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## *Take Care of the World*<sup>1</sup>

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The vernacular cultures of food, film and music play a central role in Michael Rakowitz's wider project of exploring critical socio-political situations. By adopting source material from consumer culture and mass media such as magazines, food-packaging and newsprint, he reveals a complex and interconnected landscape. In many ways his approach echoes the artistic strategies of Pop Art and in particular its non-western iterations, as recently mapped in exhibitions such as *International Pop Art* (2015) at the Walker Arts Centre, Minneapolis; and *The World Goes Pop* (2015) at Tate Modern, London. These curatorial projects challenged canonical notions of Pop as an exclusively Anglo-American phenomenon, celebrating the pop ethos across a wide range of non western movements such as Tropicália in Brazil, Soviet Sots-Art and Nouveau Réalisme in France. As curator Flavia Frigeri wrote in the catalogue accompanying the Tate exhibition:

Distinctly and critically removed from American cultural heritage, global Pop artists had little interest in Andy Warhol's feats or those of his companions: they pursued Pop as a device to reflect upon current events and voice their social and political convictions, of which America was often a target. History, politics and societal shifts were global Pop's daily bread and while the visual language – garish colours and bold images – showed some affinities with mainstream, Pop, the subject matter clearly steered away from it.<sup>2</sup>

International Pop was porous, embraced by a range of diverse artists who each set out to challenge ideological and societal structures on local, national and international levels. This text sets out to explore Rakowitz's oeuvre within this context of global Pop, gaining a deeper understanding of his ideas by comparing key works with those of artists working during the movement's heyday in the 1960s.

Pop in all its global manifestations came as a reaction to the rapid expansion of visual media that overwhelmed culture in the 1960s. Artists since the 1920s had grasped the potential of new systems of mass communication such as broadcasting and advertising; however it was in the 1960s that they combined these modes of address with the brash aesthetics of the mass-produced to disrupt bourgeois value systems and to exploit the language of consumerism for political ends. Intrinsic to the adoption of the everyday was the artists' critical enquiry into the belief systems that framed material culture; as Jessica Morgan observes in her essay *Political Pop: An Introduction*; 'Pop art, we know, was an inevitable rejoinder to the flow and dissemination of images of products (as much as objects themselves). These images were no longer created after reality but after icons pre-coded by the media'.<sup>3</sup>

Pop artists tapped into an associative world already imbedded within the codes and images of the mass media. The American artist Andy Warhol's silkscreened portraits of film stars, socialites and cultural figures, themselves sourced from photographs in the media, depend on an a priori recognition of individuals as icons. By contrast Spanish artist Eulàlia Grau creates photo-montaged portraits to critique how the media collude with the political and economic status quo, to serve the interests of an unjust and patriarchal society.

Like Grau, Rakowitz conjures figures from popular culture and transposes them into unlikely new contexts to interrogate and illuminate a range of socio-political issues. These pre-coded sources make their appearance through the narrative drawings that nearly always accompany his installations. His project *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (2007–ongoing) features a drawing of Dr. Donny George Youkhanna, Director General of the National Museum of Iraq. Another drawing from the installation *White Man Got No Dreaming* (2008) features the Soviet artist Vladimir Tatlin. Rakowitz traces the image of Youkhanna onto a well-known photograph of Ringo Starr, drummer for the Beatles, themselves the subject of another body of work titled *The Breakup* (2010). Tatlin appears as a boxer fighting a circus clown. Rakowitz provides a hand-written commentary under each image. We learn that Youkhanna played the drums in a band called 99%; and that Tatlin had been a boxer in a circus. What is sensed when viewing these works is their uncanny association with images that sit in our subconscious. Although the image of Tatlin doesn't seem to be derived from an original photograph, its 'look' awakens a pool of representations of famous boxers from our psyche, such as African American Muhammed Ali – the subject of an Andy Warhol screen print of 1978 – or American middleweight Jake LaMotta immortalised on screen by Robert de Niro in Martin Scorsese's 1980 movie *Raging Bull*. This re-imagining of real people transforms them into quasi-fictional figures that transcend a singular spatial-temporal reading.

Rakowitz's extensive narrative drawings are reminiscent of comic strips, a pictorial medium also adopted by Pop. They unfold personal and humanistic perspectives on situations such as conflict zones that are often depersonalised by the media. Rakowitz celebrates the figures he depicts and tells their stories; these influence our interpretation of the wider circumstances of their struggle and suggest that true understanding is gained with more than facts. The drawings in *White Man Got no Dreaming*, for example, bring to the forefront Rakowitz's collaborators in the Aboriginal district of Sydney known as The Block, as well as other indigenous groups who have campaigned for land rights. In *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* the 1970s hit 'Smoke on the Water' is played as the soundtrack, a reference to the fact that Youkhanna's band 99% covered tracks by the rock band Deep Purple. In this way, he weaves into the work the symbolic presence of Youkhanna (as now, and as was) guarding the ancient artefacts that are central to the project.

Pop emerged in the context of a volatile worldwide socio-political climate, which included civil rights movements, anti-colonial struggles, the fallout from the Vietnam War, as well as the emergence of dictatorships, the Cold War and the Space Race. Indicative of this new milieu, global Pop was diverse, emerging from very specific conditions shaped by local realities as well as national and international contexts. In his book *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures*, art historian Kobena Mercer suggests that the movement created a space and a platform for dissident voices:

Exploring the vernacular as an entangled space in which popular and 'official' world views are constantly antagonised in shifting patterns of authority and subversion, these critical perspectives demonstrate how Pop Art strategies 'gave permission' to dissonant viewpoints

that came into visibility as a result of the de-centring and fragmentation of mono-cultural consensus in the 1960s.<sup>4</sup>

We can position Rakowitz's practice within the same tradition. Global Pop simultaneously championed populist expression and disavowed Western ideological power, as can be seen in the Brazilian artist Marcello Nitsche's work *I Want You* (1966). Nitsche appropriates the iconic 1917 Uncle Sam army recruitment poster with its unmistakable pointing finger, also ambivalently adopted by US Pop artist Roy Lichtenstein earlier in the decade. The addition of a drop of blood in Nitsche's work, made from stuffed and painted canvas, critiques the image's original meaning and invokes the cultural and political imperialism that the US exerted in Brazil.

This appropriation and re-circulation of Pop Art iconography became a common strategy for a range of international practitioners such as Russian-born 'Sots' artists Komar and Melamid. Their 1973-74 *Post Art* series included distressed, aged and damaged copies of iconic Pop Art emblems, including Warhol's *32 Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) and the American flag. While the work formally asserts the Soviet ideology of the failure of Western capitalism, it also demonstrates the artists' 'non conformist' position towards the then orthodox notion within the USSR that art should present an uplifting view of Soviet life. Artists took differing positions towards Pop's iconography, is evident in Rakowitz's expansive project *The Breakup* (2010-14). The work gathers a range of media that include magazines, photographs, radio interviews, film footage and texts to chart the tumultuous 1960s by weaving together the formation, success and demise of The Beatles (Rakowitz's favourite band) with the conflicts and alliances that took place in the Middle East at the same time. The events charted include the short-lived union between Syria and Egypt, lasting from 1958 until its dissolution in 1961, the Six Day War in 1967 and Syria's invasion of Jordan in 1970. Rakowitz states:

I created a series of cascading narratives of the rise and fall of The Beatles, pinpointing the precise moment when alienation and isolation gave way to collapse, amid marathon meetings, wheedlings, rehearsals and conflicts. There were, clearly, allegorical echoes between that collapse and the breakdown of political negotiations in Israel, Palestine and across a Middle East that once dreamed of uniting under the banner of Pan-Arabism.<sup>5</sup>

This multifaceted project includes direct references to two British Pop artists. *The White Album* was designed by Richard Hamilton and appears in a film that forms part of the work. The record cover for *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* was created by artist Peter Blake with Jann Haworth; it features in the film and as an object on display. Rakowitz expands on the crowd posing in Blake's exuberant collage by adding cut-out images of politicians, entertainers, protestors and soldiers to interweave and build a narrative around the Middle East. These interlopers include President Gamal Abdel Nasser (who also appears alongside the band in another work), Yasir Arafat, Anwar Sata, King Faisal of Saudi Arabia, Russian statesman Alexei Kosygin, an Egyptian POW and French rock star Johnny Halliday, who toured the Middle East in the late 1960s. The drama of the group's inability to find agreement is linked to the wider geographical context of political turmoil in the Middle East by analogy with the band's planned comeback concert, which was slated for either Tunisia or Libya. It could also be suggested, in the spirit of Nitsche's *I Want You*, that a further analogy is made between the 'British invasion' – a term coined to denote the cultural phenomenon that occurred in the mid-1960s when British bands, and in particular The Beatles, topped the charts around the world – and the British colonial legacy in the Middle East.

A precedent for this weaving of icons and politicians can be found in the demonstration/performance, *Mao-Hope March* organised by American-Swedish art Öyvind Fahlström. The event took place in 1966 in New York, where a group marched carrying placards with photographs of the American comedian Bob Hope and one of Mao Tse-tung, chairman of the Communist Party of China. Passers-by were recorded answering the question 'Are you happy?' The answers reveal broader cultural concerns and political preoccupations of the time. The performance can be seen simultaneously as a commentary on the seductive dazzle of Pop Art which was beginning to dominate the art world; and as an attempt to call people's attention to the way in which the images of political leaders and film and television stars were interchangeable in the media.

Active at the same time as the Pop artists venerated in New York, Fahlström adopted a critical Pop language that investigated economic, political and social issues and the meanings/ codes established by the west (and in particular the US) that were circulating globally. Rather than developing a style, like Rakowitz, Fahlström worked with an eclectic variety of media and techniques that included poetry, theatre, drawing, painting, film, happenings, graphic design and installations. His practice sits on the edge of Pop. In the text *Myth Science* American artist Mike Kelly writes, 'Fahlström was considered a minor player in the drama of Pop Art. Because he allowed the 'political' to enter his work, because he was interested in issues of narrative, because his work was compositionally busy.'<sup>6</sup>

Having spent the first ten years of his life in Brazil, and then in Sweden before settling in New York, Fahlström was conscious and critical of the gap between the US rhetoric disseminated through mass media and the real experiences of people in countries such as Brazil during the US supported military coup of 1964. A similar dissonance resonates with Rakowitz whose grandparents moved from Iraq to Long Island, New York in 1947. Although the artist was born and raised in the US, both Iraq and his Jewish/ Arabic heritage are central to his cultural life through his family's memories, stories and cuisine.

Rakowitz often talks of the disconnect between the images of Iraq circulated by the US and his own knowledge of the country; he draws on examples such as the CNN satellite coverage of the 1991, US-led Gulf War (code name *Desert Storm*). Thanks to new technology, it was the first time that a television audience could watch missiles being launched through the live satellite feed supplied by the military, which resembled the graphics of a video game. What is absent from the footage is the lived experience of Iraqi citizens enduring the conflict. Images from the CNN footage circulated globally, becoming a frame of reference that masked a broader understanding of a country and its people; Iraq became reduced to two tropes – oil and war.

Responding to this deadly abstraction in a radical and critical way Rakowitz has produced a number of works including the multifaceted *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist*. This evolving project comprises reconstructions of artefacts looted from the National Museum of Baghdad in the aftermath of the US invasion in 2003, rooms from the Northwest Palace of Nimrud and the Lamassu from the Nergal Gate of Nineveh, both destroyed by ISIS in 2015. Rakowitz's reconstruction of this human-headed winged bull sits at the time of writing atop the Fourth Plinth in London's Trafalgar Square. These works encompass a narrative that imparts a wide range of incidents that befell the objects, including damage as a result of conflict, iconoclasm; and disappearance as a consequence of removal by archaeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> century or looting in the

aftermath of war. The artefacts are reconstituted by Rakowitz and a team of 30 plus assistants from everyday materials relating to the Arab diaspora today: ‘fragments of cultural visibility being enlisted to make visible these things that are now for all intents and purposes invisible’.<sup>7</sup> This includes food packaging, Arab newsprint (only available in the US), as well as Syrian cab drivers’ adverts. Curator Chus Martínez has described such coverings as ‘skin of the objects’.<sup>8</sup>

The reconstructed artefacts become colourfully tattooed palimpsests that resonate with the energy of their coverings, transmitting and filling the lacuna between the international outrage over the lost artefacts and the silence around lost Iraqi lives. The ensuing narrative created through the action of recovering (research, collaboration and remaking) the objects points to a broader understanding of Iraq. Rakowitz’s artefacts act as surrogates denoting Iraqi people, culture and land; while the Iraqi date syrup tins used to construct the Lamassu represent not only the economic but also ecological disasters that follow conflict. Once a common feature of the landscape, the date palm tree’s drastic decline due to war-derived soil pollution and bomb blasts is registered in the work. Dates also symbolises – by way of its production and transport to the US – the journey taken by both refugees and smuggled artefacts. The syrup is harvested in Iraq but its origin is masked; it is canned in Lebanon and labelled in the Netherlands from where it is possible for it to be imported to the US. *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* can be viewed as a form of protest that encourages a wider understanding of the effects of war. It is a project that cannot be completed in Rakowitz’s lifetime, but his persistence in researching, collaborating and remaking lost artefacts will ensure that the stories that are hidden and unrepresented in the Western media’s portrayal of the political situation in the Middle East are documented and witnessed.

Referring to the global circulation of goods and the idea of everyday cultural artefacts used by Pop artists, British theorist and Independent Group member John McHale wrote in his essay, ‘The Plastic Pantheon’, that ‘Packaged foods are as important a cultural change agent as the packaged ‘culture’, in a book or play’.<sup>9</sup> In common with many Pop artists, Rakowitz initially trained in design. He has even admitted to concealing a Campbell’s soup can amongst the Iraqi date syrup tins that adorn the Fourth Plinth’s Lamassu. However, his inclusion of material such as food packaging from Iraq while still operating in Pop’s edifice as described by John McHale, both deploys and subverts the aesthetics of Western consumer culture. Inserting the everyday ephemera of marginalised or invisible communities, he proclaims their presence in situations that require urgent attention and resolution.

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<sup>1</sup> This is the title of Öyvind Fahlström’s artistic manifesto, reproduced in *Pop Art Redefined*, edited by S. Gablik and J. Russell (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> F. Frigeri, ‘The World of Pop’ (1966), in *The World Goes Pop*, edited by F. Frigeri and J. Morgan (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> J. Morgan, *ibid.*, p.15.

<sup>4</sup> K. Mercer, *Pop Art and Vernacular Cultures* (London: Iniva and Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> M. Rakowitz, *The Breakup*, 2010, <http://www.michaelrakowitz.com/the-breakup>, (accessed 6 March 2019).

<sup>6</sup> M. Kelley, *Myth Science*, 1995: <http://www.fahlstrom.com/on-fahlstrom/myth-science-mike-kelley-1995> (accessed 27 February 2019).

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<sup>7</sup> M. Rakowitz and C. Martinez, *Art Basel Conversations: Premiere-Michael Rakowitz*, 25 June 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v+WNJA3jhsbME> (accessed 27 February 2019).

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> *Pop Art Redefined*, cit., p. 47.