans swept the midterm elections. Clinton attempted to maintain a policy of containment and work alongside the United Nations, but his hands were tied by a partisan house and senate. The sitting president would eventually go on to sign the Iraq Liberation Act, which took steps toward regime

14. "From Containment to Preemptive War: Document 1.8," in *The Iraq Papers*, 19.

15. William Kristol and Robert Kagan, "Bombing Iraq isn't Enough," *New York Times*, January 30, 1998, https://www.nytimes.com/1998/01/30/opinion/bombing-iraq-isn-t-enough.html.

16. "From Containment to Preemptive War: Document 1.10," in *The Iraq Papers*, 24-25.

change and implemented the harsh sanctions that were discussed previously in this section. Short of a total military invasion, the U.S. decimated Saddam's regime by the mid-1990s.

When George Bush was elected in 2000, he quickly set out a new orientation that stripped away any notion of Clinton's reluctance to pursue a military option in Iraq. Within a few months of taking office, the new administration had withdrawn from several international accords including the Kyoto Protocol on climate change and the Anti-Ballistic Missile Treaty. In addition, the U.S. government refused to take part in the Rome Statute of 1998, which would have established an international criminal court that tried individuals for the most heinous crimes of genocide, war crimes, and general crimes against humanity. W. Bush made it clear from the outset that he was willing to renege on years of diplomatic, international legislation in favor of a strategy that placed the United States at the top of the proverbial world food chain. The country would not be bound by treaties or agreements, but rather forge its own path as a global superpower.

After the September 11 attacks, the president briefly turned his attention toward the Taliban and Afghanistan, but quickly shifted back to Iraq. W. Bush and his constitutes spoke of "hidden enemies" that lurked in the shadows and would support any insurrection against American interests.[17] Hussein was a poster-boy here, of sorts, billed as the seedy and ruthless dictator that funneled money and weapons to the very same terrorist groups that attacked

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17. For more on neoconservative ideology, see an excerpt of George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union Address in "Organizing for Preemptive War: Iraq and the Presidency of George W. Bush, Document 2.2" in *The Iraw Papers*, 57-59, and Condoleezza Rice's remarks on terrorism and foreign policy in "Organizing for Preemptive War: Iraq and the Presidency of George W. Bush, Document 2.4" in *The Iraw Papers*," 63-65.

American soil. In reality though, this could not be further from the truth, as Iraq was drowning in the decades-long international sanctions imposed by H. W. Bush and Clinton. As the discussion around preemptive war began to rise, opposition from Washington veterans rose with it. James Baker, Brent Scowcroft, Lawrence Eagleburger, and others that still supported policies of containment were more keen on diplomatic solutions and thought that an invasion would result in more harm than good. Unfortunately, words of the old guard mattered little, and the neoconservatives would eventually have their way.

A document known as the Downing Street Memo showed that the Bush administration had made their mind up about going to war with Iraq months before the 2003 invasion. In the summer of 2002, a conversation between British Prime Minister Tony Blair and an agent only referred to as "C" discussed conversations with CIA intelligence officer George Tenet and other high officials in the U.S. government. Not only did it verify that the U.S.' intent to go to war was based on unsubstantiated accusations of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, but that the Bush administration was fully aware of the illegality of a unilateral preemptive strike.[18] Sadly, this document was not released to the public until 2005, two years after the invasion had taken place. Bush and his cabinet eventually leveraged the Pentagon and the United Nations by asking them to pave the road for war. Although the U.N. 1441 resolution imposed weapons sanctions on Hussein's regime and a U.S. congressional authorization was given for a use of force against Iraq, it was not enough to abate the war effort. European allies such as France, Spain, and

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18. "Organizing for Preemptive War: Iraq and the Presidency of George W. Bush, Document 2.6" in *The Iraq Papers*, 68-69.

Germany made last-ditch efforts to dissuade Bush from invading, but they were all for not. In early March of 2003, 250,000 American soldiers stood at the Iraqi border ready to fight.

One must understand that, despite all of the damage done, the road to Iraq's destruction was paved with good intentions. the U.S. government believed with impunity that by launching a preemptive strike in Iraq, they were providing a service to the Middle East and the international community as a whole. Of course, there would be the individual gains of commodifying oil reserves in the Persian Gulf and destroying international terrorism. Yet, it seems clear that Bush and his supporters considered western values of democracy and freedom as the medicine that could heal a country from the even the most atrocious of authoritarian dictators. If Saddam could be ousted, then the road to regime change would be smooth-sailing, and although aggression and violence may ensue, they are necessary tactics for a greater good. Sadly, this reasoning was deeply flawed, and the U.S. occupation of Iraq set off a domino effect that lead to a multitude of consequences including environmental and cultural destruction, deep-seeded distrust among the Arab population, and the rise of radical groups such as the Islamic State.

This "war on terror" eventually magnified ad infinitum, and it wasn't long before America had a foothold in every country across the Middle East. Military action was swift and highly successful, so successful in fact that W. Bush and his cabinet were taken by surprise. The U.S. had not yet drafted a postwar plan, so they had to improvise and rely on local Iraqis to do their bidding. By the time L. Paul Bremer had arrived and instituted the Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), the country was in disarray. To make matters worse, Bremer's team was ineffectual and underprepared. Any attempt to achieve goals such as reorganizing Iraq's higher education system, establishing a U.S. style stock exchange, or rebuilding shattered electrical

systems were unmitigated disasters. One failure after another resulted in incessant civil war, insurgency, and social collapse.

In total, the CPA was in charge for a little more than a year (May 2003 – June 2004), and the damage done in that time altered the lives of many. Millions dead, millions more displaced as refugees, collapse of social infrastructure, damage to the environment, and cultural devastation are just a few of the many consequences seen today.[19] The situation was made worse by the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC), a provisional governing body set up by the CPA after the fall of Baghdad. This Council was a sectarian body that deliberately set parameters between ethnic groupings, and decisively widened they already fractured gap between the Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish peoples. This effectively established the parameters of a new Iraq and played a large part in the eruption of chaos alongside the invasion.[20] What is more, the Iraqi economy was reworked into a neoliberal capitalist system where in which American based companies dominated its foreign capital. In other words, the backbone of Iraq's national industries was given over to privatization, eliminating any sort of domestic enterprises.

Another way that the U.S. and Britain contributed to the destruction of Iraqi culture was through sheer willful negligence. There were repeated attempts on the part of Iraqi officials to

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19. For more details on Consequences of the Iraq War, see webpage "Consequences of the War and Occupation of Iraq," *Global Policy Forum*, https://www.globalpolicy.org/humanitarian-issues-in-iraq/consequences-of-the-war-and-occupation-of-iraq.html.

20. Raymond W. Baker, Shereen T. Ismael, and Tareq Y. Ismael, "Ending the Iraqi State," in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq: Why Museums Were Looted, Libraries Burned and Academics Murdered* (London; New York: Pluto Press, 2010), 5.

warn the provisional government about possible lootings of cultural heritage sites, but they fell on deaf ears.[21] As a result, one of the most important global institutions, the National Museum in Baghdad, lost 15,000 of its artifacts. The National Museum's importance stretched beyond the Arab world, as it housed remnants of cities such as Nineveh, Hatra, Babylon, and Samarra, pieces of the first great *human* civilizations. They acted as symbols of unity by representing the accomplishments of humanity as a whole. Iraqis recognized the grave importance of these archeological discoveries long before the U.S. occupation and often used them to mend a national population that was so often divided by Western powers. This began with the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire after World War I which set the stage for a perpetually disjointed and unstable region. In the instance of Iraq—which is only a singular example amongst many other countries that were haphazardly created by the United Nations—the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq was formed in 1922 by the Anglo-Iraqi Treaty under the administration of British rule.[22] As a result, the leaders of Iraq were faced with an impossible task: establishing an independent, national identity while the U.K. lurked behind every corner.

Over the ensuing decades, varied responses to Western rule caused rampant strife amongst the public discourse. There were some that favored a pan-Arabian ideology which would serve to coalesce the Mesopotamian region, while others took to the notion of a singular

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21. Fiachra Gibbons, "Experts mourn the Lion of Nimrud, looted as troops stood by," *The Guardian* Online, April 30, 2003, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/apr/30/internationaleducationnews.arts.

22. For more historical exposition on this period of history, see Michael Provence, *The Last Ottoman Generation and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).

and nationalistic Iraqi identity.[23] Compounding this with a population that already had stark

cultural and religious differences created a recipe for perpetual discord. The first king of the

Hashemite Kingdom, Faisal I of Iraq, contextualizes this issue in a statement he made roughly

ten years into his reign: "[In] Iraq, there is still no Iraqi people…but unimaginable masses of

human beings, devoid of any patriotic ideal, imbued with religious traditions and absurdities,

connected by no common tie."[24] However, by the mid-1930s, there was a conscious effort on the

part of Iraqi political leaders to use archeology and history as a means of fostering a nascent

identity. For example, the director of education in Iraq, Dr. Sami Shawkat, gave speeches to high

school students about the caliphs Haroun as-Rashid and al-Ma'mun, leaders of the Abbasid

Caliphate that ruled over millions of people in the Middle East during the eighth and ninth

centuries. He asserted that their example should be used to foster a formidable state without the

exploitations of Western imperialism.[25] Making this connection with the Abbasids established

that Iraqis actually had a grassroots tie to the land through a religious and historical connection,

effectively giving the country's citizens an ideological imperative for establishing independence

from British interference.

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23. On the phenomena of splintered national/pan-Arabian identities, see Eric Davies, *Memories of the State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2004).

24. Quoted in Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 25-26.

25. Magnus T. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005), 6.

In his book *Reclaiming a Plundered Past: Archaeology and Nation Building in Modern Iraq*, Magnus T. Bernhardsson discusses why archeology, used in conjunction with history, is an effective tool in the nation-building process across the Middle East. From the 1920s to the 1950s, countries formed from the fall of the Ottoman Empire endeavored to establish a unique or exceptional tie to the borders that were imposed by the United Nations. In this oedipal drama of sorts, nations attempted to marry themselves to "rediscovered" cultures in order to bolster their legitimacy. Whether it was Turkey tying their heritage to the Hittites or Lebanon to the Phoenicians, this exercise played out by new nation-states allowed them to situate themselves in the new geopolitical framework that was set out for them. Yet, Bernhardsson points out that Iraq had more of a unique development than its neighbors.

While other countries like Egypt and Turkey were exclusively using pre-Islamic empires as a means of legitimacy, Iraq used both pre-Islamic and Islamic empires to form their own unique identity. Depending on the government's interests at any given time, the narrative would change in order to suit the needs of officials. If pan-Arabism was the popular trend—such as it was from 1932 to 1941 and from 1963 to 1968—histories centered around the focal point of a broader Mesopotamia, including the Abbasid Caliphate and other pan-Arabian empires of the like. On the other hand, Saddam's regime stressed Iraq's connection to pre-Islamic powers such as the Akkadians, Sumerians, and Babylonians in order to promote a sense of Iraqi particularism. This "paradigmatic nationalism,"[26] a term coined by Bernhardsson that encapsulates the

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26. Bernhardsson, *Reclaiming a Plundered Past*, 9.

exceptional ebb and flow of Iraqi cultural discourse, was and is greatly influenced by archeological practice.

In the nineteenth and twentieth century, Iraqi archeology went through a three-stage progression; the first era can be understood through the lens of Western domination in the early 1800s through the 1920s when the Ottoman Empire was waning and then eventually divided into new territories. In short, British excavators would lead expeditions into the ruins of "lost civilizations," remove the artifacts, and bring them back to England in order to showcase them to the public. From a Western perspective, they were seen as pieces from the literal Garden of Eden, as Mesopotamia was believed to be the original cradle of civilization. At this point in time, Iraqis were limited to acting as manual laborers digging up crucial pieces of history only for them to be taken by their occupiers. The second stage was a transitional period before the Ba'athist party took power in 1968 and can be characterized by the struggle between Iraq and Britain over the ownership of antiquities. As stated in the preceding paragraphs, the 1930s were the beginning of Iraqi leaders using ancient histories to classify their own national identity, and archeological discoveries were helpful in bolstering their claims of heritage. The last phase, lasting from 1968 to 2003, is the most crucial for the present day, as Iraq had completely control over the archeology that existed within their borders.

For instance, Saddam Hussein was adamant about the modern Iraqi connection to classical Islam and Mesopotamia. In order to manufacture this genealogical through-line, Saddam erected statues of Islamic philosophers and poets, rebuilt monuments, and even mandated annual festivals that stemmed from ancient Mesopotamian traditions, all of which drew fabricated connections to contemporary Arabs. Hussein also frequently associated himself

with well-known historical figures such as King Nebuchadnezzar, Abbasid caliph al-Mansur, and even the Prophet Muhammad's nephew Ali, whom Saddam alleged was his direct descendant.[27] This strategy of revisionist history established two main precedents; the first is that the Ba'ath party used history and archeology as a means of legitimizing the ruling elite.[28] The second phenomena—one that is perhaps more important for the work of Michael Rakowitz—is that it quelled ethno-religious divisions between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish groups through uniting the population under a singular *Iraqi* identity. Although Hussein was a ruthless tyrant, he succeeded in giving the majority of Iraqis a tangible history to latch on to—one that was theirs and not concocted by an outside entity.

This entire history of modern Iraq that is traversed in this section is the very essence of Rakowitz's work. Without it, *The Invisible Enemy* objects are just cardboard cutouts with slap-dashed colorful packaging, and the food produced by *Enemy Kitchen* is nothing more than a good meal. Instead of making art that is self-serving, Rakowitz creates in the vein of total recalcitrance. That is to say, he resists the authority of Western hegemony through staging a theater within Western institutions. His creations are props laid out in a specific location for a specific audience, attempting to reveal the sins of Western imperialism and exceptionalism. Everything that has occurred from the fall of the Ottoman Empire, to the rise of Saddam Hussein,

27. Ofra Bengio, *Saddam's Word: Political Discourse in Iraq* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 80.

28. For more details regarding the Ba'ath establishment of power, see Amatzia Baram, *Culture, History and Ideology in the Formation of Ba'thist Iraq, 1968–1989* (London: Macmillan, 1991).

and to the eventual Western invasion of Iraq are the inherent mechanisms that drive Rakowitz's

artistic production.

CHAPTER 3

BEYOND THE MUSEUM: FOOD AND ART

The association of food and art is certainly not a new one. From Roman-era statues and frescos to Arcimboldo's fruit-face paintings, to Warhol's Campbell's Soup series, gastronomic discourse has stretched the gamut of Western art. Rakowitz and his culinary projects stem from a particular point in the food-art intersection, namely the twentieth century traditions of modernism, Dada, and the avant-garde. These are loaded terms that would take pages to unpack in themselves, however, they are used here specifically in order to identify a transformation in the food-art dynamic. With the arrival of artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Daniel Spoerri—who are generally affiliated with the aforementioned movements—there is a notable paradigm shift as identified by the critic and writer Walter Benjamin. In her book *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: from Futurist Cooking to Eat Art*, University of Otago professor Dr. Cecilia Novero states that, "[Benjamin's] texts on food…like his theses on history, help break the artificial continuity of historical narration."[29]

Benjamin conceives of a dialectic that begins and ends with what he calls "incorporation".[30] To define the term briefly, incorporation is the act of interrupting

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29. Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde: from Futurist Cooking to Eat Art* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xi.

30. For more discussion on "incorporation" in the writings of Walter Benjamin, see Karl Kraus' *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 114– 27.

preconceived ideas about reality, time, history, or any notion of a subjective phenomenon. This concept is not only critical to food and its importance for understanding idealism in the rhetoric of history, but it also draws a connection between Benjamin and the artists that he writes about. For Benjamin, incorporation is equivalent to devouring, ingesting, or becoming intoxicated. "Food" ("Essen") is an early example of this thought process, where he writes about the powerful sensory enticements of food and drink.[31] Ingesting, like the intoxicating effects of a hashish meal, is a form of incorporation that can disrupt a political or historical consciousness in the mind of an individual. For example, take Novero's comments on Benjamin's "Food Fair" (1928), an article written by him regarding the allegory of Saturn and Chronos. She states that, "Saturn is an ambiguous figure that Benjamin uses to exhibit the dialectical turns in history and to expose the other repressed sides of history's own mythologizing."[32] In short, food and its ingestion can cause a corporeal disruption that has the ability to alter false perceptions, thus mirroring the work of avant-garde artists.

If a work can criticize, or devour, the material that it references, then it can succeed in severing its contextual ties and breach the human experience. Dada's collage and Surrealism's dream-like landscapes were the most successful works of art from the historical avant-garde at utilizing this tactic of incorporation. However, it is the food-based work of postwar neo-avant-

31. Stories from the chapter "Food" were originally published in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* in 1930. It is now in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag), 4: 374– 8; trans. in Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2: 358– 64.

32. Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde*, 93.

garde Nouveau Réaliste artist Daniel Spoerri that is most pertinent to Michael Rakowitz.

Spoerri's series of Trap-pictures began in 1960 with the *The Resting Place of the Delbeck Family*, when he glued various dinner-table items on a board and placed it on a wall. Bricolaged plates, silverware, saucers, and cups were splayed out haphazardly in order to "capture" an ephemeral moment. Sometimes it was the middle of the meal, sometimes the beginning, and other times it was long after everyone had left the table. These collections can be seen as an archeology of sorts that freezes the temporal present. One of the most expansive versions of this project was Spoerri's *Collective*, where he cooked meals for invited guests in the banquet halls of Paris and Zurich. Spoerri subsequently turned the leftovers into Trap-pictures, displaying them in the very same rooms where the food was consumed.
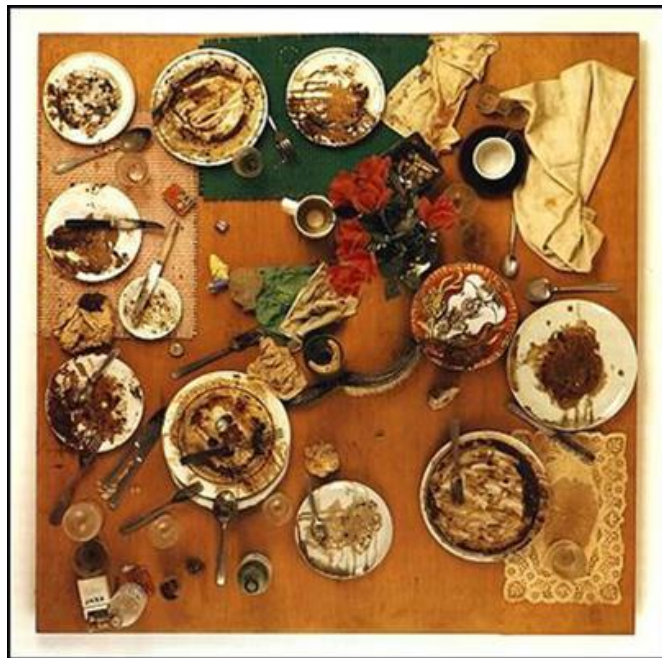

Figure 3. Daniel Spoerri, *Tableau-Piège: Restaurent de la City-Galerie'*, 1965, 82 x 82 cm, Collection of Helga Hahn, Cologne.

Spoerri would continue his Eat Art practice into the 1980s with the *banquet series* where he cooked and served meals to large gatherings on several occasions. For instance, in 1983, Spoerri hosted a picnic with one-hundred guests and subsequently buried the remnants (Fig. 4). Twenty-seven years later, it was unearthed by French archeologists where they found everything intact from ceramics to the remains of pig penises.[33] Yet, while Spoerri was prolific as an archeologist of modern life, he was a part of a broader food-performance-art community that spans from the the 1960s to contemporary art in the present day.

While Spoerri's food-art might seem the most comprehensive in terms of preserving the remains of full dining experiences, many artists have experimented with food, both serving and eating it as a form of art. Fluxus artist Allison Knowles was among the first to experiment with this concept with her *Make a Salad* event (1962), a Fluxus "event score" based on the teachings of John Cage. It was quite simple, as the totality of the work can be gleaned from its name. The artist merely tossed a giant salad alongside guests and served it to attendees. In her broader attempt to blur the line between life and art, Knowles inspired future artists to take up a similar mantle. Examples include Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (free)* (1992), which transformed New York's 303 Gallery into a kitchen that cooked Thai food. In a more recent affair, Jon Rubin's *Conflict Kitchen* (2010-2017) served the cuisine of countries with which Americans were in military "conflict". Spoerri, Knowles, Tiravanija, and Rubin all engage(d) food in a similar manner and paved the way for Rakowitz's artistic involvement with colorful while impoverished

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33. Jonathan Jones, "Unearthed – artist Daniel Spoerri's banquet fron 1983," *The Guardian* online, June 7, 2010, https://www.theguardian.com/science/2010/jun/07/unerathing-artist-daniel-spoerri-banquet.

communities of Iraqi immigrants. Yet, unlike these artist's ostensibly similar food projects,

Rakowitz operates within and around a particular sub-class, the Iraqi diaspora, rather than

presuming a universal "public" as the viewer-participant of his work.

Figure 4. Daniel Spoerri, *Dejeuner sous l'herbe (Funeral of the snare picture)*

For decades, Iraqis living in the United States have been denied the opportunity to

implement certain cultural aspects into their immediate communities. Food, art, religion, music,

and many more practices specific to Iraqi peoples are shunned from the public sphere and

relegated to the private domestic household. This happens for a multitude of reasons, but it is

primarily due to the United States' hegemonic enterprises in the Middle East. American media,

including films, television, and news outlets, frequently demonized Arabs as an enemy of the State, which ultimately resulted in the "othering" of Middle Eastern populations within the national consciousness. Dr. Mubarak Altwaiji, an English professor at the Norther Border University in Saudi Arabia, characterizes this phenomenon as "Neo-Orientalism". [34] While somewhat derivative of the traditional Orientalism that emerged in nineteenth-century painting and photography, Neo-Orientalism reshapes the geographical playing field by eliminating Turkey and India as members of the Orient and hyper-focusing on the Arab Muslim world. In this binary post-9/11 concept, "superior" American values are pitted against a "vile" and "barbaric" Middle East. Words such as "terrorism" and "enemy" are pervasively associated with the Arab world, further propagating an us-versus-them mentality. For the most part, this paradigm is almost exclusively driven by culture and religion, as "Arab" and "Islamic" are inseparable from the American perspective.[35] They view Islamic countries as uncivilized and undemocratized—their cultural mores antithetical to progress. In the words of Edward Said, "Islam represents a resurgent atavism, which suggests not only the threat of a return to the Middle Ages [sic] but the destruction of what is regularly referred to as the democratic order in the western world."[36]

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34. Mubarak Altwaiji, "Neo-Orientalism and the Neo-Imperialism Thesis: Post-9/11 US and Arab World Relationship," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2014): 313-23. doi:10.13169/arabstudquar.36.4.0313.

35. L. E. Harrison and S. P. Huntington, *Cultural Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, (New York: Basic Books, 2000).

36. Edward Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (London: Vintage Books, 1997), 55.

Although the notion of Neo-Orientalism is fairly novel, practices of imperialism and colonialism are certainly not. The United States occupied Iraq in 2003 with the goal of democratizing the state, but as a result, much of the country was plunged into chaos.[37] From the ashes of Hussein's dictatorship, the U.S. attempted to mold Iraq into a monolith of the American ideal. In the occupation of foreign countries, extraction of resources, and changing of regimes, the U.S. deploys centuries-old tactics that have afflicted many older primarily European nation states. The only difference in the twenty-first century is the branding of neo-conservatism, which packages imperialism into pro-American terms like "democracy," "liberation," and "freedom". Other countries such as Vietnam, Guatemala, the Philippines, Korea, and Cuba are just a few examples that shared the same fate of Iraq, and their citizens have paid a steep price. Refugees are often expected to leave their life behind and assimilate into Western society. Iraqis, in particular, would have to begin anew under the guise of an American, looking and acting as everyone around them does.

Artist Rakowitz recognizes this issue that has plagued Iraqi communities in America and uses his culinary projects such as *RETURN*, *Enemy Kitchen*, and *Spoils* to confront Western hegemony and provide a pathway into the Arab world that is made more familiar and comfortable because it is on American soil. Through utilizing methods such as Joseph Beuys' social sculptures, Rakowitz stages a theater by using his artistic production as props that raises the ghosts of an imperial past. However, rather than using the museum as his stage, Rakowitz

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37. For elaboration and detailed plan of regime change, see L. Paul Bremer's Orders 1 and 2 for the Coalition Provisional Authority in "Liberators or Occupiers?: The Coalition Provisional Authority, Document 4.6 and 4.7," in *The Iraq Papers*, 182-188.

instead turns to Spoerri's Restaurant Galleries, a series of art events in which the artist transformed art galleries into restaurants.

RETURN (2004 – ongoing), a project created in honor of Rakowitz's immigrant grandfather, is a shop established in Brooklyn dedicated to distributing Iraqi goods. As mentioned in the Introduction, the most requested product was Iraqi date fruit syrup, one of Iraqi cuisine's most vital and intrinsic ingredients. As he began the process of importing, though, Rakowitz ran into more difficulty than he ever imagined. In order to get the date syrup into the United States, Second House Products—a company based in Baghdad—was commissioned by the artist to produce the syrup. It was put into large vats and driven over the border into Syria where it was packed into aluminum cans. Finally, the syrup was transported to Lebanon where the label was applied and then exported to the United States. This difficult process was the result of longstanding prohibitive policies limiting the import of Iraqi goods into the United States. They had been in place years before the Iraqi occupation, but were of course tightened as soon as the American invasion of Iraq began in 2003. Not only did the United Nations limit the export of Iraqi goods, but the U.S. Customs and Border Patrol and Homeland Security also levied charges for any freight bearing Iraqi origins. This only served to complicate matters when Rakowitz began attempting to import actual dates from Iraq.

Rakowitz signed a deal with the Iraqi company Al Farez, where they agreed to grow and send one ton of dates over to his shop in the United States. Within a few months, they were packaged and ready to ship out of Jordan. Unfortunately, the road to delivery was unimaginably difficult. According to Rakowitz, "They traveled by truck along the most dangerous road in the country, then waited in a line of cars at the Jordanian border that was reported to be four days

long, as hundreds of thousands of Iraqis tried to flee the worsening sectarian violence."[38] They

waited days only to then be sent back to Baghdad to acquire proof that the vehicle had no traces

of depleted uranium. Rejected at the Jordanian border, the driver then improvised an alternative

plan, driving north through Syria, intending to ship them on a plane to Egypt from Damascus.

From Egypt, the dates could finally go to the U.S. However, the dates never made it out of Syria,

as they had sat for weeks inside a searing hot truck and became rotten. The dates were deemed

unfit to ship, and the plan died in Syria. With Iraqi dates spoiled, Rakowitz came up with the

idea of planting four varieties of Iraqi date seed in California. Coincidentally, the path of the

Iraqi dates seemed to reflect the plight of the Iraqi people.

Rakowitz elaborates by stating that "the dates suddenly became a surrogate, traveling the

same path as Iraqi refugees. The store became a place where that crisis and its affiliated narrative

was being disseminated—hardly the exchange a customer would expect."[39] Shamoon Salih, an

Iraqi-Jew who fled to the United States in 1960, had regular meetings with Rakowitz in the store

and spoke about the trauma of leaving his home and never being able to return. Others such as

Hana Ali and her family asked if Rakowitz could ship toys to their grieving family in Diwanya,

as their cousin had been tragically killed by insurgents. These interactions lead to conversations

about the U.S. occupation, Saddam Hussein's execution, and many other topics surrounding the

war in Iraq. suddenly, the store became much more than a shipping company. It was a place

where Iraqi immigrants and refugees could be together in a community, creating new social

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38. Michael Rakowitz, "*RETURN*," accessed May 1, 2020,
http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/return.

39. Rakowitz, "*RETURN*," http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/return.

networks of family and friends with others who shared similar experiences. *RETURN* is a place that made interchanges and (re)connections between Iraqi émigrés possible, in a somewhat specific, insular way – within this storefront. On the other hand, *Enemy Kitchen* is about bringing those Iraqi traditions out of the communal bubble and into the world of non-Iraqi Americans.

Rakowitz developed the idea for *Enemy Kitchen* (fig. 2) after an experience he had in New York City. Rakowitz saw a long line of people waiting to eat at an Afghani restaurant in the East Village shortly after the 9/11 attacks. In an act of solidarity, the people in line were demonstrating their frustration with the mistreatment of businesses run by those of Middle Eastern heritage. Rakowitz wanted a safe environment for Iraqi and Afghani people to come and share a meal, so the artist and his mother compiled a list of Baghdadi recipes, and thus, *Enemy Kitchen* was born. In the beginning, Rakowitz taught and cooked with groups of middle school and high school students, some of whom were the relatives of soldiers fighting in the Iraq War. Similar to *RETURN*, a dialogue formed around U.S.-Iraq relations, but this time, it was from the perspective of American youths. As a result, there were conversations similar to the one recounted in the introduction. The student's exposed their opinions, myths, and prejudices about the war, and they were able to speak about subjects that were otherwise considered taboo in school.

The project transformed into a food truck in 2012, popping up regularly on the streets of Chicago to serve the locals. Both U.S. veterans and Iraqi refugee cooks worked side by side to produce "enemy" dishes. According to Ella Shohat, "the project denaturalizes the occupier/occupied power relations and reverses the war hierarchy in which the U.S. military dictates orders and regulations to Iraqis. Now it is Americans who follow (cooking) orders given

by Iraqis."[40] To symbolize this partnership, Rakowitz flies a flag of his own creation on the *Enemy Kitchen* food truck. Instead of the standard blue and white colors of the Chicago flag, it is instead rendered in the red, white, black, and green of the Iraqi flag, thereby fusing two nations that have so often been at odds with one another. What's more, the Iraqi coat of arms under the reign of Saddam Hussein is painted on the truck just below the flag, and the plates and knives that are handed out to customers are replicas of Hussein's own personal utensils. Ultimately, Rakowitz's tightrope act that balances provocation and invitation paid off, as *Enemy Kitchen* became a roaring success.

Figure 5. Michael Rakowitz, *Enemy Kitchen* flag.

Both *Enemy Kitchen* and *RETURN* recognize marginalized communities through an artistic practice similar to Spoerri's Restaurant Galleries. In the early 1960s, Spoerri began

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[40] Shohat and Rakowitz, "Culinary Ghosting," 48.

experimenting with the novel idea of bridging the gallery space and the world of dining. Just as a stage play transforms the theater to meet the needs of the audience, Spoerri decided to convert Paris' Galerie J into a restaurant for eleven days. During this time, the artist catered a specialized menu for ten to twenty people per day. He also acted as the waiter who served the dishes, playing the role of the mediator between artists and the public. Like Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen*, Spoerri cooked meals that were considered scarce or even unknown to the recipients. For example, Spoerri conceived of a Romanian menu that had Eastern European dishes, some of which had been widely assimilated into the national culture. This concept lies at the heart of his *Gastronomic Journal*, where Spoerri insists on fracturing the metaphysical substrates of cultural homogeneity. Rakowitz is playing the same game, but instead of challenging the regional-national dichotomy, he is bringing awareness to cultures that have yet to even appear on the Western stage.

With *Enemy Kitchen*, Rakowitz is positioning himself in the role of *facilitator* rather than *mediator*. This is an important distinction between Rakowitz and Spoerri. As stated in the earlier paragraph, Spoerri cooked and served the dishes, making him at all times in control of the artistic process. It was planned, coordinated, and executed in a particular manner. Rakowitz's *Enemy Kitchen* was far less regulated. He merely set parameters for a dialectic and let it play out on a stage that he arranged. American schoolchildren cooked the food rather than Rakowitz himself, and it was served to members of the Iraqi community. In this way, one might think of Rakowitz as a participant in an impromptu conversation, guiding the interactions but letting the actors play out a dialogue, whereas Spoerri is the central *actor* of his Restaurant Galleries. Rakowitz is scientific in that way; He creates the parameters of an experiment and then observes.

On the other hand, *RETURN* takes the Restaurant Gallery and renegotiates the terms of engagement. Instead of a basic cook-serve-eat process, Rakowitz expands the entire narrative to include the transportation of foodstuffs across the globe. As a result, the artistic endeavor does not take place within the confined space of a gallery or restaurant, but rather mimics entire trade routes, in particular the path of Iraqi date syrup from Baghdad to Brooklyn. However, while Rakowitz deviates from the means of Spoerri's production, the ends are similar to Spoerri's Restaurant Galleries. After the eleven days were over at the Galerie J in Paris, Spoerri exhibited Trap-paintings, one for each night that he served his meals. Cecelia Novero notes that "the Gallery J's exhibition of trap-paintings, following the restaurant activities, presented art as mnemonic trace."[41] In the same way that the Trap-paintings represent a suspended memory of waste and consumption, the date syrup can, when emptied and consumed, personifies the condition of Iraqi immigrants. The can is ultimately a temporal remnant of the Iraqi plight, as both made the same treacherous journey from the Middle East into the United States.

While Rakowitz certainly incorporated Spoerri's Restaurant Galleries into his own work, it was not his only source of inspiration. Rakowitz absorbs his audience into his artistic process, further situating the work in contemporary political rubrics while manifesting as Beuys-ian social sculpture. Oddly enough, this concept came to Beuys through studying honey bees. Using his action-based approach, the artist created *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (Fig. 4) in 1965 by covering his head with tiny bits of gold leaf and large amounts of honey. This was a cleanse or anointment of sorts that is derivative of his shamanistic practices. In the words of

41. Cecilia Novero, *Antidiets of the Avant-Garde*, 162.

Beuys himself: "Using honey on my head I am naturally doing something that is concerned with thought. The human capacity is not to give honey, but to think—to give ideas. In this way the deathlike character of thought is made living again. Honey is doubtlessly a living substance."[42]

Figure 6. Beuys during his Action How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (Wie man dem toten Hasen die Bilder erklärt), Schelma Gallery, Dusseldorf, 26 November 1965.

Rakowitz's date syrup shares its sentiment with Beuys' honey. Beyond the fact that both are sweet, viscous substances, date syrup has been ubiquitous in Iraqi recipes for time immemorial just as honey has been pervasive in cultural dishes all over the world. Beuys thought that, just as bees effortlessly produce honey, humans produce ideas, and both are made excessively in relation to what is needed to survive. Due to this overproduction, ideas, like

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42. Rudolf Steiner, "Social Sculpture and the Internet Hive Mind: Beuys and the Bees," in *Bees* (Hudson: Anthroposophic Press, 1998), 86.

honey, should be shared amongst the community. This is the origin of Beuys famous words, "everyone is an artist." Not everyone is necessarily a visual artist, but they are artists in their sharing of ideas and contributions to society. If everyone is an artist, everyone can then participate in or create social sculpture, not by carving marble or painting a canvas, but through politics, ideas, and pedagogy. When Beuys began creating social sculptures, it was difficult to separate Beuys the artist from Beuys the politician, teacher, or philosopher. Date syrup takes on a similar role in *RETURN*, acting as the pivot point through which Rakowitz can engage socially and intellectually with Iraqi immigrant communities in the United States.

Even though a conversation about Beuys and bees may seem distant from Michael Rakowitz and his culinary endeavors, they have undeniable theoretical ties. For example, Beuys' piece *Honey Pump and the Workplace* (1977), Made out of tubes, plexiglass, and electric motors, pumped honey for one hundred days throughout the Fridericianum Museum in Kassel. Lectures, discussions, seminars, films, and many other engaging activities were held during the time that the pump was active. Beuys repeatedly stated that the sculpture is complete only when people are present "because the social sculpture needed communication, coordination and cooperation to have any meaning when installed."[43] This mirrors both *RETURN* and *Enemy Kitchen*, in that both require interaction between differing social groups that exist within a larger community.

For *Enemy Kitchen*, it was necessary to have American school children cooking Iraqi dishes for marginalized Iraqi communities in order to reverse the traditional power dynamics. Additionally, schoolchildren would bring their own recipes to the table and would then be

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[43] Steiner, 88.

converted by Rakowitz into an "Iraqi" version via typical spices and ingredients. This was the artist's own version of Beuys' "coordination and cooperation". *RETURN*'s execution had a similar requirement, but instead focused more on Iraqi refugees and immigrants. By shipping the date syrup from Iraq, Rakowitz laid the groundwork in the U.S. for a social community of Iraqi immigrants. It is clear that Rakowitz is acting in the same vein of Beuys, transcending the visual and entering the artistic realm of the lived event and real-time action. *Enemy Kitchen* and *RETURN* were about more than food; they were about the concept of human coalescence and the power to instigate revolutionary change.

For Rakowitz, his culinary practice plays a pivotal role within his oeuvre, and although he brushes up against the works of Spoerri and Beuys, his food art is entirely novel. It uniquely traverses a contemporary history of United States foreign policy that is largely unknown to the average American. Furthermore, *Enemy Kitchen* and *RETURN* supersede the tradition of made-for-the-museum art and conduct a theatrical performance in the public realm. While both versions of the project have been institutionalized within a museum setting in some form or another, it is futile to grasp their meanings in that specific context.[44] One would not only have to entrap the *Enemy Kitchen* food truck into a vitrine, but also every cook, customer, and student that had ever participated in Rakowitz's social exercise. In this way, they are more than going "beyond" the museum. Both are *anti*-museum. They stand in solidarity against the very

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44. An exhibition of Rakowitz's oeuvre titled *Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West* was shown at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago from September 16, 2017 to March 4, 2018. A section of the exhibit called *Enemies and Kitchens* showed objects relevant to both *Enemy Kitchen* and *RETURN*.

institutions that house objects obtained through Western hegemony. In *Culinary Ghosting*, Ella Shohat argues that "Rakowitz's broad, diasporatic Iraq art project evokes the region's vivacious, palimpsestic history of communal multiplicity, while also gesturing toward its hoped-for potentialities."[45] If Rakowitz's art is indeed what Shohat claims it is, I argue that the museum is the last place it should call a permanent home considering how such cultural institutions have approached and handled the "Orient". Arab culture is either obfuscated or distorted due to the appropriation of artifacts by its colonizers. Therefore, Rakowitz takes to the streets of Brooklyn and Chicago where he can engage with members of dislocated Iraqi communities, using food as an act of solidarity.

In the next section, Rakowitz's visual projects are assessed in comparison to his ventures into cuisine. *The invisible enemy should not exist* and *May the arrogant not prevail* draw parallels with *Enemy Kitchen* and *Return*, but there is a crucial difference between them; more often than not, Rakowitz's built structures are solely meant to reside in the Western museum as monikers of iconoclasm, critiquing the institutions from within their own walls. Rakowitz constructs colorful and vibrant objects that beguile his audience similarly to his exquisite Iraqi dishes, but the setting and parameters have been altogether modified. Additionally, Rakowitz incorporates the elements of "junk" and "trash" into his repertoire, allowing him to comment on the archeological detritus collected by European and American excavations during the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

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45. Shohat, "Cullinary Ghosting," 47.

Ultimately, He engages with a macro-history that sits in a liminal space between human and object, setting a large stage that aims to challenge the cartesian theater of American exceptionalism.[46]

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

CHAPTER 4

WASTE, PLACE, AND SPACE: THEATER AND THE INVISIBLE ENEMY

When the Ba'athist party came to power in Iraq around the late 1960s, there was a concerted attempt to define the country's national identity from a foundation of cultural heritage. Using archeological history as a springboard, political pundits of the Ba'athist regime touted both Islamic and pre-Islamic empires as ancestral underpinnings. However, when Saddam Hussein took control in 1979, he added an entirely new framework to the governmental propaganda machine. The despotic dictator was as charismatic as he was ruthless, and despite his terrible crimes against religious and ethnic minorities, he managed to foster a unity among Iraqi peoples that had not been previously achieved. One of Hussein's enterprises, literally called "The Project for the Re-Writing of History," was perhaps the most influential and effective tactic used by his regime. Eric Davis, author of *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq*, notes that "'the project represented an attempt to construct a new public sphere, including the reconstitution of political identity, the relationship of the citizen to the state, and public understandings of national heritage."[47] Ultimately, the campaign was wildly successful in its mission to "ba'athify" any and all aspects of Iraqi history.[48]

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47. Eric Davis, *Memories of State: Politics, History, and Collective Identity in Modern Iraq* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 148.

48. See Addendum for more details on the broader ties between Iraqi politics and archeology in Iraq.

This paragraph is indicative of the larger complexities that connect cultural heritage and historical identity. Although Iraqis living today learned their "history" through the tyrannical propaganda machine of Saddam Hussein, it succeeded in providing many citizens with a rich historical memory that they had previously lacked. There was, of course, various populations of minorities whose ideas of identity were incompatible with the Ba'ath party, and those who failed to fall in line were severely and unjustly punished for their resistance. Nonetheless, Hussein made a concerted effort to bridge ethno-religious divisions through the implementation of a national "Iraqi" identity. Cultivating symbols of a historical heritage through Mesopotamian archeology, establishing ties to important Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish historical figures, and erecting Pan-Arab monuments were just a few of the tactics used by Hussein and the Ba'ath regime to establish a collective nationalism.[49] During the American and British invasion of 2003, sectarian violence resumed due to a lack of state doctrine, and religious fanaticism was able to take hold in a country that was riddled with poverty, death, malnutrition, and ecological destruction. Extremist groups like the Islamic State ran rampant, destroying much of Iraqis cultural heritage.

The environment that was fostered by the Western occupation ultimately laid the groundwork for the Iraq's eventual cultural destruction. While American troops closely safeguarded the oil ministry, they stood idly by as museums, archeological sites, palaces, mosques, libraries, and monuments were left vulnerable to pillage. 15,000 artifacts were

49. For more on the Ba'ath party and Iraqi nationalism, see Benjamin Isakhan, "Targeting the Symbolic Dimension of Baathist Iraq: Cultural Destruction, Historical Memory, and National Identity," *Middle East Journal of Culture and Communication* 4 (2011): 257–281.

purloined from the National Museum in Baghdad, 12,000 archeological sites looted, and the National Library burned to the ground.[50] Even though some artifacts were recovered, there will always be those that remain destroyed, missing, or out in the ether, forever drifting between auctions and private collectors. Granted, there are more positive stories regarding the recovery of objects such as artifacts from the National Museum in Baghdad, but the loss of cultural artifacts in Iraq cannot be understated. As Lebanese archeologist Joanne Farchakh stated in 2007, "Iraq may soon end up with no history."[51]

In the contemporary art world, several artists have used their practice to highlight the conflict between East and West. Jon Rubin, mentioned in the previous section for his project *Conflict Kitchen*, continued his work bringing awareness to Arabic cultural invisibility with *The Other Apartment*. In response to Donald Trump's travel ban imposed on countries in the Middle Eastern region, Rubin collaborated with Iranian-based artist Sohrab Kashani to recreate her apartment in Pittsburgh's Mattress Factory Museum. Kashani uses her apartment as a space to exhibit contemporary art, so from September 2019 to July 2020, *The Other Apartment* acted as a mirror for everything that was shown in Tehran. By duplicating Kashani's apartment-gallery, Rubin in transcending boundaries and giving a platform to "othered" artists that are barred from entering the country.

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50. "The Contours of Cultural Destruction," in *Cultural Cleansing in Iraq*, 26.

51. Robert Fisk, "It is the Death of History," *Independent*, September 17, 2007, http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/ fisk/robert-fisk-it-is-the-death-of-history-402571.html, accessed April 2020.

Jeremy Deller also attempted to give a voice to voiceless Arabs when he placed a destroyed car in the middle of London's Imperial War Museum. The vehicle was blown up by a suicide bomber on March 5, 2007, killing thirty-eight people and injuring hundreds more. However, before it was placed in the museum, Deller hitched it on the back of a truck and toured the U.S., conducting a conversation between himself, an Iraqi War veteran, and an Iraqi citizen along the way. Not only did this spark many discussions around the U.S.-Iraq conflict, but also about the excesses of war and how Western countries foster the conditions that result in a suicide bomber blowing up a car.

In a similar vein, Morehshin Allahyari calls attention to the consequences of Middle Eastern conflicts through *Material Speculation: ISIS*, where she reconstructs artifacts destroyed by ISIS with 3D printing. Acting as a material archive, each reconstructed artifact holds within it a flash drive and memory card that contains information about the original object. Allahyari's work is simultaneously acting to preserve histories that are often seen as unimportant in the Western world while also critiquing relationships between capitalism, waste (plastic in particular), and technology.

In his own response to the devastation of Iraqi culture, 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 countries such 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 in order to find the monuments of ancient biblical civilizations.[52] In fact, the museum gets its name from the Pergamon Alter, a second century BC 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.

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.[53] This Babylonian monument was originally completed in 575 B.C. under the reign of the famous King Nebuchadnezzar II.[54] Standing at over fifty feet tall, it was situated along the northern part of a defensive wall and recognized as one 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.

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

53. 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.

54. "Ishtar Gate," in *Architectural Excellence: 500 Iconic Buildings*, edited by Paul Cattermole, Greene Media, 2008, https://libproxy.utdallas.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/gmarchbuild/ishtar_gate/0?institutionId=1164.

Figure 7. Reconstructed Ishtar Gate in the Pergamon Museum.

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 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. 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."[55] This was a watershed moment for Rakowitz, as he had presumably discovered his first "ghost".[56] 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.

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55. 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.

56. Michael Rakowitz, "Wild Talks: Michael Rakowitz on g(hosting)," 22:52. Rakowitz states in this lecture that he visited the Pergamon in 2006, upon where 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.

Figure 8. Scaled-down reconstruction of the Ishtar Gate in Baghdad, Iraq.

After the fall of Baghdad, the National Museum was looted from April 10th through the 12th of 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. 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.

Figure 9. *The invisible enemy should not exist (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)* (2007) exhibition view.

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 found photos from which he garnered the true dimensions of given artifacts, and then proceeded to construct its "ghost" with materials such 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."[57] 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. 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 and curators that had close personal ties with the stolen artifacts, while others are from U.S. 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."[58] Additionally, *IM 19771* features the words of Selma, Al-Radi, an archeologist of Iraqi decent

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

58. Michael Rakowitz, "The invisible enemy should not exist," in *Michael Rakowitz: Backstroke of the West*, ed. Omar Kholeif (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2017), 36.

who pioneered restoration projects in the Mesopotamian region: "With war comes destruction, the loss of thousands of years of human history."[59] Through the incorporation of these quotes, Rakowitz cultivates a dialogue, of sorts, between the protagonists and antagonists of the U.S.-Iraq conflict.

Figure 10. Illustrations of Dr. Donny George's life in *The invisible enemy should not exist (Recovered, Missing, Stolen Series)*

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. As president of the Iraq State Board of Antiquities and Heritage, Dr. George would regularly participate in archeological excavations

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59. Rakowitz, "The invisible enemy," 36.

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 United States 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".

Over the ensuing years, *The invisible enemy* project has taken on many distinct forms. In 2010, Rakowitz returned to his inspiration for the project and created a copy (of a copy) of the Ishtar Gate. *May the arrogant not prevail* is itself a scaled down version of the three-quarter-sized facsimile in Baghdad and was installed at the entrance of the *Über Wut / On Rage* exhibition at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. The construction mirrors that of the Iraqi Ishtar gate, with plywood and cardboard composing the foundation of Rakowitz's piece; however, the artist's signature use of detritus forms the outside patchwork, differing from the plaster on its Middle Eastern counterpart. Like *The invisible enemy* ghosts, Rakowitz's Ishtar

Gate calls attention to Western imperialism. It is no coincidence that the original Ishtar Gate sits in the Pergamon Museum, just a fifteen-minute bus ride down the road from the Haus der Kulturen der Welt. In its description of *May the arrogant not prevail*, the Whitechapel Gallery catalogue of Rakowitz's work notes that the exhibition is "like a child who has seen a ghost and reenacts the scare with a bedsheet, [as] the imitation is made earnestly yet poorly." Further, the replica of a replica "haunts Berlin with the hopes of conjuring the mušhuššu dragons, lions, and bulls rendered in the tiles of the original—to free them from their mudbrick grave for an immediate return home to Iraq."[60]

Figure 11. Rakowitz's *May the arrogant not prevail* Ishtar Gate.

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60. "May the arrogant not prevail," in *Michael Rakowitz* (Milano: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 110.

London's National Gallery recognized Rakowitz for his work on *The invisible enemy* in 2018 when they awarded him the Fourth Plinth Prize and commissioned the artist to create an artwork that would sit atop a platform in Trafalgar Square. In this extension of the project, Rakowitz turns his attention to the destruction wrought upon the Middle East by the Islamic State (ISIS), an extremist group that rose out of the ashes of the Iraq War. The insurgents have ravaged cultural heritage sites across Mesopotamia, including the Nergal Gate and its Lamassu protector. Around 700 BC, the winged-bull-human deity was constructed on top of Nineveh's Nergal Gate and was believed to provide protection to the Assyrian people. When ISIS destroyed the Lamassu in 2015, Rakowitz created a maquette in its honor, but then decided to formulate a life-size reimagining of the figure for the Fourth Plinth. Not unlike the rest of *The invisible enemy* projects, it serves to tell the tale of Iraqi cultural devastation. Constructed purely out of date syrup cans that surround a hollowed-out metal frame, the contemporary winged beast raises awareness about a once thriving Iraqi industry. Just as Rakowitz's culinary project *RETURN*, date fruits are front and center.

Date palms were, and are still, an extraordinarily important crop for not just Iraq, but the whole of the Mesopotamian region. Its usage can be traced back to Babylon in 4000 BC, where it is frequently depicted in the art and architecture from the time period. Nothing went to waste, as the entire tree was often harvested in order to make everyday objects such as tools, furniture, baskets, and firewood. One would not be remiss in saying that it was part of the lifeblood that sustained several populations in the region for thousands of years. Unfortunately, date palms were one of the many victims of the incessant warfare in modern Iraq. It is estimated that, in the mid-twentieth century, date palms were numbered at 32 million. By 2000, they had dropped to

12 million.[61] The empty date cans that compose the Lamassu are a conjured apparition that cries out against the havoc wrecked on the ecological and agricultural systems of Iraq. Moreover, its position in the heart of London denounces an imperial power from within its own borders, facing away from the British National Museum which houses ancient Mesopotamian objects and towards Iraq, forever longing for a return home.

Figure 12. *The invisible enemy should not exist (Lamassu of Nineveh)* in Trafalgar Square, London, 2018.

61. Hussam Khierallah, Saleh Bader, Kadhim Ibrahim, and Ibrahim Al-Jboory, "Date Palm Status and Perspective in Iraq," *Date Palm Genetic Resources and Utilization* 2, (2015): 97-152.

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 BC 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 employed 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.

Figure 13. *The invisible enemy should not exist (Room Z, Northwest Palace of Nimrud)* at
Williams College Museum of Art.

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. 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

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 twentieth 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.

This notion is also what separates Rakowitz from artists such as Thomas Hirschhorn, who according to Modernist scholar Benjamin Buchloh, "concocts unsavoury combinations of non-

design and anti-typograph (very much integral to his strategies at large) in which the domestic

and the amateurish are combined with an aggressive stupor, generating writing and letters made

out crude tape applications and ballpoint pen scribbles…"[62] Although both have utilized detritus

to their own ends, Rakowitz and Hirschhorn differ wildly when it comes to application and

construction. Yet, one might say that the artists run parallel to one another rather than

perpendicular. For instance, Hirschhorn commits much of his time to exploring the material

lifespan of the commodity form. *Pilatus Transformer* (1997) and *Jumbo Spoons and Big Cake*

(2000) are, to Buchloh, compressed temporalities that reflect a microcosm of an object's

evolution, i.e. their lifespan from production in a third-world country, to its actual use, disposal,

and then artistic display.

One might also argue that *The invisible enemy* formations are also a microcosm, but not

of the life of an *object*, per se. Rakowitz's walls of Nimrud utilize the material in order to

magnify *personhood*. This is obvious through the substitution of quotes that accompany each

piece in the exhibition rather than a typical background of said object. Also, it must be reiterated

that Rakowitz's figures and their arrangement are practically immaculate despite their dross

components, whereas Hirschhorn's *Jumbo Spoons* are a carefully curated chaos. I would argue

that both artists are parallel in what Buchloh calls the "cult of fetishization". *Pilatus Transformer*

parodies the idea of commodity obsession through creating an "altar" of watches, an almost

comical diatribe about a capitalism's fixation on material goods. On the other hand, Rakowitz is

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62. Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Detritus and Decrepitude: The Sculpture of Thomas Hirschhorn," *Oxford Art Journal* 24, no. 2 (2001): 43-56.

playing on the West's preoccupation with "oriental" artifacts and its antipathy toward Middle Eastern peoples.

Moreover, Rakowitz emphasizes th 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."[63] 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 the their moniker as "other", partaking in 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*.[64] 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."

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

64. 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).

For artists of the twentieth 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."[65] 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 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. William Seitz, the curator of *The Art of Assemblage*, centered the show around Jean

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65. 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), p. 240.

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."[66] 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 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

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

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."[67]

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".[68] 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 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.[69]

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

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

68. Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*.

69. For more on the Western demonization of Arab populations, see Addendum.

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 life-blood 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.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis has traversed a large swath of Rakowitz's work. Through his use of cuisine, the artist recognizes a global diaspora of Arab immigrants, homing in on their status in the US in particular. *Enemy Kitchen* introduced Iraqi food into the non-Iraqi communities living in Brooklyn and Chicago and also created a continuing dialogue between the oppressor and the oppressed. Since 2012, American war veterans and Iraqi chefs work side by side to cook "enemy" fare and distribute it along the streets of Chicago. *RETURN* was similar, but instead focused its attention solely on the absence of Arab cultural representation. Just as the date fruits took a tumultuous path to the United States, so did many Iraqis. Both the dates and the people eventually made it to Davisons & Co., with their long journey culminating in a gathering reminiscent of a home they thought long gone. In the culinary aspects of Rakowitz's work, it is the Iraqi people and their culture that represent marks of absence and displacement. Through his interaction with marginalized communities, Rakowitz not only revives traditions, but creates a work that transcends the museum and traditional realms of art.

May the arrogant not prevail and *The invisible enemy should not exist* have proved to be effective, ongoing projects that acknowledge much of the history that has been stolen or reduced to rubble in the Middle East. Rakowitz makes clear that these atrocities are not altogether contemporary, and in fact have their roots in the drawing of Western-determined boundaries after the fall of the Ottoman Empire and the European excavations of the nineteenth century. Although a rough estimate can be placed on the artifacts that were lost due to the Iraq War, there are perhaps hundreds, if not thousands that were taken and stored in museums across the world,

never to be seen again. So, in response, Rakowitz makes his ghosts in all shapes and sizes. From votive figures, to Babylonian gates and palace walls, the artist forces Western audiences and museums alike to reckon with their fraught pasts. Yet, there is something more to all of his exhibitions than a good meal or a papier-mâché artifact.

In order to best understand Rakowitz's art, this thesis compartmentalizes the "culinary" and "visual" aspects of the artist's oeuvre so that the particular projects remain a critical focus. However, after a proper reading of his body of work, one realizes that they are not so easily separable. The idea of "connections" is a primary theme that Rakowitz attempts to convey, and he does that through relating all of his artistic enterprises back to a central core of particular theories and practices. For example, *The invisible enemy*, *Enemy Kitchen*, and *RETURN* all have an art historical precedent derived from avant-garde and neo-avant-garde movements. Echoes of Spoerri and Beuys are seen in Rakowitz's food art, but they can also be recognized in *The invisible enemy*. Spoerri's trap-paintings are reminiscent of Rakowitz's reimagined figures from the Iraqi National Museum, as each use food leftovers to compose their works. Furthermore, similarly to Beuys' social sculptures, *The invisible enemy* exhibition is meant to foster a dialogue in the hopes of transforming society through art. Rakowitz draws inspiration from other artists and writers as well such as Walter Benjamin, Marcel Duchamp, Georges Bataille, and John Latham in order to pay homage to others with similar goals—that is, to challenge established norms and bring art into various socio-political spheres.

Secondly, Rakowitz often blurs the line between his own projects, not really knowing where one starts and the other ends. Take the Lamassu commissioned for the Fourth Plinth Prize. Ella Shohat describes the date syrup cans that comprise the winged-beast as "reconstructed

objects [which] become living testimonies to the long durée of cultivation in [Iraq]—where food and art are intimately linked."[70] It brings together those things which are usually separated, namely that of contemporary food production and ancient civilizational artifacts. Both have experienced untold devastation as a result of unending warfare in the Mesopotamian region, so Rakowitz combines their shared grief into one monolith. It is as if to say that the ghost of the Lamassu also carries with it the apparitions of the Iraqi people and their culture, who are presently still fighting to re-cultivate everything they have lost in the past few decades. The artist is telling his audience that, instead of viewing food, artifacts, and people as disparate subjects, they should see them as entangled and inseparable entities that are frequently caught in the same dialectic.

So, Rakowitz reflects these ideas in his work, setting his stage and planting easter-eggs along the way. Like a trail of breadcrumbs, he leads the viewer into his own world of paradigms that both converge at some points and diverge at others. But he does not do this in a patronizing or condescending manner. Rather than using the enigmatic and confounding tactics that are so often seen in the works of modern art, Rakowitz makes his projects approachable for the layman, allowing them to freely participate in his constructed discourse. This is the theater of Michael Rakowitz—using cultural ghosts as his props and placing them on various stages. The viewer (or participator) doubles as both actor *and* audience, but the artist attempts to dispel the notion that they are two different things. Instead, Rakowitz's theater views them as one in the same, mirroring the cartesian theater of American Exceptionalism. With these false dualisms

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70. Shohat, "Cullinary Ghosting," 48.

eliminated, Rakowitz can perhaps facilitate a meal between a native Chicagoan and an Arab immigrant, or maybe even start a museum down the road to repatriation. That way, the "invisible" enemy and the "invisible" victims might not be so "invisible" anymore.

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